

Sex on campus: Arkansas State University

by [Eric Van Meter](#) in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue

I confess to being a skeptic when I first read the reports about a toxic sexual culture on campus. Arkansas State is a long way from elite East Coast colleges. Even though it's not uncommon to find entire sororities dressed in nothing but T-shirts and high heels at a function, most women on our campus are much less overt in communicating sexual availability. I thought the stories of women participating in their own objectification, while disturbing, were probably overblown.

But when I opened up the topic with a few of the women, I found that they identified strongly with the type of culture that authors such as Lisa Belkin describe. They pointed specifically to Greek organizations, but acknowledged that those were extreme examples of a widespread problem. "Guys call the shots socially," said Hannah, a senior. "Women let them get away with it. There's a tremendous amount of pressure to conform to their expectations."

When asked why women participated in such an unhealthy sexual culture, students talked about the hurt that many females endure from their families and peers. They cited the lack of deep relationships with parents as a major source of pain, one which many women try to address by looking for acceptance from men—even if the price of that acceptance is their dignity or their bodies.

Attempts to find a solution for the problem, however, ended in frustration for the women I interviewed. "You almost can't address it," Elaine said. "Because you'd have to change what we—guys and girls—learned from our families and the media. Our assumptions about the way things work are so deep that it's hard to even question them."

That's not to say there is no hope, however. Each of the women I talked to expressed gratitude that they had found a community of people who live by a different set of social norms. In general, they found the men who are part of our ministry more respectful, the women more confident and the pressures to cave in to

sexual expectations far less.

Perhaps this is how campus ministers should begin addressing the toxic sexual culture among our students: by creating spaces with healthier norms. That does not relieve us of our obligation to speak out against the larger injustices involving women on campus. But until we can help students model better relationships for one another, our voices will be lost in an ocean of noise.