

Sex on campus: University of Southern California

by [Diane Kenney](#) in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue

We were meeting for lunch, at her request. She was a first-semester senior, a bright, lively, attractive young woman. I assumed she wanted to ask me for a recommendation for graduate school or for a job. But she stunned me: "What is wrong with me?" she pleaded. "Why isn't anyone hitting on me?"

I know the culture that prompted this outburst. On some segments of the campus, the tales are shared proudly: "I didn't know how much I'd drunk!" "He really wanted me!" "His regular was gone for the weekend, and we just ended up together." Institutional interventions seem all but meaningless. When administrators try to limit party nights, the parties move off campus into private homes. Health center staff try to educate students and peer mentors seek to keep students safe and informed, but they can't change the culture as a whole. We would do well to admit that we are in the midst of changing social norms and to note how many different norms there now are.

I know couples who met as freshman and have worked hard at determining how they could move together into individual careers while continuing to develop their relationship. I know couples who began a relationship in high school and are loyal to that relationship even while attending different colleges. I know male and female roommates, one gay, one not, who provide stability and protection for one another in difficult circumstances. I know two compassionate and caring gay young men, not in a sexual relationship, who are listening to and working with a male friend who is confused by his lack of attraction to the "really hot" females who are very interested in him. I know many students whose social interactions will be very limited until they enter a relationship that is approved by their families.

You can find any of these students, and dozens of others, at thriving and expanding Take Back the Night events on campus. Take Back the Night is now a weeklong series of speak-outs, marches, seminars, theater productions, poetry readings,

concerts, skits and comedy routines, all initiated, coordinated and funded by students. The event ends with the traditional candlelight procession and speak-out. It includes presentations by a student organization that pairs female students with local eighth grade girls for a full year of mentoring. It includes theater pieces written about student experiences and performed by the women's theater organization. It includes the supportive, though sometimes embarrassed, presence of fraternity brothers and other male students. Maybe the new norm is emerging here.

As a campus minister, my role is to help people be open and honest with themselves as they develop their own integrity in a complex, overwhelming and not very safe world. The current higher education model asks two often contradictory things of students: constant competing with their peers and learning to work on a team. For some, hitting on or seeking the sexual attention of others is a part of the competition. And on a campus where most conversations are limited to 140 characters, it's easy to infer things that are not quite true.

What about that woman who was worried because no one was hitting on her? Our conversations were long and involved. We talked about what it meant to her that no one was hitting on her. We talked about how genuine friendships are difficult to form on a college campus. Did she have any genuine friends? What did she think her life would be like five years from now?

My hope is that as college women mentor eighth graders, that as two friends help a third understand his sexual orientation, that as roommates support one another, that as couples slowly and deliberately learn to know each other, they are beginning to understand and live out something of what we mean when we say "God is love."