

Courting confusion

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The word courtship and the idea of it—a prescribed process of getting to know someone in preparation for marriage—is virtually archaic. The courting rituals that members of the baby-boom generation still enacted or endured have largely disappeared. Young people no longer live with expectations about male initiative and female reticence. When they arrive at college, they often find coed dorms, perhaps even coed bathrooms, which offer a simulated experience of familial intimacy. In this scene, the rituals of dating are as antiquated as chaperones or calling cards.

The dissolution of many of the older rituals was no doubt a necessary step toward egalitarian relationships. But some observers have suggested that young people today suffer from the lack of any tradition for channeling and reflecting on erotic desires. Amy and Leon Kass, drawing on years of teaching at the University of Chicago, recently suggested that “there are no socially prescribed forms of conduct that help guide young men and women in the direction of matrimony.” People still make it to the altar, the Kasses noted, but it’s almost by accident; they have no compass to direct them. (The popularity of Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider’s 1995 book *The Rules* indicates there is a felt need for such a compass, though the book merely recommends, rather cynically, that some of the old gender dichotomies are strategically useful for women.)

A recent study by the Institute for American Values offers some confirmation of the Kasses’ judgment. In surveying college women’s attitudes toward sex and marriage, researchers encountered repeated references to men and women “hooking up”—a distinctive new social form, though really more of an antiform. The researchers developed this consensus definition of the “hook-up”: it can involve a range of sexual activities, from kissing to intercourse; is usually engaged in when both parties are drinking or drunk; may or may not be repeated with the same partner; and is understood by both parties to involve no emotional commitment or even affection. “Hook-ups usually occur between people who do not know one another well, with little if any expectation that either person will follow through and try to continue the

relationship,” says the IAV report released last month (see www.americanvalues.org). According to the survey, 40 percent of college women have hooked up at least once, and 10 percent more than six times.

Though less than half of students are engaging in the practice, and though hooking up is hardly a brand-new phenomenon on campuses, the prominence of the hook-up in these women’s lives is a sign of an impoverished social scene—impoverished socially, romantically and even erotically. The IAV report includes some poignant remarks by young woman about their confusion in the aftermath of hooking up. Though they know that a hook-up entails no emotional attachment, they still worry about how to act afterward, not knowing how the young man will respond or whether the relationship will continue in any way. (The survey doesn’t report how the young men feel.) Especially poignant are the women who upbraid themselves for caring this much. A generation ago, these young women probably would have felt a little guilty about the sex; now they feel a little guilty about the residual commitment.

The IAV report suggests that colleges offer unprecedented opportunities to hang out casually with the opposite sex, along with the freedom for some couples to bond intensely—living, eating and sleeping together at an early age—but they do not offer many options in between. There are few chances to explore deeper relationships in a safe and measured way, and with a sense of shared and legitimate expectations.

The old courtship rituals cannot and should not be retrieved. But perhaps, in light of reports like this one, it’s time to give thought to some new rituals.