"Oh, That’s For Girls": Barriers to Men’s Enrollment in College Sex Education Courses

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“Oh, That’s For Girls”: Barriers to Men’s Enrollment in College Sex Education Courses

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School
at Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science,
Social Science

by
Savannah R. Burke
August 2023

Accepted by:
Dr. Heather Hensman Kettrey, Committee Chair
Dr. Natallia Sianko
Dr. Thomas Maher
ABSTRACT

American teens have diverse experiences with sex education that may leave some inadequately prepared for navigating their sexuality as emerging adults. For those who seek higher education, college-level sex education classes could fill this void. Yet, there is a notable gender gap in enrollment in college-level sex education classes across the US, with men being reluctant to taking these courses. Thus, it is important to understand what barriers prevent men from taking these classes. This study explores the roles that masculine ideology plays in dissuading men from enrolling in college-level sex education courses. Interviews with 17 masculine-identified college students who had not enrolled in a sex education course indicated that men see these courses as feminized spaces that they should avoid. Although toxic masculinity was apparent in participants’ comments, they often distanced themselves from this ideology by either using genderblind language or attributing toxic ideology to other men. As such, efforts to recruit men into college-level sex education classes may benefit from the use of tactics that approach men as allies in educating “other” men about sexuality.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the educators who are committed to the academic and personal success of their students. Your passion, dedication, and sacrifices have not gone unnoticed.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my parents and grandparents for instilling in me the value of education. “Once you get an education, no one can take it away” has become a family motto and is the advice I will continue to give to anyone with the ambition to dream. Mom and Dad, thank you for giving me the tools to become the educated woman I am today. TJ, thank you for your love and support. To the cats, you all have been my emotional backbone.

To my committee, I could not have done this without you. Dr. Sianko and Dr. Maher, thank you for creating a safe space for me to test my early ideas for this project and for your feedback and encouragement. Dr. Kettrey—I could not have foreseen the impact you would have on me. You have been a great advisor and role model. I will be forever grateful for your support.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Sexual health and adolescent sexuality education are important in the minds of many Americans. A recent meta-analysis that combined findings from 23 studies measuring Americans’ opinions regarding sex education found 88.7% of respondents exhibited support for sex education in schools (Szucs et al., 2022). Yet, despite this overwhelming support, the exact benefits of adolescent sexuality education are tenuous, and can differ between the wide range of sexuality education programs that are implemented in schools, ranging from comprehensive sexuality education to abstinence-only education, and including many other program formats between these two varieties. According to a position statement issued by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) should be medically accurate, evidence-based, and age-appropriate, and should include the benefits of delaying sexual intercourse, while also providing information about normal reproductive development, contraception (including long-acting reversible contraception methods) to prevent unintended pregnancies, as well as barrier protection to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2016).

Comprehensive sexuality education includes, but is not limited to, information on the topics above and should begin in early childhood and continue through adulthood (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2016). Another form of sexuality education that is popular in the United States is “abstinence only,” “abstinence only until marriage,” or “sexual risk avoidance” (SRA) education. This type of educational program emphasizes abstaining from sex until marriage. Some programs include information about contraceptives and sexual health
topics such as STIs, anatomy, and puberty, but some of these programs are limited to information encouraging youth to delay sexual activity. SRA programs have been heavily supported by the US federal government, through mechanisms such as the Title V Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) Grant Program.

Established in 1996 during the Clinton administration, the Title V SRAE program was created to fund abstinence programs across the US (Title V Sexual Risk Avoidance Education, 1996). States seeking funding from Title V Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) or from discretionary SRAE grants must implement programs that focus “exclusively on sexual risk avoidance” and must adhere to the definitions and guidelines as stated in Section 510 (b) under the Social Security Act (1996). This act requires that programs emphasize and normalize avoiding “non-marital sexual activity” and requires that programs be medically accurate, age appropriate, based on learning and development theories, and be culturally appropriate. Further, these programs should address the individual and societal benefits of SRA and disadvantages of nonmarital sexual activity to improve emotional and physical health of youth, with an emphasis on their futures. Programs should also address how sexual activity may increase likelihood of poverty, and other risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol consumption. They must also mention ways to avoid sexual coercion and dating violence and how to get help if experiencing these, as well as how healthy relationships are important for the formation of healthy marriages and stable families.

There is a lot of variation in types of sex education that schools are required to offer youth in the United States. This could be related to state policies which are affected by the demographics and beliefs of voters, state by state. Some studies have shown that American parents’ support for certain sex education topics varies by political and religious groups, with
conservatives and religious people being more restrictive, while liberals are more permissive (Eisenberg et al., 2008; Kantor & Levitz, 2017). According to SIECUS’s Sex Ed State Law and Policy Chart (2022), only 5 states require comprehensive sexuality education and 21 states do not require any form of sexuality education at all. Furthermore, only 19 of the states that do require some form of sex education require information on safer-sex topics such as condom and birth control usage; only 13 states require information on consent and only 9 states require information on LGBTQ+ topics.

Consistent with this diversity in state-level requirements, there is also a wide range of sexuality education content that U.S. high schools actually offer to their students. The extent to which American high schools cover various abstinence and comprehensive sex education topics can be found in the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) biennial School Health Profiles report, which summarizes U.S. high school staff and administrators’ reports of whether their school’s health and wellness classes cover 22 distinct sexuality topics (see Table 1 for a list of the 22 topics and their rates of inclusion).

According to the most recent School Health Profiles report, in the year 2020 the state-level median rate at which U.S. high schools covered the benefits of being sexually abstinent was 87.4% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). This is much higher than the percentage of high schools that taught more comprehensive topics such as methods of contraception other than condoms (median of 75.9%), importance of using a condom at the same time as another form of contraception to prevent both STIs and pregnancy (median of 74.9%), diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity (median of 64.8%), how to obtain condoms (median of 64.7%), and how to correctly use a condom (median of 58.6%). Only 44.6% of high
schools represented in the survey offered information on all 22 sexual topics summarized in the *School Health Profiles* report.

In addition to the fact that students in many states fail to receive information on particular sexuality information, research indicates that students from different demographic groups receive different types of sexuality instruction (Lindberg et al., 2022). A study comparing 2011-2015 and 2015-2019 data from the National Survey for Family Growth compared the rates at which youth receive instruction on various sexuality topics (Lindberg et al., 2022). According to these data, a greater percentage of females are being instructed to wait until marriage to have sex compared to males. Additionally, racial minority males are less likely than white males to receive formal sex education on STIs, birth control, and condom usage prior to their first time having sex.

**College Level Sexuality Courses**

Because secondary sexuality education programs may leave adolescents lacking sufficient knowledge to navigate the sexual landscape of college campuses, college-level sexuality courses may help bridge this gap. Emerging adulthood is a time when many college students use their newly found autonomy to explore their sexuality, often through college hookups (Bogle, 2008; Halpern & Kaestle, 2014; Wade, 2017), which may result in both positive and negative outcomes. Positive outcomes include pleasure, positive emotions, or the development of a more serious, longer-term relationship (Bogle, 2008; Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Kettrey & Johnson, 2021; Shepardson et al., 2016). Yet, college hookups also have the potential to result in negative outcomes such as feelings of being used, regret, guilt, shame, and anger; increased risk for depression and lower self-esteem; and STIs or pregnancy (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008; Fisher et al., 2012; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Manning et al., 2006; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul et al., 2000). Having a solid knowledge of
sexuality could help college students maximize positive outcomes and minimize negative outcomes of college hookups.

The existing research on college-level sexuality courses indicates such classes can have favorable effects on knowledge about sex, intimate relationship satisfaction, and attitudes toward LGBTQ+ identities (Cotten 2003; García-Rojas et al., 2022; Henry, 2013; McMahan et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2009). In Spain, García-Rojas and colleagues (2022) studied the effects of both an in-person and virtual sexuality training program compared to a control group up to three months post-training. They found a statistically significant, favorable pre- to post-training improvement in knowledge about sexuality for those who received in-person and online training compared to the control group. Those who did not receive sexuality training did not improve upon their scores.

In a similar study conducted in the U.S., McMahan and colleagues (2021) examined the effectiveness of a sexual health e-seminar on college freshmen’s perceived knowledge about various sexual health topics. The authors found there were no differences in contraceptive knowledge between the treatment and control group at pre-test and there were no changes in the control group over time, but the treatment group’s scores increased significantly after completing the seminar. Study participants also rated their perceived knowledge of viral STIs, bacterial STIs, HIV/AIDS, and other STIs. Similar to contraceptive knowledge, the treatment group exhibited a significant difference in pre- to post-test changes for perceived knowledge about HIV/AIDS and other STIs; yet, the control group did not exhibit a significant pre- to post-test change.

There are also relationship benefits to those who take college-level sexuality courses (Henry, 2013; Rutledge et al., 2011). A mixed methods study on college couples where one partner had completed a human sexuality course investigated how couples perceived the effects
of the class on their relationship (Henry, 2013). Students who took the class reported benefiting from it in a variety of ways, as did their partners, even if only one partner was enrolled in the class. Participants reported increased openness specifically related to sex and sexuality, better communication, a better understanding of healthy relationships, pleasure, self-acceptance related to body image, awareness of one’s sexual agency, and higher self-esteem. This combination of benefits led to couples engaging in new sexual behaviors, as well as some protective health behaviors such as starting birth control.

Additionally, a study surveying college students in a sexuality course sought to understand how students obtained sexual knowledge and who they thought should teach adolescents about sexuality (Rutledge et al., 2011). Many participants were dissatisfied with their own sexuality education and believed parents should be the primary guides to adolescents on sexuality (67%), despite the fact very few of them had their parents as primary sexuality educators. Interestingly, students who took a sexuality course-initiated conversations about sexuality with their parents (Rutledge et al., 2011), which supports the idea that taking a sexuality class in adulthood may facilitate important conversations and improve interpersonal relationships.

College-level sexuality courses help students become more tolerant, especially of those who experience sexuality different from themselves. There is some evidence that college sexuality courses can foster more positive attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals. The authors of a study comparing students enrolled in a sexuality course to a control group of students enrolled in professional or introductory social science courses found that, at the end of the course session, participants in the sexuality course exhibited significantly lower measures of homophobia than students in the control group (Rogers et al., 2009). Furthermore, the authors found that the effect
of taking a sexuality course on reducing homophobic attitudes was partially mediated by students’ sexual knowledge. Thus, improved general sexual knowledge itself may partially contribute to improved attitudes toward diverse sexual identities. Fostering positive attitudes toward LGBTQ+ identities among college students is especially important since emerging adults are often exploring their sexual identity alongside their exploration of sex.

Despite the benefits noted in this emerging body of research, college sexuality courses are not compulsory. That is, college students self-select into these courses. Thus, understanding why students do or do not enroll in such courses is important for the sexual health, well-being, and sexual/relationship satisfaction of emerging adults. A recent study examining reasons students do or not enroll in these courses found students decide to take these courses for a range of reasons, most commonly because the courses seem interesting, friends recommend the courses, the courses meet a major/minor academic requirement, the course seems like an easy A, or other courses are full (King et al., 2020a). Popular reasons for not enrolling include the inability to work the course into one’s schedule, disinterest in the course, lack of awareness of the course, and believing one already knows enough about human sexuality. In a follow-up study, the same lead investigator found that men are less likely than women to enroll in sexuality courses. Specifically, King et al. (2020b) discovered women consistently enroll in sexuality courses more frequently than men, oftentimes at a ratio of 2:1 or greater, despite campus enrollment rates by gender being nearly 1:1. Although King et al. (2020a) found interesting insights in regard to students’ reasons for enrolling or not enrolling in sexuality courses, their findings scratched the surface of basic barriers related to practicality and interests. King et al. (2020a) do not provide an in-depth analysis of the ways that masculinity may influence men’s decisions to enroll or not enroll in sexuality education.
In light of the potential benefits of college sexuality courses, men’s reluctance to enroll in these courses may mean that they are missing important instruction that may help them develop a healthy sexual identity during their emerging adulthood years. Thus, understanding gender-specific barriers to sexuality education enrollment is important for boosting men’s enrollment in sexuality education courses. Predominant theories of masculinity may shed some light on why men are reluctant to enroll in sex education classes.

**Masculinity as a Barrier to Sexuality Education**

Connell (2005) notes that masculinity is defined in opposition to femininity, and femininity is considered inferior to masculinity. Yet, not all men have large amounts of masculine privilege over women. Instead, masculinity can be conceptualized as a fragile hierarchy where men must constantly establish their masculine privilege over women and less-masculine men. In fact, masculinity can be viewed as an achievement that must be constantly proven by the various ways that men “do gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Some men do gender in a manner that places them at the top of the masculine hierarchy. These men are said to possess hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity refers to an authoritative masculinity characterized by socially valued traits (e.g., physical strength, financial success, sexual prowess) that places some men at the top of the masculine hierarchy (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018). Viewing masculinity as an achievement means that men are always in danger of falling down the masculine hierarchy. Those who wish to climb or maintain their status on the hierarchy may do gender in a way that defines themselves in direct opposition to femininity, and ultimately devalues women and less masculine men. Those men who find themselves in a precarious position on the hierarchy may begin to exhibit characteristics of toxic masculinity.
Toxic masculinity refers to the socially constructed, rigid expectations of masculinity that promote aggression, dominance, emotional suppression, and the devaluation of femininity (Anderson, 2005; Kimmel, 1995). Toxic masculinity may lead some men to actively police (e.g., exclude, harass, victimize) men who do not possess hegemonic masculinity, and lie at the lower rungs of the masculine hierarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). In other words, men and boys may police one another’s ways of doing gender while excluding and devaluing women to maintain their precarious position on the masculine hierarchy.

This devaluation of femininity often means avoiding feminized spaces, such as sex education classes. In fact, research indicates that men in feminine spaces, such as feminized occupations and sports, actively work to do gender in a way that transgresses gender boundaries while simultaneously resisting feminization (Anderson, 2005; Barber, 2008; Robinson et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2019). For example, to resist feminization, male cheerleaders sometimes perform extra-athletic stunts in order to prove their physical strength and masculinity (CITE).

Men’s avoidance of feminized academic spaces has implications for higher education. Some have postulated that a decreasing trend in men’s enrollment in college is associated with the feminization of higher education (Kahn et al., 2011). Additionally, gender segregation by field of study has been noted across many countries, including the United States (Charles and Bradley, 2009). Men do gender in educational settings by their selection of masculine fields of study (Beutel et al., 2019). These masculine fields of study (e.g., STEM) are often perceived as rigorous and competitive, and associated with objectivity, status, agency, and instrumentality (Thomas, 1990; Mullen, 2014; Simon, Wagner, and Killion, 2017) while feminine fields of study such as liberal arts are seen as being subjective and not rigorous (Mullen, 2014). In fact, findings from one study indicate that conformity with masculine norms is associated with lower
likelihood of choosing a major within arts and humanities versus a STEM major or pre-medicine track (Beutel et al., 2019). Thus, it follows that the general over-representation of women in sex education courses may lead men to perceive these classes as feminized spaces that they should avoid.

**Current Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore men’s perceptions of college-level sexuality education. It specifically explores reasons that men decide not to enroll in college-level sexuality courses. To achieve this aim, this study specifically addresses the following research questions.

1. What barriers do men face that prevent them from enrolling in college-level sexuality courses?

2. What facilitators might encourage men to enroll in college-level sexuality courses?
CHAPTER TWO

METHODS

Clemson University’s Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the methods outlined below, which I piloted with a small sample during the Spring 2022 semester (see IRB approval letter in the Appendix A). To fulfill the thesis research requirement, I implemented these methods with a larger sample during the Spring 2023 semester.

Participants

Participants included undergraduate students (age 18 or older) enrolled at Clemson University who identify as men, are masculine-identified, or have been identified/classified as boys/men at some point during their lives. I identified and recruited participants by flyers placed in campus locations such as: Brackett Hall, Martin Hall, the library, and other buildings on campus. For in-person recruitment on campus, I asked Clemson instructors if they could recruit during class, and used an IRB approved script (Appendix B).

Procedure

I selected participants using convenience and purposive sampling by focusing on masculine-identified college students. Participants who expressed interest in the study were first given information about the study and an informed consent form (see Appendix C), and then were administered a pre-interview survey on Qualtrics to ensure they met the study’s inclusion criteria (Appendix D). Participants were required to meet the following criteria: 1) be a Clemson student, 2) be an undergraduate, and 3) be a man, masculine presenting, or non-binary (those who were socialized as men were eligible). Interested participants who passed the screening items on the survey then answered demographic questions as well as a few questions about their past sex education experiences and their number of sexual partners. They also indicated whether
they had taken a college-level sexuality class. Those who had already completed such a course were ineligible for this study.

Data were collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews in order to obtain rich, qualitative descriptions of men’s prior sex education, why sexual education was not pursued in college, and what men thought of sex education, including how men might be encouraged to enroll. Participants were paid after the interview with a $15 Amazon gift card. There were 17 men interviewed for this study. After interviewing 17 men, I reached data saturation, as participants were repeating similar messages and no new themes were emerging. The interview introduction script and interview guide are available in Appendices E and F.

**Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai software and then were checked for accuracy. Transcriptions were de-identified and stored on a password protected computer. To code transcripts, I used an inductive, grounded theory approach introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), following methods outlined by Charmaz (2014). This included conducting a line-by-line analysis of the transcripts to identify a list of *initial codes*, and then working with my advisor to classify each of the initial codes under *focused codes* that represent cohesive themes among the interview transcripts. Coding was an iterative process, as emphasized by Chun Tie et al. (2019). In a pilot study conducted in Spring 2022, I conducted line-by-line coding of the first five interviews. This served as coding training and ensured that the interview protocol produced robust data.

**Funding**

This thesis project was funded by the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminal Justice at Clemson University.
CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were 17 participants in this study. The majority of the sample was White (12/17 or 70.59%), mostly straight (14/17 or 82.35%), mostly cisgender (15/17 or 88.24%), and largely STEM majors (12/17 or 70.59%). The average age of the sample was 20.65 years old, ranging from 18 to 24 years old. The demographic profile of each participant, identified by pseudonym, can be found in Appendix F.

During their interviews, participants discussed a number of barriers to enrollment in college-level sexuality classes, along with suggestions regarding how enrollment might be facilitated. These barriers and facilitators are pertinent to five focused codes: (1) Practical Constraints, (2) Toxic Masculinity Deters Men from Sex Ed, (3) Politicization of Sex Ed, (4) Sex Ed is Not Necessary, and (5) Lack of Diversity. Below, I discuss each focused code, along with their corresponding initial codes.

**Practical Constraints**

For many men, whether interested in sex education or not, there were practical constraints that prevented them from enrolling in college-level sex education courses. A common practical constraint was that sex ed was simply inconsistent with participants’ degree requirements, especially among those who were STEM majors, which was the majority of the sample. Additionally, participants noted the lack of visibility of courses as a barrier to enrollment.

**Sex Ed is Inconsistent with Degree Requirements**

Many men in the sample expressed that sex education classes did not fulfill their degree requirements, and they did not want to enroll in a course that did not further their academic
agenda. Revan stated that his decision to enroll in courses is totally based on his major requirements, “It's basically 100% of how I take my classes, because most of my classes go along with my major requirements for my major […] So, it just goes based on my major.” Lane similarly stated, “It's not required for my degree,” and so did Revan who said, “I just really didn’t need it for my degree.” Other men expressed concerns about how the class fit in their schedule, concerning both workload and timing. Frachesco simply stated, “I just don’t have free time.” For these men, even those who express some interest in taking a sex education course do not have time for the additional credit hours or the course is not offered at a time that works for them. Revan said that despite it not fulfilling requirements, he did consider taking a sex education course, “I just didn't really need it for my degree. And I saw it—I think one of my friends mentioned taking one and I looked at the times and it conflicted with one of my major classes… So I couldn't take it.”

Many men in the sample were STEM majors and expressed that academic restrictions are a major issue for STEM students. With pressure to do co-op rotations (2 regular semesters and 1 summer semester of internships often completed by engineering majors prior to graduation), many STEM majors do not graduate in 4 years and become “fifth year seniors”. In order to graduate on time, Eli, talked about how his intense course load restricted him from following his interests, “As an elective, I think it would be interesting but also I think the biggest reason is just the credit hours. Because this semester, I'm taking 18 [credit hours].”

Others expressed concern about STEM major ideological barriers to taking a sex education course, such as by dismissing it as a liberal arts class. Rocky said that his engineering friends would degrade the course as unneeded saying, “They'd be like ‘Why are you taking that, we're engineers. We don't need to. This is kind of like a more like liberal art kind of thing. You
don't need that kind of stuff.’” Some equated this devaluation of sex education to be related to practical concerns. They emphasize STEM majors' fixation on building technical skills needed for landing an engineering or computer science-based job. Another man spoke as an insider to other STEM major colleagues, “I feel like a lot of STEM students have that idea where it's like, ‘if I'm taking a course it has to be related to STEM somehow.’” Others related to their own experiences. Lane said, “Cuz from my experience (and people I know) we very much value, ‘Does this help me?’ ‘No,’ I don't want it.’ ‘Does it help me?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘I'll take it.’”

Participants also expressed the sentiments that STEM majors have a “know it all” attitude as well as disdain for general education requirements that colleges view as helping students become well-rounded. Eli elaborated:

Because like being real, a lot of them feel like they know everything, about everything.

So then it's like, even if they have the free time, they don't really pursue stuff like that, because they feel like they already know everything.

One participant seemed to embody the dismissive sentiment that Eli ascribed to the stereotypical STEM student. Lane expressed his own disdain of courses aimed at making him a so-called well-rounded student by explaining:

There's a lot of credits that we have to take for being a well-rounded student in engineering that we don't really value, I'm going to be honest, like, I'm forced to take a well-rounded course for art or something like that yada, yada, right? I don't like art... not why I'm here. Yes, there's value to art kind of thing, right? But it's not valuable to me, personally, right?

**Lack of Visibility of Courses**
When asked why they did not enroll in a sex education course, several men in the study admitted they did not know the courses exist, which demonstrates a lack of visibility. Logan said, “I didn’t know [University] had a sex ed class,” while Brendan said, “I didn’t really know they [sex ed courses] exist.” Participants also noted that a sexuality education course is not visible in the online degree requirement/monitoring system for non-Psychology majors. As Thomas noted, “I can’t even think of like a sex ed course I’ve seen [on DegreeWorks].” Without knowing the course exists, it is impossible to register.

Neil said if he knew the course existed, he probably would have taken it over other courses:

I'd rather take sex ed than psychology or sociology. And I'm just not interested in either of those fields. Whereas, I'm pretty confident 99% of people are interested in sex. Right? This is like a general rule of thumb. I'm in college, and that would be very encouraging to people. Also... I can't really think of many other like encouraging things to do for put it out there. Or to like to get people to take it, other than like, making it known that it's available. Because if I had known it exists, that I probably would have taken the course a couple of years ago when I just needed like a couple more hours. That would have been very helpful to say instead of meditation or yoga.

Neil points out that sex education has broad appeal to college-aged people since everyone is a sexual being, and learning about sex may be more beneficial than some other electives students choose.

**Toxic Masculinity Deters Men from Sex Ed**

Toxic masculinity was front and center in many interviews, whether the participant implicitly named it as such. Some participants exhibited toxic masculinity through their own
implicit statements whereas others identified explicit instances of toxic masculinity that they attributed to their friends or “other guys.” Men in the sample feminized and undervalued sex ed, while exhibiting a lack of empathy for female partners. They valued masculine spaces over feminized spaces, equated masculinity to sexual prowess, and repeated social media messages that foster distrust of women.

**Feminizing and Undervaluing Sex Ed**

The men in the sample often feminized and undervalued sex education, and cited fear of social stigma as a barrier to enrollment. Interestingly, participants often cited these reasons as explaining why “other” men do not enroll. They did not claim that they personally thought sex education was feminine, nor did they report fear of their peer’s judgement. Instead, they noted that other men may fail to enroll due to social stigma.

JJ drew a connection between the feminization and invalidation of sex ed by men. He explained:

I feel like most men would feel like, "Oh, is that like a women and gender studies class?" or they would have—they would associate some sort of stigma with it and almost try to like, invalidate it in a way.

JJ points out that women’s and gender studies class are stigmatized, and conflating sex education with women’s studies becomes an initial avenue of invalidating sex education courses as unimportant, embarrassing, or even shameful. He was not the only participant to express this sentiment.

Thomas similarly pointed out men’s feminization of sex ed. As he explained, “A guy would look at a human sexual behavior course and be like, ‘Oh, that's for girls.’...It’s like sexual topics from an academic approach seem like more a feminine of a field of study.” Interestingly,
Thomas did not claim ownership of this sentiment; instead, he attributed it to other “guys.” It was not uncommon for men in the sample to note that their peer groups perceived sex ed to be feminine or without value. This social pressure seemed to be so great that Rocky said he would receive active criticism if he were to enroll in a sex ed course, “I feel like, I would kind of get clowned by the boys if I was taking a sex class.” This quote further demonstrates the potential social stigma, particularly from male peers, when enrolling in a course deemed feminine.

Participants also mentioned that social stigma may lead men to joke or fail to take the class seriously, even if they do enroll. As Logan explained, “At the end of the day, if you don't want to be in the sex ed class, you're gonna skip, you're gonna miss the information anyway. So if you're not interested in learning it, it's just a waste of time.” Similarly, Darwin mentioned “it’s easy to joke about things that will be taught” and Thomas echoed “guys [would] just come in and kind of sit back and laugh, you know, joke around and not really get anything out of the course.” Another participant suspected that such joking and disruptive behavior could diminish benefits for the whole class. As Lane expressed, “there would be a lot more of like, the whole laughing thing, like in the middle of a class about stuff” As demonstrated by these quotes, the feminization and undervaluing of sex education could have many implications for those who do and do not choose to enroll.

**Men’s Lack of Empathy for Female Partners**

One way the men in the sample exemplified toxic masculinity was through their lack of empathy for female partners. This was done through their perception of women as sexual objects and belief that sex with women is a conquest and a competition between themselves and other men. Men in this study did not claim to participate in this themselves; rather, they indicated that they are active bystanders who police other men when they speak about women in a disrespectful
manner. For example, Jonathan explicitly stated that if he heard another man talking about women as sexual objects, he would ask the man questions to get him to critically think about what he said. He explained what he would do in such a situation:

I’d be like, “Hang on, what did you say?” And they say it and I'll be like, "Don't you want to think through what you just said?" and then I would ask him questions about that. I mean, obviously you don't want to just like yell at him or whatever, right? That's not going to help you with anything but be like "Why do you think that is?" And then pick apart why they think it is, and be like, "Well, don't you think that such and such is you know," like, make them think about it right? Like don't [be] like, "Oh, dude, you're an idiot. Why would you think that?" Be like, "Why do you think that?" and let’s see what we can do to make you think otherwise.

Several other men indicated disapproval and discomfort when they hear men in their peer group talking about women in terms of sexual conquests. JJ recounted his arrival to his campus and hearing other men talk about their sexual conquests:

When I first started [at my university], I was very much in like, especially my freshman year, in very male dominated spaces, and like, male dominated friend groups, and it was still the same old. . . [sighs] Sex as something that just happens. If that makes any sense, like, ‘Oh, I met a girl on Tinder last night, I did so and so.’ Nothing beyond that.

JJ expressed disapproval of the way these other men talked about their sexual conquests. It seems as if he were hoping the men would share meaningful information like what interests they shared with their partners or how they romantically connected. Instead, this information was lost in the recounting of what was ultimately reduced to a sexual encounter. When asked about things he would like to hear more about and think other men should learn more about, JJ laughed and said,
“Definitely a more realistic view of sex…Female pleasure…Enthusiastic consent.” When asked why he wants to hear more about these topics, he laughed and explained that most male men see sex as an accomplishment and “ego boost rather than something for both parties to enjoy.”

Thomas mentioned he is affiliated with a fraternity and said that the majority of his friends were unable to talk about sex in a non-toxic way. He said:

Oh, god. Okay. Kuhhhh [scoffs]. Um, so I'm in a fraternity. Um, and of course, I have a ton of guy friends. You know, we're 21, 20 years old. And the majority of all my friends need some education on just… like, really, they need, they need, you know, education on how to like talk about sex in a non-toxic way, if that makes sense. [It’s] very common [that] guys are like, “Yeah, man, I banged that chick” ... I personally, that kind of language makes me cringe. I don't think it... I don't think it's, one appropriate, and two, I think it can be considered very offensive. And demeaning to women.

Thomas noted that his peer group’s toxic way of talking about sex was inappropriate, very offensive, and demeaning to women. He also endorsed education as a possible solution for men to learn to talk about sex in a healthy way. Interestingly, Thomas conveys the implicit idea that his peer may benefit from sex education; yet, he has not taken such a course himself.

**Evaluating Masculinity with Sexual Prowess**

Closely related to lack of empathy for female partners, men in the sample equated masculinity with sexual prowess. By equating masculinity with sexual competence, these men were prone to feeling that sexual inadequacy and incompetence would make men less masculine.

Thomas captured this equation well. As he explained:

It's like they're focused on [trying to] have as much sex with as many people as you possibly can. That's what makes you cool, popular, whatever... I hate to use the term
because it’s so politicized, but like the toxic masculinity, but I mean, *I see it!* As much
that I'd be like, “Oh, that doesn’t exist.” *Yeah, it does.* Because you know, guys they walk
around and talk about sex very openly. And, um, you know, that's almost how you
consider if somebody's cool, if they have a bunch of sex or the women they sleep with are
pretty or that kind of thing.

If sexual prowess and adequacy are symbols of masculinity, then enrolling in a sex
education course may symbolize sexual inadequacy and, thus, may be perceived as emasculating.
The men in the study sample expressed this concern, but they attributed it to other men and did
not acknowledge it as applying to themselves. As Trevor explained, men who need education on
sexual matters may feel embarrassed and/or lose a sense of pride. As he relayed:

Embarrassed is one more is one potential thing that some guys can feel. Others, it's more
so about an aspect of pride, like “I don't need to know that, I do a good enough job
pleasing my woman on my own.”

Similarly, Eli described the emasculation other men might face if taking a sex ed course:

I do think that the main embarrassment is because they feel like I think the way
like, it's presented to a lot of men and again, is a very toxic mindset, I think is that like, if
you need help with sex, you're less of a man. Like, if you need help with anything
regarding sexual interactions, that it's, you're less of a man and that doing so [asking for
advice or help with sexual matters] it makes you like, it's emasculating to do so.

Eli elaborated by illustrating the social consequences and the line of questioning one might face
(presumably from other men) due to enrolling in a sex ed course:

“Oh, you need to take a college course?” Or, like, “What guy needs to take a college
course on sex? Like, do you not know how to do it?” kind of thing. I think most men at
this age, they have a very, like egotistical view of sex. Like they're good at everything, they know everything about it. So I can perfectly imagine like seeing men who take that course being ridiculed for it.

**Social Media Fosters Distrust of Women**

Several men in this study brought up social media in their interviews. One participant mentioned the dangers of “the Manosphere,” a place online where men discuss men’s rights and reject feminism and develop toxic ideas about women (Ging, 2019). One man specifically mentioned the potential effects of encountering “bro science” (advice presented as facts but has no scientific support) in the Manosphere. Eli explained how bro science may lead men to believe they do not need sex education. As he relayed:

Most recently, it was mainly with like, bro science, if you know, that is like the manosphere... there has been like a new wave of like, influencers, you know, specifically Andrew Tate, who created this very negative, very toxic and unhealthy view of how women, especially in sexual relationships, should be treated. And I think that would be one, at least his most recent, like most recently, that would be a big diverter. Because people...I can perfectly see an average guy being like, ‘I already watched this kind of stuff on YouTube, I don't need to take a course.’

Brendan connected sex education (in his case what he considered a negative experience or “loss of innocence”) with social media, specifically another YouTuber called Chiseled Adonis. Brendan said:

I was watching Chiseled Adonis, who does like commentaries on different things. One of them happened to be a podcast where some promiscuous women were being interviewed. And, like, some of the actions that they recorded, [that] they did... [it was] definitely like
a loss of innocence type thing of like, now my worldview has been, you know, this thing exists. And I'd rather not have known.

Brendan had a very religious background and, after seeing women’s sexual agency on social media, his idea of female sexual purity was ruined. He feared that a sex education class would do the same thing.

Eli mentioned that learning about sexual consent could help men avoid being falsely accused of sexual assault. After discussing the Manosphere and how young men may feel as if they do not need a sex ed class because they have learned about sex from influencers such as Andrew Tate, he said:

I think, a very easy way to get people to like, feel like they should take one is kind of maybe in the course description, harping on how to handle sexual interactions and how to understand consent better. Because I think definitely, that would be something where a college level course can really go in depth about how consent works, how like relationships, and especially if it's a discussion-based course, having like female and male students both discuss how they feel consent should be approached.

*Men Prefer Male-Dominated Spaces*

Although some men expressed that they wouldn’t care about the gender ratio in a sex ed class, most men said that if men were largely outnumbered by women, they might be uncomfortable. As Thomas explained, “Guys are probably a little bit more open to talking about sex and sexual behavior with other guys.” This may stem from gender-segregated experiences with sex education during adolescence. As Logan mentioned:
[Pre-college] it was, it was very much like the, the, all the guys go to a different room and all the girls stay in this room, and the girls learned about periods and the guys learn about condoms. And then those two things never cross.

Some men suggested that colleges should offer gender-segregated sex education classes, especially in geographical areas that tend to espouse traditional values. Trevor said:

Going back into that embarrassment of being more traditional, especially with this college being located in the location that it's at, you tend to draw a lot of people that were raised in traditional households. So, maybe make a guy's only class and the girls only class.

Some saw single-gender classes, at least male-only classes, to be potentially unproductive. Lane explained that, when there is a large group of men together, things can get rowdy. He said that although joking is likely a coping mechanism, it is not well tolerated in college classrooms. Despite men feeling more comfortable in male dominated spaces, having women in the classroom could help mitigate some of the potential lack of professionalism from a large group of men. Lane said:

Like, as guys, we do like to crack jokes, especially on sensitive, like, I guess, embarrassing topics, because it's our, I guess, the male way of like, coping with this kind of a thing. Like, we just do, like, "ah, yeah" you know, kind of a thing, which is not good for a professional setting right? So, like, that would be bad there. Because, like, guys are more inclined to do that less if there is a female presence. Because it's, a "I don't want to make them uncomfortable. So I'm not going to make the joke” kind of thing.

Not all men in the sample valued masculine spaces. As Jonathan explained the importance of welcoming various voices in classroom discussions to prevent an echo chamber among men:
That just sounds like it'd be boring... Well I feel like there wouldn't be a lot of good
dialogue, there would just be like, a bunch of dudes asking questions. But I think it'd be
interesting to like, hear, like, what women have to say about it. It'd be interesting to see
both sides, like, what the questions that the others have. I feel like you get more out of it.

Eli took it a step further. He indicated that the importance of diversity within the
classroom directly benefits men, particularly men who have sex with women, as women can
provide a valuable perspective, especially for issues like consent. He said:

As a heterosexual man, is, it's kind of redundant and kind of stupid to ask for advice
about how to interact with women from men... like asking for consent advice from a guy,
you're gonna get a lot different answer than if you ask a woman about how to like, not
make them uncomfortable, and how to make sure they feel safe and feel like they're
respected, versus a guy [guy's opinion]. So having women in the course, I think, is a good
thing.

Eli elaborated further about how a dynamic class can benefit women and men by helping them
be more understanding of each other’s experiences:

And I think it would also be useful because, again, you know, it's a two way...it's
not a one-way street. I think it'd be useful for women to have guys, in an equal
mix, so they can understand some of the insecurities and things like that, that men
can experience.

**Politcization of Sex Ed**

When discussing sex education with the men in the study sample, either pertinent to their
personal childhood/adolescence experiences or relevant to their reasons for not enrolling in a
college sex education course, many relayed negative experiences related to the conservative
politics or Biblical culture of their campus or hometown. Relatedly, they expressed the belief that sex education was stigmatized as a liberal issue. These political barriers dissuaded men from enrolling in sex education courses.

**Bible Belt**

The men in this study sample were recruited from a campus in the rural southeastern United States, with a relatively conservative culture. When discussing the drawbacks or barriers to men’s enrollment, participants specifically mentioned the campus’s southern culture. For example, Eli stated, “With the climate around [this university]...it’s not a very progressive school...we’re in the South...[and people] might be less open to discussing different values...like casual sexual relationships, non-heterosexual sexual relationships, or non-monogamous [relationships].” Eli was specifically concerned with how the climate of the university might prevent men from enrolling, or that it may prevent the class from having open and respectful discussions about specific topics and diverse sexual identities and behaviors.

Others brought up barriers that extended from their experiences prior to college related to their family, religion, and culture. Several specifically discussed being taught that sex prior to marriage is morally unacceptable. Jonathan said:

> Sex outside of marriage was viewed in a negative, a negative, like reprehensible sense, right? But like, in marriage [sex] is perfectly fine. They made that very clear. They said, like, “Sex isn't a bad thing as long as it's within the confines of marriage.”

Trevor similarly emphasized that sex is only allowed within the confines of marriage between a man and a woman, and that sex within this context this is a “gift” and a “duty.” As he explained:

> But, I was raised in a Christian house, obviously [went to] church, and then the church preaches premarital sex is a sin. But, after, our church was a little like, not as taboo about
it, because the message was premarital sex is a sin. But, sex in a marriage is a duty as well as a gift from God to be something to be enjoyed between the man and his wife. Trevor saw this taboo view of non-marital sex mirrored in his formal sex education prior to college, which he found to be lacking. He elaborated:

They kind of tended to not want to get into the touchy subjects, just because it was so it was kind of considered taboo where [I’m] from. So, I mean, I think I heard the word condom mentioned one time but was never shown how to put one on or anything like that.

These quotes demonstrate a clear intersection of cultural and religious beliefs with opinions about sex and sex education. Thus, considering the conservative culture in which these participants were embedded, it is not necessarily surprising that many believed sex education was stigmatized as a liberal endeavor.

**Political Stigma**

Some men in the sample mentioned that folks may see sex education or conversations around sexual identities to be liberal propaganda. JJ mentioned the culture around his campus to assumptions people may make about sexuality. He said, “I unfortunately, do think, especially at [my university], a lot of people associate like sex positivity and the discussion of sex with like, certain political groups.” When asked to clarify what he meant by “certain political groups,” JJ said that liberals were the political group he was referring to. A trans man, Frachesco, expressed similar sentiments in regard to the effect of political views deterring men to enroll in sex education.

I imagine people who don't want to hear about gender and sexuality tend to feel like they're getting that information shoved down their throat, whenever they learn about it.
So, if someone of that kind of mentality entered the class, they probably would not enjoy themselves at all, even if it is a good information.

Lane implied that he has avoided taking a sex education class in order to insulate himself against information that conflict with his own worldviews. When asked what he thought a college sex ed course might be like, he said:

I think it would be a lot like my high school course was, but probably a lot more politically correct. And discussing more variations of lifestyles that occur, which this might sound bad is unfortunately, something that I'm not really interested in taking. Because I only have to worry about my own lifestyle and my own safety and precautions more so than, "Oh, well, there's all these different versions".

When specifically asked about what influenced his decision to not enroll in a sex education course, Lane noted that even if he did have time (his STEM major limited his schedule), he would not enroll due to his perception that politics would be embedded into the class. He elaborated:

There's courses that I'm required to take that have nothing to do with politics, and magically politics and stuff [are] in there. And it's just kind of a thing of like, “Okay, cool. This is not what I'm here for. This is amazing [sarcastic tone].”

**Sex Ed is Not Necessary**

Many men, whether explicitly or implicitly, conveyed the idea that sex ed was not a necessary part of their college experience. Men in the sample relayed a variety of messages that conveyed this idea, including the perception that their prior sex education was adequate, the belief that sex ed was not pertinent to their life circumstances or worldview (e.g., being single or
not intending to become sexually active until marriage), or the idea that their previous sex ed had instilled a sense of anxiety around sex.

**Received Adequate Sex Ed Elsewhere**

Some men believed that had gained adequate sex education prior to college, and said that they did not really need further education on the subject. Jonathan said, “Like, I mean, they covered they covered everything there was [to] know. So, I would say [that the quality was] probably out of 10, probably 10. Like, they told me everything I need to know.” Zayne described the quality of his prior sex education to be “fair” and “good” and recognized that nothing will ever be perfect, but still gave his education an “8 out of 10” and said, “To be honest, I haven't taken one [college-level sex ed class] because I thought I didn't need one... just because I've already taken one in middle school.”

**Not Pertinent to Life Circumstances or Worldview**

A couple of men expressed life circumstances or worldviews that prevented them from enrolling in a sex ed class. Brendan did not think taking the class was necessary due to his relationship status, “I eventually got to the point where I was like, ‘Okay, that's probably factually all I really need to know’ because there's not much well... I don't need to know more until I'm in a relationship.” Some other men expressed similar sentiments related to their relationship status or moral stance on sex before marriage. For example, Rocky mentioned that he was worried about his close friends questioning why he was taking a sex ed class. This worry was specifically related to him and his friends identifying as religious and discussing their plans to wait until marriage to have sex. He said:

We've talked about it before, “Oh, we're all waiting for marriage”, that kind of thing. But like then all of a sudden, like, they're like, "Oh, now you're suddenly interested in sex,”
and like, all this kind of stuff. They would assume I'm having sex or something. I wouldn't like that. You know, if I wasn't but um, you know, maybe I'm just trying to get educated. I guess it's more of just yeah, like a worry that they're passing judgment on me for having sex.

Perceived lack of pertinence of sex ed also stemmed from participants’ sexual identities. Franchesco felt discomfort around sexual topics, and questioned whether such information was pertinent to an asexual individual such as himself:

My like, search or my start to my search been to figuring out more about sexual stuff started because of being transgender. As I said, I, in my mind, when I entered high school, in college, I had like this strange mindset of, “Oh, I don’t need to have sex. I don’t think that’s for me.”

Yet, as JJ suggested, information from a sex education class could have benefits for college men whether they are currently sexually active or not. As he explained, “This is something that would positively benefit you… and would be beneficial for you and future partners, or you and your current partner.” Additionally, Franchesco mentioned that, although information from sex education may not seem to be personally relevant to college men now, in the future they may need to pass this information on to a friend, family member, son or daughter. In this case, more information is always better. He concluded:

Everything we've talked about really, just being informed is one of the greatest mental, I don't want to say weapons or mental tools a person can have. If you aren't informed, and you don't know what you're talking about, you could end up making some really, I don't know, egregious errors or mistakes, or maybe end up insulting people or doing something you definitely shouldn't have done. Because you weren't informed.
Past Sex Ed Experiences Instilled Fear or Anxiety Around Sex

When discussing past sex ed experiences, many men expressed how they felt anxious about sex. Some expressed fear of consequences of sex such as getting a woman pregnant or getting an STI. Others felt a general lack of openness and sense of anxiety around sex. Despite seeing himself as quite sex positive at the time of his interview, JJ reflected on his past sex education experience, stating, “I would say I definitely didn’t feel like I could be as open with regards to it. I would say I definitely felt shame sometimes.” Another man in the sample noted that, while he believes teaching prevention is important, his early experiences with sex ed included scare tactics that had an effect on his feelings toward sex. Killian specifically said, “There was, there was a good bit of that [scare tactics] now realizing, and that's why I kind of said, I wish they had talked about it in a much more like, safe…manner.”

Because of these early experiences, men may feel hesitant to pursue further sexual education, due to an assumption that a college sex ed class will evoke similar negative feelings of shame, fear, and discomfort with oneself as a sexual being. Yet, Frachesco, the transman who expressed that he didn’t think sex was for him suggested these feelings could dissipate over time. As he explained, “I feel a lot more comfortable in general about the idea of sex [now], whereas I used to just hate it. I didn't want to interact with it at all.” This evolution from hating the idea of sexual education to being more comfortable suggests that barriers created by negative experiences with past sex education could be overcome with exposure.

Lack of Diversity

When discussing past sex education experiences and what men think a college sex ed class would be like, there were a few concerns among participants. They believed curriculum
would overlook LGBTQ+ topics, expressed concerns about abstinence curriculum, and believed sex ed would entail lost opportunities to learn from others’ perspectives.

**Curriculum Overlooks LGBTQ+ Topics**

Some men mentioned that their prior sex education experiences included heteronormative information, and rarely mentioned LGBTQ+ topics, let alone discuss them in depth. When imagining what a college sex ed course might look like, some even brought up a desire for information on LGBTQ+ topics. Despite not having any sexual interactions with same-sex partners himself, JJ wished he had learned more about them saying, “I personally have not had like a same-sex sexual interaction. But if I had, I would not have known what to do at all. Like I can say that with confidence.” He went on to say that his sex education did not align with his personal values and that it took a lot of involvement with progressive groups, Title IX trainings, and online sources to fill in the gaps. As he explained, his pursuit of information included “applying what I was hearing in those spaces, to like, what I was not hearing in those spaces, sort of filling in gaps and critically thinking” to remedy the inadequate and inaccurate information presented to him during his childhood.

Franchesco took a different approach. He was previously very uncomfortable with sexual education and sexuality, but eventually overcame some of that discomfort through learning more about sexuality and their own identity. He hoped that inclusive curriculum could help prevent trouble that may come from misinformation and help students to be more understanding of others. He said:

I think a lot of people, or a lot of trouble that occurs today comes from people either being misinformed or just not understanding and in general, what it means to be certain sexualities, or genders or identities. So, if there was a class that helped cover that, and got
people more informed about that sort of information, it would, I think it'd be really helpful, especially if it was like a required course. These participants believed that LGBTQ+ topics have a place in college sex education courses and believe that curriculum could help those who are in LGBTQ+ relationships, or to help the broader public become knowledgeable, and hopefully more understanding of LGBTQ+ peers. Yet, their belief that college courses would ignore these topics (as their secondary education classes did) discouraged them from taking a college-level sex education course.

**Concerns about Abstinence Curriculum**

Related to the concern that college-level sex education classes would ignore LGBTQ+ topics, some participants also believed such classes would promote abstinence. Eli mentioned concerns about abstinence curriculum in the context of the stigma that some people may have against casual sexual relationships, saying he hoped a college-level sex ed class the class would be as objective as possible and avoid “perpetuat[ing] the idea that sexual relationships should only be between two committed partners” and that college students should be abstinent. When asked what topics or content would not be helpful for him, Revan mentioned abstinence, and elaborated, “All the silly, morality aspects behind it.” JJ, who is sexually active, agreed when asked what would not be useful and said, “The least helpful to me [in a college sex ed class] probably is an abstinence-based curriculum or anything regarding abstinence.”

**Lost Opportunity to Learn from Others’ Perspectives**

Participants who expressed concerns over a lack of diversity in sex ed often lamented that this void represented a lost opportunity to learn from others’ perspectives. They specifically mentioned that a lack of diversity in curriculum or enrollment would create an echo chamber that
diminished students’ learning experiences, as well as create an uninviting atmosphere for sexual and gender minorities. Pointing to the benefits of diversity, Darwin said:

If it's mainly one sex, that might count kind of, it kind of defeats the point because like, everyone needs to kind of learn if you only have one group of people learning, you need the other group too, to actually make that knowledge more useful in everyday life.

Trans men in the sample also had things to say about the importance of diversity in a sex ed class. Logan expressed that having an “LGBT sex ed” course on its own would be best for comfort, but that with stigma around the LGBT community in the South, that “not a lot of people would take it.” He said, “I do think the most uncomfortable would be like to separate the classes by gender, and like, make you take the class that aligns with your gender”, so he suggested having an open course. A mix of people in the class helps everyone learn from each other, but also builds connections with peers that helps destigmatize sexual and gender minorities:

So, I think the best option would be co-ed, like a mixed ratio. Not only are you learning from like, through instruction, but you can also like, connect with your peers and understand differences and experiences there across gender spectrum. So I think that's important to have that mix.

Franchesco posited that variety and covering LGBTQ+ topics could destigmatize and prevent harm for LGBTQ+ people saying, “At least knowing more and knowing the truth about something will prevent people from making certain logical fallacies that could possibly hurt people or themselves.”

According to the quotes above, some men point out and appreciate diversity, and recognize its importance due to the potential benefits of having class with people from different backgrounds, especially when those people are given the opportunity to converse amongst
themselves or connect through in-classroom discussions. Connecting with others and hearing lived experiences can help reduce stigma and humanize marginalized groups.
Chapter Four

LIMITATIONS & CONCLUSION

Limitations

Findings from this study must be interpreted within the confines of a few important limitations. First, this study sample was limited to masculine identifying undergraduate students at one university in the southeastern United States. All interviews were conducted by me, a woman, which could have affected responses. It is possible that participants would have responded differently if a man had interviewed them. Second, due to the interviews being conducted during the/post-COVID 19 pandemic, interviewees were given the option to complete interviews in person or via Zoom. Most men chose online interviews. Yet, some chose in-person interviews and, thus, the differing formats may have created differences in the way participants interacted during their interviews.

Finally, the men who participated in this study are not necessarily representative of the broader population of college men. Although men from all majors were invited to participate, a large proportion of participants were STEM majors (70.59%). Importantly, STEM is a male-dominated field and, thus, findings are not representative of the views of men from feminized or gender-balanced fields. Similarly, the majority of the sample was White (70.59%) and identified as straight (82.35%). These demographic proportions are similar to the demographics of the university where the sample was obtained. Although the sample is representative of men on this specific campus, findings are not necessarily representative of the broader population of college men.

To address some of these limitations, future research should be conducted with different study populations such as LGBTQ+ men, men who have taken sex ed classes in college, or men
in non-STEM disciplines using interviews or focus group interviews. These studies could help better assess whether all men hold similar views related to masculinity and the feminization of sex ed, or if these attitudes are predominantly held by STEM men and men who have not taken sex ed in college. Studies may also utilize diverse interviewers to encourage men to speak more openly about their experiences.

**Conclusion**

This study adds to interdisciplinary literature on education, sex research, and masculinity. While previous research has identified practical barriers to men’s enrollment in sex education courses (King et al., 2020b), this study specifically sought to explore the role that masculine ideology inhibits men from seeking sex education. Although some men avoided sex education because they believed it would ignore a range of diverse experiences, toxic masculinity was a substantial deterrent to men’s enrollment. Toxic masculinity was evident in men’s perceptions that see sex education classes are feminized spaces that they do not need to occupy, in their lack of empathy/respect for women as sexual partners, and in their belief that a real man with sexual prowess does not need sex education.

Interestingly, the men in the study did not overtly claim to subscribe to toxic masculinity themselves. They either spoke in genderblind language or they attributed toxic masculinity to “other” men. Many men spoke about their and their peers’ reasons for not enrolling using genderblind language. This was evident in the practical constraints that they mentioned as dissuading them from enrolling in sex education. For example, men commonly mentioned that a sex education class was inconsistent with their STEM requirements. However, STEM disciplines are male-dominated and perceived by the general public as masculine, rigorous, competitive, and
career driven. Conversely, men in this sample believed sex education to be unnecessary. As one man in this study said, “Why are you taking that, we’re engineers?”

When men did speak directly about masculinity, they distance themselves by attributing their thoughts to other men. Although no man interviewed in this study had ever taken a college-level sex education course, many said they were adequately educated in this subject, but their peers were not. They mentioned that the embarrassment or social stigma of taking a feminized class was problematic for their peers, but they did not apply this barrier to themselves. Additionally, men in the sample said their peers displayed toxic masculinity but claimed that they personally rejected this kind of ideology. In this sense, participants in the study saw themselves as what Messner (2016) calls “good men.” Commenting on men’s role in the prevention of violence against women, Messner noted that men assume a false dichotomy between good men (themselves) and bad men (others, their peers). They essentially assume that other men need to reflect on their role in perpetuating a culture that tolerates violence against women, but that they themselves are not part of the problem. Similarly, in this study, men believed that other “bad men” subscribed to toxic masculinity and, thus, believed they would not benefit from sex education, but they did not see this as applying to themselves.

One way that men in this study attributed toxic masculinity to other presumably bad men, was by highlighting the role that social media influencers play in upholding toxic masculinity. In this study, I did not directly ask men about social media, but a few men mentioned the influence of social media on young men’s masculinity and understanding of sexual relationships. With the expansion of social media, users can access content from influencers like Andrew Tate, or forums like Reddit and 4chan, there is a hotbed for anti-woman discourse, toxic masculinity, and
bro science. By juxtaposing themselves against social media influencers, men in this sample were able to see themselves as good men who do not need the benefits of sex education.

Implications

Findings from this study have important implications for efforts to recruit men into sex education classes. Past research has suggested that a college-level sex education course can have important benefits such as improving interpersonal skills and intimate relationships, helping students become more tolerant of diverse sexualities and identities, increased knowledge about sexual health, initiation of protective health behaviors (Cotten, 2003; Rogers et al., 2009; Rutledge et al., 2011; Henry, 2013; McMahan et al., 2021; García-Rojas et al., 2022). Yet, men are reluctant to take these courses (King et al., 2020a). The men in the present study offered some suggestions or strategies to facilitate men’s enrollment. To combat practical barriers related to degree requirements, men suggested to advertise during orientation or at informational tables to increase the visibility of sex education courses. They also suggested opening additional course sections at different times and in various modalities (in-person, online, etc.), making sex education a graduation requirement or making the course count as a general education requirement. Men also noted that once these practical barriers are alleviated, ideological barriers must be addressed.

To facilitate the enrollment of men who face ideological barriers, men in the sample suggested advertising through an apolitical entity, or the creation of a men’s health club or similar inclusive environment for men, which would serve as an equivalent to women’s health clubs on campus. They also suggested giving the course a more interesting/appealing title and accurate description which could encourage men to seek reliable information about healthy
relationships and consent and may prevent them from turning toward questionable avenues such as the Manosphere for information about women and relationships.

Yet, not all of these suggestions are easily feasible. Men’s reliance on the “good man” narrative, however, could be one key to recruitment. It is possible that encouraging those men who do take sex education classes to approach their friends as fellow good men who need to prepare themselves and educate other men about sexuality could be an effective recruitment strategy. This could be a feasible first step in slowly altering the gender distribution of college-level sex education classes. As long as sex education classes remain feminized spaces, many men will continue to undervalue and avoid them.
Table 1

The CDC School Health Profiles 22 sexual health topics

<table>
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<th>Topic</th>
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<tr>
<td>How HIV and other STIs are transmitted health consequences of HIV, other STIs, and pregnancy;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of being sexually abstinent;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to access valid and reliable information, products, and services related to HIV, other STIs, and pregnancy;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influences of family, peers, media, technology, and other factors on sexual risk behaviors;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and negotiation skills;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal-setting and decision-making skills;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencing and supporting others to avoid or reduce sexual risk behaviors;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy of condoms;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of using condoms consistently and correctly;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to obtain condoms;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to correctly use a condom;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods of contraception other than condoms;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of using a condom at the same time as another form of contraception to prevent both STIs and pregnancy;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to create and sustain health and respectful relationships;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of limiting the number of sexual partners;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preventive care that is necessary to maintain reproductive and sexual health;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to communicate sexual consent between partners;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing and responding to sexual victimization and violence;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities;

How gender roles and stereotypes affect goals, decision making, and relationships;

Relationship between alcohol and other drug use and sexual risk behaviors.

Note: Topics are listed from most to least common/highest to lowest % taught in US.
References


[https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2005.48.3.337](https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2005.48.3.337)

[https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243208321168](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243208321168)

[https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-019-09236-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-019-09236-0)


[https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696813487181](https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696813487181)


Cotten, Annie Laura. (2003). The impact of a human sexuality college course according to gender: Comparisons of the 1970s and the 1990s [1], *Sex Education, 3*:3, 271-280, DOI:  
10.1080/1468181032000119140


https://doi.org/10.1177/2050312118822927


Appendix A

To: Heather H Kettrey
Re: Clemson IRB Number: IRB2022-0120

Exempt Category: D2
Determination Date: 29-Mar-2022
Expiration Date: 31-Mar-2027
Funding Sponsor: N/A
Project Title: Men's Sex Education Project

The Office of Research Compliance determined that the proposed activities involving human participants meet the criteria for Exempt level review under 45 CFR 46.104(d). The Exempt determination is granted for the certification period indicated above.

Principal Investigator (PI) Responsibilities: The PI assumes the responsibilities for the protection of human subjects as outlined in the Principal Investigator's Responsibilities guidance.

Non-Clemson Affiliated Collaborators: The Exempt determination only covers Clemson affiliated personnel on the study. External collaborators have to consult with their respective institution’s IRB office to determine what is required for their role on the project.

Modifications: An Amendment is required for substantial changes to the study. Substantial changes are modifications that may affect the Exempt determination (i.e., changing from Exempt to Expedited or Full Board review level, changing exempt category) or that may change the focus of the study, such as a change in hypothesis or study design. All changes must be reviewed by the IRB office prior to implementation.

PI or Essential Study Personnel Changes: For Exempt determinations, submit an amendment ONLY if the PI changes or if there is a change to an essential study team member. An essential team member would be an individual required to be on the study team for their expertise or certification (i.e., health expert, mental health counselor). Students or other non-essential study personnel changes DO NOT have to be reported to the IRB office.

Reportable Events: Notify the IRB office immediately if there are any non-compliance issues, unanticipated problems involving risks to participants, complications, adverse events and/or any
complaints from research participants.

**Closing IRB Record:** Submit a Progress Report to close the IRB record. An IRB record may be closed when all research activities are completed. Research activities include, but are not limited to: enrolling new participants; interaction with participants (online or in-person); collecting prospective data, including de-identified data through a survey; obtaining, accessing, and/or generating identifiable private information about a living person.

**New IRB Application:** A new Exempt application is required if the research activities continue for more than 5 years after the initial determination. **Exempt determinations may not be renewed or extended and are valid for 5 years only.**

**Non-Clemson Affiliated Sites:** A site letter is required for off-campus sites. Refer to the [guidance on research site/permission letters](#) for more information. An Amendment is required to add additional sites to the study.

**International Research:** Clemson’s approval is based on U.S. human subjects protections regulations and [Clemson University human subjects protection policies](#). Researchers should become familiar with all pertinent information about local human subjects protection regulations and requirements when conducting research internationally. We encourage you to discuss any possible human subjects research requirements that are specific to your research site with your local contacts, to comply with those requirements, and to inform Clemson’s IRB office of those requirements. Review the [FAQs](#) for more information about international research.

**Contact Information:** Please contact the IRB office at [IRB@clemson.edu](mailto:IRB@clemson.edu) or visit our [webpage](#) if you have questions.

Clemson University’s IRB is committed to facilitating ethical research and protecting the rights of human subjects. All research involving human participants must maintain an ethically appropriate standard, which serves to protect the rights and welfare of the participants.

Institutional Review Board
Office of Research Compliance
Clemson University

IRB Number: IRB00000481
FWA Number: FWA00004497
Appendix B

Online/Verbal Script for Classroom Recruitment for Men’s Sex Education Project

Hi everyone, my name is Savannah Burke and I’m a Master’s student in the Social Science program beginning my thesis research. My project is on men’s sex education prior to and during college. Undergraduate, masculine-identifying people who have not taken a college sex ed course can participate in this study. If you decide to participate in an interview with me, which should last between 30 and 90 minutes, you will receive a $15 gift card as thanks for your time and contribution to my research project. My contact information is (write on board if possible) srburke@clemson.edu. Please email me to express interest in participating and we can schedule a time to complete the interview. Please feel free to let your other classmates and friends know about this opportunity. I appreciate your time and hope to hear back from some of you!
Appendix C

Information about the Research Study
Clemson University

Men’s Sex Education Project

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Heather Kettrey is inviting you to volunteer for a research study. Dr. Heather Kettrey an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice and is conducting the study with Savannah Burke, a Master’s student at Clemson University.

Study Purpose: The purpose of this research is to study why men do or do not enroll in college sex education classes. We are interested to see the various things that motivate or deter men from enrolling.

Voluntary Consent: Participation is voluntary, and you have the option to not participate.

Activities and Procedures: Your part in the study will be to complete a brief demographic survey and for a 30 to 90 minutes interview to discuss your experiences with sex education. Interviews will be conducted either via Zoom, or in-person in a private setting, depending on your preference.

Participation Time: It will take you about 30 to 90 minutes to be in this study.

Risks and Discomforts: There are no known risks associated with this study. Discussing sexuality topics may cause discomfort for some students, but participants can skip any questions or end the interview at any time. Students may also access the health resources listed at the bottom of this form.

Possible Benefits: There are no potential benefits to participating in this study. However, findings may help researchers understand how to meet men’s sex education needs.

EXCLUSION/INCLUSION REQUIREMENTS
Any male-identified Clemson University students are eligible for this study.

INCENTIVES
You will receive a $15 Amazon e-gift card as thanks for your time and contribution. This gift card will be distributed after the interview has concluded.
Cumulative payments more than $600 in a calendar year must be reported to the IRS. The participant’s name, address, social security number, date of payment, and payment amount will be reported to Clemson University’s Procurement and Business Services. Clemson University will mail the IRS form to the participant. The participant’s SSN will not be shared with anyone but Clemson University’s Procurement and Business Services and will not be stored with the study data.

**AUDIO/VIDE0 RECORDING AND PHOTOGRAPHS**

Zoom interviews will be audio/video recorded and in-person interviews will be audio recorded. Audio and video recordings will not be shared publicly. All recordings will be stored in password protected format such that only research team members will have access. Recordings will be transcribed and recordings will be destroyed within one year of collection.

**PROTECTION OF PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

The results of this study may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations. Interviews will be private and confidential.

Identifiable information collected during the study will be removed and the de-identified information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

This study is funded by the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice at Clemson University.

**HEALTH RESOURCES**

If you need to connect with someone, consider the following confidential resources
- Clemson University students may access psychological care through Counseling and Psychological Services at Redfern Health Center, call (864) 656-2233.
- Mental Health America of Greenville County’s CRISIS line: 864) 271-8888. Free, 24/7 crisis phone line.
- Crisis Chat: http://www.crisischat.org/, free chat line available 2PM to 2AM, 7 days/week.
- Crisis Text Line: Text “START” to 741-741, service is free through most major phone service carriers and available 24/7.
- National Sexual Assault Online Hotline: http://apps.rainn.org/ohl-bridge/, free, 24/7 online chat service.
- Contact a mental health professional of your choice, at your own expense.

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-0636 or irb@clemson.edu. The Clemson IRB will not be able to answer some study-specific questions. However, you may contact the Clemson IRB if the research staff cannot be reached or if you wish to speak with someone other than the research staff.
If you have any study related questions or if any problems arise, please Dr. Heather Kettrey (hkettre@clemson.edu).

CONSENT
By participating in the study, you indicate that you have read the information written above, been allowed to ask any questions, and you are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research. You do not give up any legal rights by taking part in this research study.
Appendix D

Pre-Interview Survey Items

1. Are you a Clemson student?
   Yes
   No

2. What is your gender identity?
   Man
   Woman
   Trans man
   Trans woman
   Intersexed
   Non-binary
   Other not listed here (please specify)

3. What is your age in years?
   [Free Response]

4. What is your class rank?
   Freshman
   Sophomore
   Junior
   Senior

5. What is your academic major?
   [Free Response]

6. Have you completed PSYCH 3060 Human Sexual Behavior?
   Yes
   No
   [If respondent selects “Yes” they will be ineligible for the study and receive a thank you message.]

7. What is your sexual orientation?
8. What sources of sex education did you have prior to college (check all that apply)?
   Parents
   School
   Community program
   Church
   Other (please specify)
   I had no sex education prior to college

9. What was the main approach of the sex education you received (select one)?
   Abstinence only
   Abstinence plus (i.e., emphasis on abstinence with inclusion of safer sex practices)
   Comprehensive
   Other (please specify)
   I had no sex education prior to college

10. Are you sexually active?
    Yes
    No
11. How many sex partners have you had?
   [Free response]

12. Your email address (for sending gift card after interview)
   [Free Response]
Appendix E

Men’s Sex Education Project Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to join this interview today. My name is Savannah Burke, and I am a master’s student in the Social Science program at Clemson University. I am conducting research about men’s enrollment in sex education courses. I feel it is very important to speak to men directly to hear about their experiences with sex education and opinions about college sex ed classes, so I will be conducting interviews to learn more from you.

I appreciate your participation, so upon the completion of our interview, I will give you a $15 Amazon gift card as thanks for your time and contribution to my research. Next, I am going to give an overview of what to expect during today’s interview.

During this interview today, I will simply be talking about your experience with sex education. I am most interested to hear about your own experiences, opinions, and views on the issues we discuss, so please don't feel shy, your views are very valuable, and I want to learn from you. I have a list of topics I would like to discuss, but feel free to bring up any topics you feel are related to our discussion. Also, I want to let you know that your participation in this interview is completely voluntary so if you want to stop at any time or don't feel comfortable answering a question, please let me know.

I would like to record our discussion, so I don't miss anything you say. Our discussion will remain completely confidential, only my faculty advisor and I will listen to the recording and the information you give will only be used for this research project. Do you have any questions for me before we get started?
1. Can you tell me about your major and what classes you are taking?

2. How do you usually select classes you take?

Now that I know a little more about your classes, I’d like to ask some questions to learn about your sex education.

3. What are your earliest memories or first experiences of sex education?

4. What was your sex education experience prior to college? For example, what did you learn from sources such as parents, school, community programs, church, etc.? What do you wish you had learned?

5. Thinking about your sex education experience prior to college, what topics did you learn about? [NOTE: If participant has trouble answering this question, interviewer will probe by suggesting topics such as abstinence, STIs, birth control, and sexual consent]

6. What moral messages did you receive about sex (before college)? (NOTE: If the participant has difficulty answering this question, interviewer will probe with, “Good, bad, risky, empowering?”) How do you think these moral messages influence your attitudes and behaviors?

7. How would you describe the quality of your sex education? (NOTE: If the participant has difficulty answering this question, interviewer will probe with, “How accurate was your sex education?” “How well did it align with your values?”)

8. If you were to enroll in a college-level sexuality course, what do you think it would be like? [NOTE: If necessary, interviewer will probe to ask what topics would be covered, what the participant would learn, what cultural messages might be presented, etc.]

9. What topics in a sexuality course do you think would be most useful to you? What would not be useful to you?
10. What benefits do you think your guy friends would get from a college sexuality class? 
What could some drawbacks be for the average guy?

11. On your survey, you indicated that you have not taken a college-level sexuality course. 
What influenced this decision? (NOTE: Interviewer will ask probing follow-up questions specific to the participant’s responses. If the participant has difficulty answering, interview will give examples such as scheduling, topics or content, etc.)

12. Do you think guys should be encouraged to take a college level sexuality class? (NOTE: Interviewer will probe with “Why?” or “Why not?” and if they think guys should be encouraged, the interviewer will ask, “How could we encourage men to enroll in sexuality classes?”)

13. If you were to enroll in a sexuality class, do you think there would be more women or men in the class? How would you feel about that? (NOTE: If the participant has difficulty answering, interviewer will probe: “Would you feel uncomfortable in a class with mostly women? What about an all-male class?”)

14. What else would you like to share with me that we have not covered? 
Thank you for talking to me today. As I previously mentioned, you’ll get an email from me with your gift card in the next week or two. Feel free contact me if you have any questions.
## Appendix F

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