

Sex on campus: Princeton University

by [Tara Woodard-Lehman](#) in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue

The analyses of these cultural commentators sadly ring true. Many of my students struggle against powerful forces of societal objectification and internal fragmentation as they navigate a complex campus culture that sends mixed messages. On the one hand, women are expected to be assertive and equal intellectually. On the other hand, they are expected to be submissive and available sexually. Although Princeton women are confident and capable academically, often they are insecure and uncertain relationally. Though there is parity in the classroom, it does not extend to the bedroom. In many ways women are alienated from their own bodies, even as they are asked to display them in increasingly provocative and demeaning ways.

Women today face what we might call "the failure of the success" of first- and second-wave feminism. Having fought and won the battle for one kind of representation, feminism has lost the battle for another kind. Female students are well represented in the student body, but the bodies of female students are not presented well.

Ariel Levy, author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, captures this alienation in a description of Paris Hilton as "being sexy without being sexual." Levy means that women are allowed, if not required, to be sexy, yet cannot enjoy their sexuality. Their bodies are to be displayed for and enjoyed by others—by men. Because of this, they are fragmented. They find it hard to connect intellect with affect, mind with body, spirit with flesh.

Much of my work is simply to provide a safe space where these fears can be voiced and validated. Beyond that, I attempt to help students cultivate a prophetic, holy imagination—one that helps them imagine a self and life that is integrated. I invite them to affirm what Rowan Williams calls "the body's grace," a vision of sex as an identification of one's own body with another's body as mutually given sources of joy and desire. I invite them to see their bodies through the sacred lens of their Creator, who names them as good, very good. Even if they can't quite believe that it's true, I hope that they want it to be true. And I trust that over time, by God's grace, they will

live more fully and faithfully into that new reality.