



*Sex Ed All Grown Up:  
The Benefits of Teaching Human Sexuality Courses  
at the Collegiate Level*

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**ABSTRACT:**

In the United States sex education is a hot button issue. While the debates are largely centered around grade school and high school level sex education, there has been very little discussion around sexuality education at the collegiate level and beyond. This indicates a failing to recognize how beneficial this type of education can be at every level. With the many resources available in various disciplines for sexuality and gender there is no reason this particular area should be skirted around, or ignored by institutions of higher learning, most especially because the common reason for denying sexuality education, the age of students, plays no part at the collegiate level. The aim of this paper is to explore the benefits of teaching sexuality and gender courses for both students and educators while also discussing methods by which these types of courses could be implemented. This paper will define sexuality education by both the more traditional sexual education courses along with any course focused on human sexuality, gender, and marital relations in any discipline. The broad range of courses further explores the thesis that sexuality education could be easily presented in various formats and within various programs. This paper will also discuss some of the various reasons that sexuality education is sometimes not included in collegiate programs and how these blocks could be overcome. Improving and implementing sexuality education in higher education is possible and should be prioritized for those institutions hoping to produce well rounded, empowered students regardless of their discipline or area of study.



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**S**ex education is a sensitive subject in the United States. There are many debates surrounding the issue, including when it is appropriate to start teaching and what course materials should look like. The interesting thing about these debates is that they focus on what age it is appropriate to start teaching young people about sex, but don't focus at all on what the benefits of continued sex and gender studies might be at the adult level. When sex education is discussed, it is almost always in reference to grade school and high school sex education courses and curricula, and rarely branches into higher education. The fault here lies in failing to recognize the many lasting benefits to teaching sexuality and gender based courses through various disciplines. The adage, "Knowledge is power!" is often used to convey the importance of higher education, and if knowledge is seen as valuable, then all areas of study should be covered equally. With the many resources available in various disciplines for sexuality and gender there is no reason this particular area should be skirted around or ignored by institutions of higher learning most especially because the common reason for denying sexuality education, the age of students, plays no part at the collegiate level. The aim of this paper will be to explore the benefits of teaching sexuality and gender courses for both educators and students while also discussing methods by which these types of courses could be introduced and implemented. Throughout this paper, sexuality education will include more tradition sexual education courses, along with any course focused on human sexuality, gender, and martial relations in any discipline. While this is a broad range, it further explores the thesis that sexuality education could be easily presented in various formats, and within various programs. This paper will also discuss some of the various reasons that sexuality education is sometimes not included in collegiate programs and how these reasons could be overcome. Improving and implementing sexuality education in higher education is possible,



and should be prioritized for those institutions hoping to produce well rounded, empowered students, regardless of their discipline or area of study.

Unlike the standardized education of grade and high schools, colleges aim to create specialized educational experiences for students who are seeking education to further themselves into a career. Simply put, colleges create specific tracks for specific students who are studying a specific discipline. Across these tracks are some courses that are mandatory for all students, sometimes referred to as general education courses, and other courses that are elective and more specialized to the students' particular area of study. The proposal of this paper is to make some type of sexuality education required for all students regardless of their area of study. In much the same way that most college students are required to take at least one course in math, language composition, and a secondary language they would also be required to take some form of sexuality education. This could be accomplished by creating sexuality education courses that would meet health science general education requirements or offered as a course that ties sexuality education in with their selected discipline thereby creating a course that does not stand alone but meshes more seamlessly with their overall program. To create this type of addition requires insight into why it would be useful to do so.

In June of 2014 Carol Colatrella, associate dean at the Ivan Allen CLA and co-director of the Center for the Study of Women, Science, and Technology at the Georgia Institute of Technology, explored the benefits of sexuality education for science and technical students in her article "Why STEM Students Need Gender Studies". Colatrella addresses one of the areas of difficulty surrounding sexuality education, since it usually falls into the disciplines of the humanities saying, "Critics argue that the humanities and social sciences are less valuable than science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields because they do not generate the same levels of external research, funding, donations, and municipal investment. I was more immediately troubled, however, by Governor Pat McCrory's assertion...that gender studies courses 'have no chance of getting people jobs'" (Colatrella 26). This attitude, expressed by Governor McCrory, is not a new or unpopular perception of sexuality and gender courses and is an opinion that sometimes extends to cover the humanities as a whole. Colatrella continues, "I would like to offer a



counterargument. Gender Students as a field illustrates the potential of interdisciplinary scholarship in today's scientific and technical university: it can increase the representation of women and minorities in STEM fields and help prepare them to participate in those fields" (Colatrella 27). Colatrella provides insight into the first of many benefits of sexuality and gender courses, which is, that they create contexts for discussions surrounding gender and sexuality in the workplace and social structure. She sums this up in the statement, "Studying gender informs citizens. Gender studies scholarship encourages attention to social, political, and economic interests and outcomes. Gender studies courses and initiatives promote understanding of personal and social values and intellectual merit" (Colatrella 28). As a co-director for a program at the Georgia Institute of Technology it is telling that Colatrella is advocating for gender studies because it speaks to the importance of these humanities related topics for all students not just those students seeking degrees in the humanities. Stressing gender studies ability to inform citizens and create a sense of importance around intellectual merit exemplifies why students at the college level would benefit from these types of courses. At the end of their education they would enter the workforce with a potentially more liberal and accepting mindset that could have the lasting affect of improving workplace interaction and equality. These types of outcomes would be the result of improved communication and more social awareness and these are factors Colatrella has attributed to gender education and the ability for these types of courses to change student perception and understanding.

Several research studies on the ability for sexuality and gender education to change student perception have been continued since the United States introduction of sexuality education in large numbers in the 1970s. The 2003 article "The Impact of a Human Sexuality College Course According to Gender: Comparisons of the 1970s and the 1990s" by Central Connecticut State University professor of Psychology Annie Cotten explores how sexuality education at the collegiate level changed student perceptions in the 70s and again in the 90s to try and measure the impact of a college sexuality course. To compile the data students in the 1970s were asked to complete a 24-item survey that was given before and after completion of the course and 90s students were asked to take the same survey with 10 additional questions both before and



after course completion. The instructor of the course was also the same for both samples and the curriculum was kept as similar as possible. The survey explored areas including masturbation, pre-marital sexual intercourse, oral sex, forced sex, and the students willingness to each their own children about sex and contraception. For the 1970's course/survey there were 22 men and 53 women while for the 1990s course/survey there were 14 men and 37 women. She noted that there were those who dropped out in both sample sizes (roughly 50%) possibly due to the small amount of credit offered or the fact that participation was voluntary. Interestingly, in the 1990s course no men dropped out while the number of women went from 54 pre-testing to 37 post-testing. Cotten also notes that most students were Caucasian. Firstly, and most generally, Cotten found that it was the attitudes of men that were more largely shifted in the 1970s while in the 1990s it was the attitudes of women that saw greater shifts. Cotten theorizes about this saying, "...feminist therapy during the past thirty years has encouraged women to learn more about their bodies, including the use of masturbation, whereas women in the 1990s in the study reported masturbation ash being 'more wrong' than in the 1970s. Guilt may also be interwoven with this study's student responses showing less positive views about morality between the 1990s than in the 1970s" (Cotten 278). Cotten also discusses how dwindling research and emphasis on sexuality education at the college level likely plays a part in the shifting attitudes surrounding sexuality and gender. In discussing the make-up of each group Cotten points out the distinct lack of male participants in the 1990s group, "Certainly more emphasis needs to be given to increasing enrollment of men in human sexuality classes and providing them with an environment which encourages gender dialogue" (Cotten 279). This particular statement speaks to the perceived benefits of sexuality and gender courses at providing a space for students of all gender identities to engage in discussion about sexuality and gender with the potential result of creating deeper understanding and a more accepting attitude among peers.

The lasting benefits of this education can again being translated to workforce interactions and positive shifts in social values. Inclusivity and acceptance of others because of increased knowledge is greatly beneficial in both work and social environments. Cotten shows that



attitudes, regardless of time period, are shifted, often positively, by including sexuality education into college degree tracks. Students are empowered to examine social value systems and are able to find space to express ideas surrounding gender and sexuality that help them navigate those areas more directly once the course itself has ended. Cotton is not alone in her research on shifting attitudes due to sexuality education. Researchers David Weis, Barbara Rabinowitz, and Mary F. Ruckstuhl explored similar ideas in "Individual Changes in Sexual Attitudes and Behavior within College-Level Human Sexuality Courses". In a sample of 172 students researchers looked at shifts in both attitudes and behavior after the completion of human sexuality courses. Weis, Rabinowitz, and Ruckstuhl found that as a result of the courses there was more noticeable impact on attitudes rather than behaviors. The researchers also noted that impacts seemed more noticeable in female students than male students and that much like within Cotton's study there were more female participants than male participants. The article states, "Subsequent two-way analysis of variance revealed that the increase in permissiveness in attitudes toward masturbation, homosexuality, and oral sex was significant for females, but not for males. As such, there were no significant changes in any attitude or behavior for males" (Weis, et al. 52). Interestingly the researchers attributed this to social grouping saying, "This finding can be viewed as partial support for the hypothesis that females, as representing membership in a social group with restrictive sexual norms, would be more likely to experience attitude changes during the period of the course" (Weis, et al. 52). While this gendered view of the results of sexuality education certainly presents some difficulties the important message to take away from Weis, et al. is that sexuality education does indeed have an effect on those people who have previously only been exposed to restrictive sexual norms and attitudes. In relation to the seemingly gender-skewed results, one of the struggles some universities may feel they face is the difficulty in getting enrollment by all students into such courses. However, by making courses in human sexuality and gender part of general education requirements it would ensure a more even enrollment. As electives it would be easier to see larger enrollment if courses were offered in multiple disciplines rather than only ever being electives in the humanities. Regardless of how they are implemented, the benefit of these



courses such as attitudes shifts ranging from better communication to more accepting and permissive attitudes in areas such as homosexuality and alternative lifestyles will be beneficial to students and their peers. The ability to create more accepting students who will venture out to be more accepting and communicative workers in all areas of the world suggests that sexuality and gender education could have positive, lasting benefits that extend past general edification and into the realm outside of academia and research. Sexuality and gender education do, however, have an important role in academia as well in order to strengthen study in a variety of disciplines.

While a large focus of this paper is how sexuality and gender courses are beneficial to students it is important to explore why these types of courses are beneficial to educators and educational institutions. Stephen Valocchi explores interjecting courses with elements of queer theory in relation to sexuality and gender in the article "Not Yet Queer Enough: The Lessons of Queer Theory of the Sociology of Gender and Sexuality". Most notably, Valocchi discusses how queer theory could be used to improve arguments and sociological theories on sexuality and gender. Valocchi says, "...rethinking sex, gender, and sexuality queerly opens up new questions for sociologists and new ways of thinking about old concepts. Also, what happens to the study of heterosexuality when sexuality and gender are understood queerly and used to analyze subjectivities, practices, and subcultural formations?" While this paper is not focused on queer theory Valocchi's article provides an important point which is that broadening the scope of study and including new theories into sexuality and gender studies opens up educators and institutions to a multitude of potential avenues for courses and degree programs. Furthermore, applying queer theory or any other sexuality/gender related theories into academia has the potential to see their spread into areas outside the humanities and thereby increasing their relevance in all areas of academia. By allowing sexuality and gender studies to permeate other disciplines it would become more possible for institutions to offer general education and elective courses in every degree track thereby ensuring that all students have at least some contact with these types of theories and courses. Finally, though it may be a reach at this point in time, the possible suggested outcome of including these subjects to create more courses is that in the future



institutions would see the potential for more enrollment because of the interest in these courses and could see the potential ability to hire and train more scholars in these areas to continue their growth. Educators and institutions able to influence students through sexuality and gender courses are also doing work to help reconstruct the world-view surrounding the social understanding and acceptability of sexuality and gender.

The reconstruction of social norms through sexuality education is another potential benefit to including sexuality and gender education at the college level. Judith Lorber's article, "Beyond the Binaries: Depolarizing the Categories of Sex, Sexuality, and Gender" explores the potential of sexuality education, starting with sociological sexuality education, can help deconstruct social norms that create negativity and exclusion. Lorber's focus, like Valocchi's, is to show that sociology would benefit from more sexuality and gender content and again her theories have further reaching applications if applied in various disciplines. "Deconstructing sex, sexuality, and gender reveals many possible categories embedded in social experience and social practices, as does the deconstruction of race and class. As queer theorists have found, multiple categories disturb the neat polarity of familiar opposites that assume one dominant and one subordinate group, one normal and one deviant identity, one hegemonic status and one 'other' (Martin 1994, Namaste 1994)" (Lorber 145). Here, Lorber explores how the inclusion of sexuality and gender into sociological theory could be applied to aid in the deconstruction of perceived norms. She continues saying,

As researchers, as theorists, and as activist, sociologists have to go beyond paying lip service to the diversity of bodies, sexualities, genders, and racial-ethnic and class positions. We have to think not only about how these characteristics variously intermingle in individuals and therefore in groups but what the extent of variation is within these categories (Lorber 146)

Higher education has long been designated as the space within which students are meant to deconstruct the world as it exists presently. Students guided by educators, are asked to question the status quo and to understand how the various social systems of their world operate. Lorber's call to include sexuality and gender into sociological theory next to race and class calls to this task. Lorber's desire to see these



subjects included speaks back to the benefits of creating more well rounded students but also to challenging educators to push further into their areas of study to include sexuality and gender as part of their educational course models. Continuing to challenge educators expand their knowledge and abilities within their chosen field and institutes to grow and expand their ability to offer more courses in these areas show another benefit of the inclusion of sexuality and gender education in colleges.

Challenging educators and institutes may be seen as a benefit of the inclusion of sexuality and gender education but it is just as likely that this challenge is also seen as a hurdle of introducing these types of subjects. Questions arise about who would educate those educators to yet prepared to include sexuality and gender into their area of study and further questions arise about how to properly include these subjects to ensure that the education students receiving is beneficial and genuinely informative. In "Teaching University-Level Family Studies Courses: Techniques and Outcomes" Donna Sollie and Julie Kaetz explore the difficulties institutes face in introducing and maintaining courses that have sexuality education components or that are sexuality education focused. "Scales (1981) called for a commitment to evaluate the impact of sexuality education. He stated that "one of the most significant barriers to development of sound sexuality education is the relative scarcity of reliable and valid data on the impact of various units and courses" (p. 564). Although sexuality education courses have probably been assessed more often than other types of family relations courses, that barrier remains a decade later" (Kaetz Sollie, 22). Sollie and Kaetz speak to the now documented benefits of sexuality education citing various studies. "Kleinginna and McClure (1981) also reported a significant increase in knowledge as a result of taking a course in human sexuality. Based on results from a longitudinal study, Story (1979) reported that students who completed a sexuality course had more accepting attitudes about the sexual behaviors of others... These differences were found immediately after the course as well as 2 years later" (Kaetz Sollie 22). Despite seeing all these benefits Sollie and Kaetz assessed that the difficulties of including these courses lies in the lack of evidence about which teaching methods and materials are best and they called for better research in that area saying, "It is encouraging to see the diversity of



teaching techniques used in family life education, but unfortunately there are limited empirical assessments of the effectiveness of these teaching methods. The challenge for family life educators is to more definitely assess the effectiveness of various teaching methods and to address the issue of outcomes for students” (Kaetz Sollie 23). So while there are clearly defined benefits for students and educators to include sexuality and gender education at the college level, there still needs to be more research on how to best teach and implement them. It is this papers assertion that in order to perform these studies, schools must begin teaching these types of courses to the best of their abilities by borrowing teaching styles and materials from schools that have already introduced these types of courses. A wider range of courses being taught would mean a wider pool for research into effective methodologies and materials. Improved courses can only begin after the courses themselves have already been implemented.

While the wide range of benefits for sexuality education have been explored here it is still a delicate subject in the United States. The fault here lies in failing to recognize the many lasting benefits to teaching sexuality and gender based courses in various disciplines. This paper explored the benefits of teaching sexuality and gender courses for both educators and students, focusing largely on how student’s attitudes are shifted and how those shifts have lasting benefits outside of the academic realm. This paper also looked at some of the various reasons that sexuality education is sometimes not included in collegiate programs and to some extent how these hurdles could be overcome. Improving and implementing sexuality education in higher education is possible and should be prioritized for those institutions hoping to produce well rounded, empowered students regardless of their discipline or area of study. Sexuality education has the benefit of being multidisciplinary and an asset to academic study while having proven, lasting benefits outside of the college setting. With a strong focus on techniques and materials, sexuality education could be introduced onto every college campus regardless of degree track, while students and educators alike benefit from the influx in courses and subjects. Finally, and most importantly, students will enter the world potentially more accepting and open-minded, which will lead to more positive social values and workplace communication for those students in the future.



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