

A Survey of Dating and Marriage at BYU

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A 2001 study of 1,000 young women attending four-year colleges and universities across the United States conducted by Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt found that “dating” has all but disappeared from American college campuses. Only half of the women reported they had been asked on six or more dates during their entire college career. In fact, one-third of the women had two or fewer dates during the same four years.¹ Instead of dating, college students now “hang out” in mixed groups in a variety of settings including apartments, dormitory rooms, student centers, pizza parlors, coffee shops, and bars. From these associations young people may pair off and “hook up” with a member of the opposite sex.

In the Glenn and Marquardt study, “hooking up” was defined as “when a girl and a guy get together for a sexual encounter and don’t necessarily expect anything further.” Forty percent of the women in the study had participated in a hookup, and over 90 percent indicated that hooking up is a regular activity on their campus.² The level of physical intimacy involved in a hookup remains ambiguous in student conversations, meaning anything from kissing to sexual intercourse. The ambiguity of the term allows students to tell others that they have hooked up without completely compromising their reputation. Some college students applaud that hanging out and hooking up carry no commitment or responsibility such as exclusivity or the designation of the relationship as girlfriend and boyfriend. The popularity of hanging out and hooking up has influenced many college students to shift their focus from seeking marriage to seeking casual sexual relationships. Phrases like “friends with benefits” and “sex without strings and relationships without rings” are tossed around on campus, and sexual intimacy has evolved into something casual and common.

This startling description of hooking up and the demise of dating on American campuses motivated us to conduct a study among BYU students to ascertain whether these trends have in any way invaded this campus as well. BYU students make a commitment upon enrollment to “live a chaste and virtuous life,” specifically “reserving sexual intimacy for marriage”: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and BYU affirm that sexual relationships outside the covenant of marriage are inappropriate.”³ LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley told the student body in 1988:

This university will become increasingly unique among the universities of the nation and the world. We must never lose that uniqueness. We must hold tenaciously to it. Without it there would be no justification whatever for sponsorship by the Church and the use of the tithing funds of the Church to support it.

The honor code to which you subscribe is also related to this. It is designed to insure the presence on this campus of a student body of young men and young women with standards above the cut of the world at large, ideals that are conducive to spiritual relationships and a social atmosphere of respectability.⁴

Interestingly, Leon Kass, a non-LDS researcher, suggested that in light of the disturbing findings about hooking-up activities on college campuses that American parents should steer their children “to religiously affiliated colleges that attract like-minded people.”⁵ According to him, such a choice will assist their children in avoiding involvement in the hooking-up culture. The primary purpose of this study was to ascertain whether BYU’s unique culture, in both social and spiritual aspects as described by President Hinckley, offers the protection hoped for by Kass.

Over the past forty years, young people have been marrying later and later in their lives.⁶ Parents, church leaders, and public policy makers are seriously concerned whether a substantial number of young Americans are merely delaying marriage or have rejected marriage and opted for singleness. The answer to this question has very significant implications for society. Unfortunately, a definitive answer will not be known until today’s youth have become senior citizens. However, some clues about LDS young people are available now in this survey of unmarried BYU students’ attitudes, goals, and intentions concerning marriage.

The BYU Survey

In winter semester 2002, we conducted a mail survey of a random sample of BYU students selected from the student directory. We sent out 1,893 questionnaires; 155 were returned because of incorrect addresses; 176 recipients who replied were dropped from the survey because they were Independent

Study (correspondence) students who tend to be married and older than the typical college student. We obtained completed questionnaires from 1,124 students for a 72 percent response rate. Further screening showed that 784, or 70 percent, from this sample were single students. Only single students age 18 to 30 are reported in this study. We note that 99 percent of our sample of BYU students are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These data give a fairly reliable picture of dating at BYU.

Our survey was designed to find out BYU students' goals and attitudes about marriage and dating: how important marriage is to them, how confident they are that they will find a mate, and how they go about the process of getting to know people of the opposite sex. We also asked what type of physical intimacy students thought appropriate for hanging-out and dating relationships and what intimate activity they had participated in.

Life Goals and Attitudes about Marriage

One indication of the relative importance of marriage was obtained by identifying how single BYU students ranked marriage in relation to several other important life goals, ranging from finishing college to helping those less fortunate. The highest-ranked goal for BYU students is having a close personal relationship with God, closely followed by marriage in the temple, which combines spiritual and marital goals (table 1). Ninety-seven percent of the BYU women and 93 percent of the BYU men answered that marrying in the temple is a "very important" goal. We compared the attitudes of BYU students to those of a very large national sample of graduating high school seniors (18 years old) interviewed in the spring of 2000 in the Monitoring the Future Project (table 2).⁷ These high school seniors are one to four years younger than typical BYU students but provide a reasonable picture of what young people are generally thinking about marriage. Similar, although not identical, goals were ranked by the high school seniors. Marriage is an important goal to them as well. It seems that most young people in this country desire to marry. Although aspirations for marriage and a happy family life were similar between BYU and the national sample, there is a striking difference concerning religious or spiritual goals.

We asked BYU students several other questions about their perceptions of and attitudes toward marriage (table 3). Ninety-six percent of the BYU students claimed that "being married is a very important goal" to them. We can compare this to the Glenn and Marquardt study mentioned above, in which 83 percent of women agreed ("Strongly agree" or "Somewhat agree") that marriage is a very important goal (table 4). Interestingly, the women in the national study are more optimistic about finding a mate

TABLE 1**BYU Students' Life Goals**

How important are the following goals to you? "Very important," "Important," "Somewhat important," and "Not important." The following table lists the percentage of single BYU students who responded "Very important."

| Goal | Men (N=327) | Women (N=445) |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| A close personal relationship with God | 93% | 98% |
| Marrying in the temple | 93% | 97% |
| Finishing college | 93% | 85% |
| Having children | 85% | 90% |
| Marrying | 87% | 88% |
| Obtaining a job I like | 89% | 53% |
| Maintaining health/ fitness | 54% | 59% |
| Help people who are less fortunate | 48% | 51% |
| Having recreational and leisure activity | 45% | 38% |
| Earning considerable money | 28% | 11% |

TABLE 2**American High School Students' Life Goals**

Question: How important is each of the following to you in your life? Choose "Extremely important," "Quite important," "Somewhat important," or "Not important." The following table shows the percentage who ranked these items "Extremely important."

| Goal | Men (N=996) | Women (N=992) |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Having a good marriage and family life | 73% | 83% |
| Being able to find steady work | 65% | 72% |
| Finding purpose and meaning in my life | 53% | 70% |
| Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies | 41% | 27% |
| Having lots of money | 34% | 20% |
| Working to correct social and economic inequalities | 11% | 11% |

Source: Jerald G. Bachman, Lloyd D. Johnston, and Patrick M. O'Malley, *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire Responses from the Nation's High School Seniors: 2000* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 2001).

when the time is right than are BYU students. Nearly the entire national sample of women, 99 percent, is convinced the right man will appear in their lives at the appropriate time. The BYU women are a little less confident at 92 percent, followed by BYU men at 88 percent. The differences are small but do suggest that BYU students take seriously the task of finding a spouse who meets their high expectations. They are a little less sure that someone with the traits they desire will appear at the right time.

About two-thirds of the women in the national Glenn and Marquardt study and two-thirds of the BYU men in our study desire to meet their future husband or wife at college. We were a little surprised that only 57 percent of the BYU women hope to meet their future husband at college. As we will discuss below, some BYU women plan on finishing their schooling before they marry. For whatever reason, nearly half of the young women at BYU reported not being very concerned about meeting their future spouse while attending BYU.

It is clear that the vast majority of BYU students not only hope to marry but expect to be married within five to ten years. Only 5 percent of the men and 7 percent of the women do not see marriage in their future within that time frame. This is considerably less than the 29 percent of the national sample of women who feel that marriage is more distant than five to ten years in their future.

BYU students are convinced that marriage is a happier way of life than singleness or cohabitation. Approximately 90 percent of the BYU students feel marriage is the more fulfilling lifestyle, as compared to 39 percent of the female high school seniors and 28 percent of the male high school seniors (answering “Agree” or “Mostly agree” in table 5). Clearly marriage, as an important part of the “plan of happiness” taught in the doctrines and scriptures of the LDS Church, influences the hopes of LDS youth and young adults. While BYU students have likely seen family conflict and divorce in their own or their friends’ families, BYU students are not greatly discouraged from seeking marriage. Only 6 percent of those attending BYU indicated they questioned marriage as a way of life, as compared to 28 percent of the high school seniors. This 6 percent, though a relatively low figure, may be cause for concern among Church leaders. The Church gives marriage high priority in happiness here and ultimate exaltation in the hereafter.

Although most studies among college students have discovered to a large degree that students feel marriage is important, have a desire to get married, and are confident that they will eventually do so, these feelings and aspirations are significantly stronger among BYU students.

TABLE 3

BYU Students’ Attitudes about Marriage

Percentage of single BYU students who responded “Strongly agree” or “Agree.”

| Attitude | Men (N=327) | Women (N=445) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Being married is a very important goal to me. | 96% | 97% |
| I believe that when the time is right, I will find the right person to marry. | 88% | 92% |
| I would like to meet my future husband/wife at college. | 68% | 57% |
| When I look ahead five or ten years, it is hard to see how marriage fits in with my other plans. | 7% | 5% |
| Most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single or just living with someone. | 93% | 87% |
| I see so few good or happy marriages that I question it as a way of life. | 6% | 6% |

TABLE 4

American College Women’s Attitudes about Marriage

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Being married is a very important goal for me. | I believe that when the time is right, I will find the right person to marry. |
| Strongly agree 47% | Strongly agree 85% |
| Somewhat agree 36% | Somewhat agree 14% |
| Somewhat disagree 12% | |
| Strongly disagree 6% | |
| I would like to meet my future husband at college. | When I look ahead five or ten years, it is hard to see how marriage fits in with my other plans. |
| Strongly agree 19% | Strongly or somewhat agree 29% |
| Somewhat agree 44% | |
| Somewhat disagree 24% | |
| Strongly disagree 12% | |

Telephone survey of 1000 women at four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. in winter 2001. Source: Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2001), 42, 73, 74.

TABLE 5

American High School Seniors' Attitudes about Marriage

Question: Most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single, or just living with someone.

| | Men | Women |
|-----------------|------------|--------------|
| Agree | 20% | 15% |
| Mostly agree | 19% | 13% |
| Neither | 36% | 31% |
| Mostly disagree | 11% | 13% |
| Disagree | 15% | 28% |

Question: One sees so few good or happy marriages that one questions it as a way life.

| | Men | Women |
|-----------------|------------|--------------|
| Agree | 11% | 12% |
| Mostly agree | 16% | 17% |
| Neither | 29% | 23% |
| Mostly disagree | 16% | 20% |
| Disagree | 27% | 29% |

Source: Jerald G. Bachman, Lloyd D. Johnston, and Patrick M. O'Malley, *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire Responses from the Nation's High School Seniors: 2000* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 2001), 167, 194.

Hanging Out

The hanging-out and hooking-up culture flourishes on college campuses across the country to such an extent that it is now taken for granted. In fact, few researchers bother to collect data on this phenomenon. They simply identify this culture as a way of life among modern college students.⁸ As seen in table 6, hanging out is also very popular among BYU students, just as it is among students elsewhere. One-fourth of the students hang out in mixed groups a remarkable six or more times a week. Hanging-out activities in some form have always been a staple of college social life. What seems to be different with the current generation of college students is that men and women are hanging out together considerably more often as compared to the segregated groups of men and women of generations past.

The most popular hanging-out activity among BYU students appears to be just sitting around a dorm or apartment and talking. Watching television or a video and going to eat are also popular hanging-out activities. Attending ball games, concerts, plays, church meetings, or firesides were occasionally identified as things to do when hanging out.

BYU young women reported they like hanging out because it allows them a more active role in initiating interaction with young men. Both men and women acknowledged that women often get a hanging-out session going, but hanging out is more often initiated by men (table 7). BYU young men reported that they often prefer hanging out to dating because it obviously spares them having to ask for a date and risk rejection. Also, hanging out reduces a man’s financial burden, as everyone pays his or her own way. The only major regret BYU students have about hanging out is that they don’t do as much of it as they would like. About 40 percent of both the men and women indicated they would like to hang out more often (table 8).

Dating

Dating involves one of the partners, usually the young man, extending an invitation to the other to participate together in a specified activity. Unlike the situation at most American campuses, at BYU dating has not been completely replaced by hanging out. Twenty-three percent of the men and 19 percent of the women claimed five or more dates per month (table 6). Thirty-five percent of the men and 27 percent of the women had at least one date a week. Only seven percent of the young men and 16 percent of the women reported they had not been on a date during the previous

TABLE 6
Frequency of Hanging Out and Dating among BYU Students

Question: How often each WEEK did you hang out with members of the opposite sex last semester?

| Hanging out per week | Men (N=324) | Women (N=436) |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| 0 | 3% | 2% |
| 1 | 15% | 18% |
| 2 | 17% | 22% |
| 3 | 15% | 14% |
| 4 | 13% | 12% |
| 5 | 9% | 11% |
| 6 or more | 28% | 23% |
| | 100% | 100% |

Question: How often each MONTH did you go on a date last semester?

| Dating per month | Men (N = 324) | Women (N=436) |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 0 | 7% | 16% |
| 1 | 26% | 29% |
| 2 | 19% | 16% |
| 3 | 13% | 11% |
| 4 | 12% | 8% |
| 5 | 7% | 6% |
| 6 or more | 16% | 13% |
| | 100% | 99% |

TABLE 7

Initiation of Hanging Out and Dating among BYU Students

Question: Who initiated any hanging out you participated in last semester?

| Hanging Out | Men (N=321) | Women (N=444) |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Only men | 6% | 16% |
| Mostly men | 36% | 53% |
| Men and women equally | 47% | 30% |
| Mostly women | 11% | 1% |
| Only women | 0% | 0% |
| | 100% | 100% |

Question: Who initiated any dates you went on last semester?

| Dating | Men (N=321) | Women (N=444) |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Only men | 27% | 26% |
| Mostly men | 44% | 36% |
| Men and women equally | 21% | 25% |
| Mostly women | 5% | 8% |
| Only women | 3% | 4% |
| | 100% | 99% |

month. Many BYU students have as many dates in one month as the senior women in the national study had in nearly four years.

Dating practices at BYU today are not drastically different from previous generations: Men do most of the inviting (table 7). Our survey respondents said dinner and a movie, concert, play, or similar activity is the typical date. Most of the popular activities require the man to pay for dinner and tickets. BYU students listed less expensive dates as well: watching a video, playing cards or board games, attending church activities, hiking, and going for a drive. What has changed is that a substantial number of BYU women have issued a date invitation, and hanging out takes the place of some of the dating. But hanging out has not replaced dating as it has at other universities.

Compared to men, BYU women are less happy with the frequency of their dating (table 8). A few BYU women say they have an active and satisfying dating life, while the others voiced a desire for more. Over half of

TABLE 8

Satisfaction with Frequency of Hanging Out and Dating among BYU Students

Question: How do you feel about the frequency of your hanging out with members of the opposite sex last semester?

| Hanging Out | Men (N=325) | Women (N=441) |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Too often | 5% | 3% |
| About right | 59% | 57% |
| Not often enough | 25% | 31% |
| Not nearly often enough | 11% | 9% |
| | 100% | 100% |

Question: How do you feel about the frequency of your dating last semester?

| Dating | Men (N=325) | Women (N=441) |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Too often | 4% | 3% |
| About right | 45% | 34% |
| Not often enough | 35% | 36% |
| Not nearly often enough | 16% | 27% |
| | 100% | 100% |

the women feel they do not date often enough. The men, who have greater control over dating, are somewhat more content with their dating life. But a majority of the men, 51 percent, also feel they don't date often enough. When asked why they did not date more, BYU men identified the fear of rejection, financial constraints, and study demands as limiting factors.

Physical Intimacy

As discussed earlier, hanging out on American campuses today is linked to hooking up, which usually involves some degree of physical intimacy. According to a study conducted in 1995 by the Centers for Disease Control, 68 percent of college students in the U.S. had had sexual intercourse during the 3 months previous to the survey.⁹ Among college senior women in Glenn and Marquardt's 2001 national study, 31 percent reported they had never engaged in sex, and of the women who had had sex, 36 percent had not had sexual intercourse during the previous month.¹⁰

To determine the degree of physical intimacy that is part of the dating culture at BYU, we first asked the sample of students what they felt was acceptable and then what activities they had been involved in. BYU students, not surprisingly, are quite conservative in their acceptance of physical intimacy in hanging-out or dating relationships. It is clear from the responses in table 9 that they define hanging out as largely platonic: around 70 percent feel that holding hands, hugging, and kissing are inappropriate in a hanging-out relationship. A small percentage of students, 1 to 3 percent, see that “making out and intense kissing” is acceptable in a hanging-out relationship. Such activity at BYU is commonly known as a NCMO (“nik-mo”), a “noncommittal make out,” and may be the BYU equivalent of the casual sexual behavior found on other American campuses. Finally, BYU students overwhelmingly feel that premarital sexual intimacy is unacceptable. Given the Latter-day Saint doctrine and

TABLE 9

Intimacy during Hanging Out and Dating among BYU Students

Question: What role does physical intimacy, such as holding hands, kissing, making out, petting, and sexual behavior play in hanging out and dating? The following table lists the percentage of single BYU Students who said “Appropriate” or “Very appropriate.”

| Attitudes about Intimacy | Hanging Out | | Dating | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Men (N=326) | Women (N=445) | Men (N=326) | Women (N=445) |
| Holding hands, hugging, and kissing | 30% | 28% | 98% | 99% |
| Making out and intense kissing | 3% | 1% | 44% | 37% |
| Petting | 1% | 1% | 4% | 3% |
| Sexual behavior | 1% | 0% | 2% | 1% |

Question: At college which of these activities have you participated in while hanging out/ while dating? The following table displays the percentage of single BYU students who said they have done the listed activities.

| Participation in Intimacy | Hanging Out | | Dating | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Men (N=326) | Women (N=445) | Men (N=326) | Women (N=445) |
| Holding hands, hugging, or kissing | 47% | 49% | 86% | 81% |
| Making out and intense kissing | 13% | 10% | 54% | 46% |
| Petting | 3% | 2% | 12% | 12% |
| Oral sex or intercourse | 2% | 1% | 3% | 4% |

teachings on moral cleanliness, coupled with the BYU honor code, it is not surprising that casual sexual behavior is not nearly as prevalent at BYU as on other college campuses.

BYU students are almost unanimous in feeling that physical expressions of affection like holding hands, hugging, and good-night kisses are appropriate and acceptable in a dating relationship. About half feel there is nothing wrong with more intense kissing while dating. But even among dating couples, there is near unanimous rejection of serious sexual involvement, mainly petting and intercourse.

Importantly, when it comes to actual behavior, the actions of BYU students closely reflects their ideals (table 9). The levels of holding hands, hugging, and kissing (including intense kissing) among those in a casual, hanging-out relationship are a little higher than we expected, but not much. Only 2 percent of the young men have engaged in oral sex or intercourse while in a hanging-out relationship with a young woman. Only 1 percent of the young women have done so.

Not surprisingly, intimacy is higher among dating couples. But the number who acknowledged having oral sex or intercourse is still remarkably low. Only 3 to 4 percent of single BYU students have had sex, as compared to 60 to 70 percent among their peers at other universities. Even if there is some underreporting among BYU students because of a fear of being reported to the honor code office or feelings of shame, the level is nowhere near the national average. At BYU, personal integrity and religiosity combine with the honor code and a religious environment including religion classes, campus congregations, and devotionals with Church authorities to produce a remarkably low rate of premarital sexual activity.

Shifting from Hanging Out to Dating

Some confusion, conflict, disappointment, and pain have been observed among couples moving from a casual hanging-out relationship to dating.¹¹ One person may define a relationship as intimate and permanent while the other feels that it is strictly a casual association. Insights into how BYU students shift from a hanging-out-just-as-friends relationship to a dating relationship were ascertained from responses to our open-ended question “How does someone try to shift a relationship from hanging out to dating?”¹² The ways and means of shifting hanging out into something more serious are presented in table 10. The confusion noted on other campuses is also present at BYU, and there are no widely accepted ways of saying to one another, “We are now in a dating relationship.”

Not surprisingly, the most frequently mentioned strategy was to spend time together outside the circle of hanging-out friends. One student insightfully made this point: “Relationships are not formed in groups, so separate from the group and spend quality one-on-one time with the person. I think too many students are afraid of the transitional risk—the ‘what will happen if I speak up and ask him or her for a date’—so they remain in the comfortable bubble of hanging out because there is no commitment or failure that way!” Another said that the shift comes when “they ‘ask out’ the other person, thus formally establishing interest.” One young woman got right to the point: “Someone has to say the word ‘date’! This shift in formality sends the other person the message that another dimension of the relationship is desired.”

An increase in physical intimacy is another important signal or sign among BYU students. Contact even as casual as holding hands sends the message a couple has shifted the type and intensity of the relationship. Kissing was cited by a large number as the most obvious sign a relationship has grown serious. For example, one student noted that “some sort of contact like holding hands, cuddling, and kissing” defines the shift. Another described the shift in these words: “My friend turned into my boyfriend by asking me if it would ruin the friendship if he kissed me. He did and I continued to think of him as a friend until a few more kisses. We realized that we were basically dating after we kissed. We hung out together more, talked more, and kissed more.” BYU students are similar in this regard to college women in the national study who reported kissing signaled a dating relationship. Said one woman at Yale, “We didn’t talk about it. We kissed. I guess that . . . at the end it sort of became clear [that we were together], and after that we just started to hang out all the

TABLE 10
How BYU Students Shift from Hanging Out to Dating

Question: How does someone try to shift a relationship from hanging out to dating? (open ended)

| Change | Men (N=476) | Women (N=552) |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Spend more one-on-one time | 45% | 44% |
| Increase physical intimacy | 19% | 21% |
| Talking about creating a dating relationship | 18% | 20% |
| Happens naturally over time | 6% | 5% |
| I don't know | 5% | 4% |
| When man pays for activities | 2% | 2% |
| Other | 5% | 6% |
| | 100% | 100% |

time. And at that point I knew that we were dating. And later on, after a couple weeks, like we actually became a couple, as in I would refer to him as my boyfriend.”¹³

Only about 20 percent of the BYU students identified talking to each other as a way to confirm a dating relationship. This low level of using discussion as the definer is somewhat surprising, given that 85 percent of BYU students know about the “defining the relationship” talk, known popularly as a DTR. This type of discussion has different names but seems to be present on most campuses. An illustrative comment from a BYU student is, “Verbally, you have to talk about it so both individuals know that now you are ‘dating,’ so there are not unmet expectations or misunderstanding.” Another student said, “DTRs—Defining the Relationship. In other words you have to tell each other that you are only dating each other and no one else.”

Student comments reveal a general loathing of the dreaded DTR. In spite of the distaste, nearly two-thirds had experienced at least one DTR during the previous semester. A few students, nearly 10 percent, had four or more DTRs during the semester. Young men were a little more likely than women to initiate the “where are we going” talk. It seems that partners in dating relationships are moving at different speeds, and one generally feels the need for clarification before the other does.

Although the hanging-out culture is certainly prevalent at BYU, students here date more and hook up less than their national college-student peers. There is significantly less premarital sex among BYU students due to their strong religious values concerning chastity and their commitment to the honor code. BYU students, however, are like other college students in that they often experience uncertainty about shifting a casual relationship to a more serious one. Fortunately, most realize that one-on-one time, modest physical contact, and heart-to-heart talks are ways to communicate a desire to make the relationship more serious—to consciously move from the “just friends” to the “we are a couple” state.

The Search for a Spouse

Most BYU students reported they hoped to find someone to marry while at the university, so we asked them to identify the traits they were looking for in a spouse. We asked them to rate how important it is that the person they marry has certain traits (table 11).

We were pleasantly surprised that BYU students identified spirituality or religiosity as the most favored trait. Over 90 percent of the women and 87 percent of the men rated religiosity as “very important”

in considering someone for marriage. They want to marry someone who is committed to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its doctrines, principles, and practices. Most research on characteristics desired in a potential spouse has ignored religiosity. The few studies that have added religious orientation to the list have found college students rate it at or near the bottom.¹⁴ This is another way in which BYU students are dramatically different from most other young adults.

Many studies have noted that both men and women desire pleasant, cooperative, and supportive personalities in those they consider for marriage.¹⁵ Kindness, communicativeness, sense of humor, consideration for others, and empathy are strongly desired. These virtues were extolled by Church leader Jeffrey Holland in counsel to BYU students. “There are many qualities you will want to look for in a friend or a serious date—to say nothing of a spouse and eternal companion—but surely among the very first and most basic of those qualities will be those of care and sensitivity towards others, a minimum of self-centeredness that allows compassion and courtesy to be evident.”¹⁶ As can be seen in table 11, this holds true for BYU students, although the women rate these traits a little higher than do the men.

Research reported prominently in national news has made much to-do about men’s fixation on physical attractiveness in a potential wife. Such is not the case among BYU students, as only 37 percent of the men admitted that looks were “very important” to them.

TABLE 11
Traits BYU Students Desire in a Spouse

Question: How important are the following characteristics in the person you desire to marry? Remember, no one is perfect, so please don’t mark “very important” in every trait.

| Traits Marked “Very Important” | Men (N=327) | Women (N=445) |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Spirituality, religious | 87% | 91% |
| Communicative, open | 77% | 78% |
| Wants children | 69% | 80% |
| Kind, considerate, understanding | 67% | 78% |
| Fun, sense of humor | 59% | 61% |
| Ambitious, hard worker | 40% | 68% |
| Educated | 32% | 59% |
| Intelligence/Smart | 43% | 42% |
| Healthy | 35% | 26% |
| Social, outgoing | 26% | 28% |
| Physically attractive | 37% | 9% |
| From a good family | 12% | 16% |
| Athletic | 10% | 8% |
| Earning capacity | 1% | 12% |

An examination of these desired traits reveals that BYU students have a pretty good idea of the type of person they wish to marry. Fortunately, the desired traits are those that will most likely foster a fulfilling marriage. The most important traits in the eyes of BYU students are those of spirituality and a kind and open personality, both of which facilitate a strong marital relationship.

False Starts

When students talk freely among themselves, it is common to hear stories of unrequited love and broken hearts or what might be characterized as “false starts.” Exactly half of the BYU students, both men and women, reported they had broken up a romantic relationship during the school year. One-third reported one broken relationship, 12 percent claimed two, and 4 percent of the men and 6 percent of the women reported three or more break-ups.

Not surprisingly, no single reason, event, or circumstance precipitated the demise of most courtships. The reasons these romantic relationships ended in failure are reported in table 12. For about 20 percent of the students, as the couple spent more time together, feelings of attraction declined and the relationship lost its initial excitement. A study of 185 college students reported similar results: 27 percent of them cited being “tired of each other” as a factor in their decision to end a romantic relationship (table 13).¹⁷ One BYU woman’s comment illustrates this process. “We didn’t have very much in common—I fell out of love. I couldn’t imagine marrying him.” A young BYU man explained, “I stopped having feelings for her, so I ended it.” Another young BYU man noted, “I was not in love with her. We dated for ten months—she was in love with me—and I tried to fall in love with her. She is a great person, but I couldn’t fall in love with her.”

Besides just the gradual decline in romantic feelings, about 20 percent of the BYU student relationships fell apart due to serious conflicts as the students got to know each other better. In some cases, one partner became jealous and overly possessive, while in others the relationship became unbalanced, with one partner giving much more than the other. As shown in table 13, the study at a large southeastern university found that 43 percent of students terminated a relationship because of “too many differences/different values.” This number is more than double the percentage at BYU. We suspect that a greater similarity of values and expectations has a positive effect on relationships among BYU students, since virtually all are members of the LDS Church.

TABLE 12

Reasons BYU Students Ended a Relationship

Question: Why did the last relationship end?

| Reason | (N=146) |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Died out, boring, didn't feel right | 19% |
| Conflicts, possessive partner, unbalanced relationship | 19% |
| Partner had someone else, cheating | 11% |
| Relationship became too physical | 9% |
| Physically separated, mission, moved | 9% |
| Not ready for marriage, too immature | 8% |
| Drifted apart, different goals | 7% |
| Relationship happened too fast | 6% |
| Met someone else, wanted to date others | 6% |
| Other | 5% |
| | 100% |

TABLE 13

Reasons American College Students Ended a Relationship

(respondents could give more than one reason)

| Reason | Percent |
|------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Too many differences/different values | 43% |
| Got tired of each other | 27% |
| Cheating | 18% |
| Dishonesty | 18% |
| I met someone new | 15% |
| Separation | 15% |
| My partner met someone new | 13% |
| Parental disapproval | 13% |
| Violence/abuse | 9% |
| Alcohol/drugs | 7% |
| I went back to a previous lover | 6% |
| My partner went back to a previous lover | 5% |

Survey of 185 undergraduates at a southeastern university. Source: David Knox and others, "Why College Students End Relationships," *College Student Journal* 31, no. 4 (1997): 451.

BYU students reported that they ended unbalanced relationships: “It was all one-sided,” one young woman stated and went on to say, “He wanted to marry me, and I got swept off my feet at first, then a few days later realized I did not even like him, so I ended it.” A young man complained, “She started to get really annoying. We didn’t get along anymore. I found myself caring about her less and less.” Several students noted religion was the source of their conflict. For example, “We ran out of things to talk about; we were just very different—different goals and levels of spiritual commitment.” And one young woman ended a relationship “because he decided to leave the Church and began to question the principles that I believe in.”

About 10 percent wanted out when they discovered their partner was “two-timing” them. Students made it clear that “cheating,” even if it does not involve physical intimacy, is given zero tolerance at BYU. The anger of a young woman is obvious in her comment: “He had a girlfriend I did not know about!! I am not bitter, yeah right!” Another said, “He strung several girls along without any of us knowing and then dumped all of us but one, got engaged in a month, and got married the next.”

Another 10 percent of the students felt they were attracted only physically or became too physically involved; the resultant guilt caused them to flee the relationship and sometimes to resent their partner. One young man noted his mistaking lust for love: “It was all physical. I was deceiving myself about my love for her, which was actually only physical.” A young woman lamented, “I ended it because we were ‘too physical’ without having potential for marriage. We love each other, dated for two years, but it got too physical. We messed up and it ruined us! I’m glad it finally ended.”

Physical separation, immaturity, and moving too quickly without really knowing each other were also mentioned by students as strong reasons for ending a relationship that seemed at one point in time to hold the promise of marriage.

The frequency of false starts and the variety of reasons for failed relationships suggest that finding a marriageable partner is not an easy task and often involves a certain amount of what some view as good luck or serendipity. It is clear that many events, experiences, and circumstances can doom a romantic relationship. Contributing to the difficulty of the task is that both partners must be simultaneously motivated to pursue an enduring relationship. Unfortunately, if one of the partners loses interest, the other is left feeling rejected, hurt, and sometimes angry. In spite of the long litany of things that go wrong in relationships, most BYU students do marry, whether during their undergraduate studies or after. BYU institutional research shows

that 63 percent of male students who graduate are married by graduation time, as are 55 percent of female students.¹⁸

Deciding to Marry

Making a decision to marry a person—which to most BYU students has eternal implications—can be a daunting challenge. Students were asked how they would know when they had found “the one” or “someone” to marry. The responses to this open-ended question revealed both considerable variation and some confusion among students about how to identify someone to marry (table 14). Most frequently mentioned was asking for some type of spiritual confirmation. Twenty-two percent of the answers given by the men and nearly 30 percent by the women reported they focused primarily on spiritual feelings and answers to prayers. Looking to spiritual manifestations makes the BYU mate selection process considerably different from the process by which their national peers make the decision to marry.

Feelings that it is the right thing to do ranked next, followed by feelings of love. Compatibility in personality, goals, and hopes for the future accounted for 9 or 10 percent. Enjoyment of being together, bringing out the best in each other, friendship, open communication, physical attractiveness, and trust were mentioned in 1 to 7 percent of the answers. Interestingly, 7 percent of the young men and 4 percent of the young women admitted they were totally clueless about how they will make a decision whether or not to marry.

TABLE 14
How BYU Students Expect to Decide to Marry

Question: How will you know when you have found a person or “the” person to marry?
(open ended)

| Feeling, Event or Circumstance | Men (N=486*) | Women (N=767*) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Spiritual confirmation | 22% | 29% |
| Feels right | 15% | 12% |
| Feelings of love | 10% | 10% |
| Compatible, complement each other | 10% | 9% |
| Enjoy spending time together | 7% | 7% |
| Brings out best in me | 4% | 7% |
| Friendship | 3% | 5% |
| Open communication | 3% | 4% |
| Physical attraction | 3% | 1% |
| Trust, confidence | 2% | 1% |
| I don't know | 7% | 4% |
| Other | 15% | 11% |
| | 101% | 100% |

* Some respondents gave more than one answer

The rate of students’ successful searches for an eternal companion is fairly high at BYU. Thirty-eight percent of the young women and 43 percent of the young men reported they were currently in a relationship with marriage potential. The percentage is somewhat higher for BYU seniors, 48 percent for both men and women. The same proportion of the national sample, 48 percent of senior women, reported they currently had a boyfriend.¹⁹

Hesitation in the Search

Even though BYU students engage in a lot of hanging out and dating, many do not seem to be making much progress toward getting married. These single students identified the factors that were influencing them to avoid marriage (table 15). Some of these students experienced the divorce of their own parents. In addition, marriage is generally portrayed negatively in the media. A study of American young adults not attending college reported the same fear:

Despite doubts and difficulties, young men and women have not given up on the ideal of finding a soul mate to marry. On the contrary, they

TABLE 15
Factors Influencing BYU Students to Delay Marriage

Question: Are any of the following factors influencing you to delay marriage? Choose “Strong,” “Moderate,” “Weak,” or “No influence.” The following table lists the percentage of single BYU students who responded “Strong” or “Moderate” influence.

| Factor | Men (N=327) | Women (N=445) |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Fear of making a mistake | 59% | 58% |
| Need more emotional maturity | 44% | 59% |
| No opportunity to marry | 33% | 56% |
| Desire to finish school | 26% | 45% |
| Fear of responsibility | 33% | 34% |
| Fear of responsibility of parenthood | 29% | 33% |
| Desire to establish career | 29% | 22% |
| Pressure from family not to marry | 12% | 12% |
| Pressure from friends not to marry | 6% | 9% |
| Unworthy to marry in the temple | 9% | 5% |
| Other | 25% | 11% |

are dedicated to the goal of finding a lifelong best friend and kindred spirit. However, their ideals of soul-mate marriage contrast sharply with personal experience—as well as the popular culture’s portrait—of married people. Both media images and real-life models of marriage tend to be more negative than positive. Many in this study have grown up with unhappily married or divorced parents. They know exactly what a bad marriage is, but they are less sure of what a good marriage looks like. Some can only describe a good marriage as “the opposite of my parents.”²⁰

Sixty percent of BYU students indicated “fear of making a mistake” as a primary factor that discourages them in making decisions regarding marriage. Closely associated with this fear of selecting the wrong mate was a fear of the responsibilities of marriage along with a fear of parenthood. About a third of the students identified both these fears as either “strong” or “moderate” influences to delay marriage. Over half of the women and around one-third of the men claimed that they had not yet had a viable opportunity to marry. Surprisingly, more young women than young men indicated they were delaying marriage to finish their schooling. Nearly half of the young women identified educational goals as a significant influence in their decision not to marry at this time.

About 10 percent of the students report that their family pressures them not to marry while in college. We feel this is unfortunate because opportunities for meeting potential partners become much more limited after leaving BYU in most cases. Many BYU students are following the trend of the world to delay marriage and family for educational and professional reasons. Yet more undergraduates are married at BYU than at other four-year institutions.²¹

Summary and Recommendations

Leon Kass gave parents sound advice when he encouraged them to guide their children to religiously affiliated colleges and universities if they desire them to marry.²² This is particularly evident at BYU. Almost all students desire to marry and are confident that they will. They have been taught and recognize that marriage is “ordained of God” (D&C 49:15).

BYU students hang out in mixed groups, just like students at other universities, yet the casual sexual encounters associated with hooking up are virtually absent. Remarkably, only a few single BYU students report sexual experience. Most are keeping their commitment to chastity. Even though the dating culture at BYU may have changed somewhat in recent years, it is still an environment conducive to finding a mate who shares fundamental beliefs and values. The traits identified by BYU students as

desirable in a spouse are in some ways similar to those identified by other college students. Most want to marry someone who has a pleasant personality and is motivated to complete his or her education and pursue a career. What is dramatically different is that BYU students place a much higher premium on spirituality and religiosity than other students do. The characteristics BYU students are seeking will generally foster a strong and satisfying marital relationship. This is not to say that the process is easy. Students often struggle in the dating game. Most experience moments of fun and fulfillment but also times of despair when relationships are absent or fail.

BYU is a remarkable meeting place for LDS young people. Literally thousands of single members of the opposite sex, in the desired age range and with many of the desired traits, including shared religious values, are gathered there. The sheer number of potential partners may be bewildering and make it hard to decide to marry—77 percent of BYU’s nearly thirty thousand students are single²³—but most students appreciate the opportunity to meet and date in a religious atmosphere. It is encouraging to see that most BYU students eventually marry.

An earlier version of this article appeared in Mary Jane Woodger, Thomas B. Holman, and Kristi A. Young, eds., *Latter-day Saint Courtship Patterns*, Studies in Religion and the Social Order (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007), 13–39.

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1. The survey used as a definition “the traditional sense of going out on dates in which the man invites a woman to go out, picks her up, and pays for the date.” According to the survey, “37 percent of the respondents [college women, freshmen to seniors] said they had been on more than six dates of this kind, and a third said they had been asked on two dates or fewer. We might not expect freshmen women to have had many dates after only four or five months at college, but only 47 percent of juniors and 50 percent of the seniors reported having had more than six

dates. Since 48 percent of the women reported having a current boyfriend and 60 percent said they had had at least one boyfriend since coming to college, it appears that a woman can have a boyfriend while participating in little or no dating, in the traditional sense.” Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2001), 26, available online at <http://center.americanvalues.org>, 26, or www.iwf.org, 22.

2. Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up*, 14.
3. Honor Code of Brigham Young University, <http://honorcode.byu.edu>.
4. Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Unique and Wonderful University,” devotional speech given at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, on October 11, 1988, 2, <http://speeches.byu.edu>.
5. Leon R. Kass, “The End of Courtship,” *Public Interest* 126 (Winter 1997): 62.
6. Estimated Median Age at First Marriage, by Sex: 1890 to the Present, U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ms2.pdf>.
7. Jerald G. Bachman, Lloyd D. Johnston, and Patrick M. O’Malley, *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire Responses from the Nation’s High School Seniors: 2000* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 2001).
8. Kass, “End of Courtship,” 40–41; Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up*, 4–30; Marisa Milanese, “Hooking Up, Hanging Out, Making Up, Moving On,” *Stanford Magazine* (May/June 2002): 62–65.
9. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance: National College Health Risk Behavior Survey—United States, 1995, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 1997, 46(SS-6) 1-56, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, online at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00049859.htm>. This is the CDC’s most recent national data for college-age students.
10. Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up*, 13.
11. Kass, “End of Courtship,” 39–45; Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up*, 24–41.
12. The responses were independently coded by two research assistants, and the reliability between them was over 95 percent.
13. Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up*, 28.
14. David M. Buss, “The Psychology of Human Mate Selection: Exploring the Complexity of the Strategic Repertoire,” in *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology: Ideas, Issues and Applications*, ed. C. B. Crawford and D. L. Krebs (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1998): 420; Stephanie Stewart, Heather Stinnett, and Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, “Sex Differences in Desired Characteristics of Short-Term and Long-Term Relationship Partners,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 17, no. 6 (2000): 848.
15. Buss, “Psychology of Human Mate Selection,” 420; Stewart, “Sex Differences,” 848.
16. Jeffery R. Holland, “How Do I Love Thee?” address given at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, on February 15, 2000, 3, <http://speeches.byu.edu>.
17. David Know, Laurin Gibson, Marty Zusman, and Charles Gallmeier, “Why College Students End Relationships,” *College Student Journal* 31 (1997): 451.
18. Institutional Assessment and Analysis, “Missions, Marriage and Degree Attainment at BYU—Summary,” unpublished report prepared by Institutional Assessment and Analysis Division, Brigham Young University, 2003, 1.

19. Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up*, 25.

20. David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America, 2000* (New Brunswick, N.J.: National Marriage Project Report, Rutgers University, 2000), 16, available online at <http://marriage.rutgers.edu>.

21. Institutional Assessment and Analysis, “Missions, Marriage and Degree Attainment at BYU—Summary,” states that 23 percent of BYU undergraduate students are married. The National Center for Education Statistics, “Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Institutions: 1999–2000,” 90–91, at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2002168>, gives this data: 22 percent of undergraduates of any age at any college or university are married; 14.8 percent of students at four-year institutions are married; 5 percent of undergraduates age 19–23 years at any college or university are married; 28 percent of undergraduates age 24–29 at any college or university are married.

22. Kass, “The End of Courtship,” 39–63.

23. Quick Facts (2007), <http://byu.edu>.