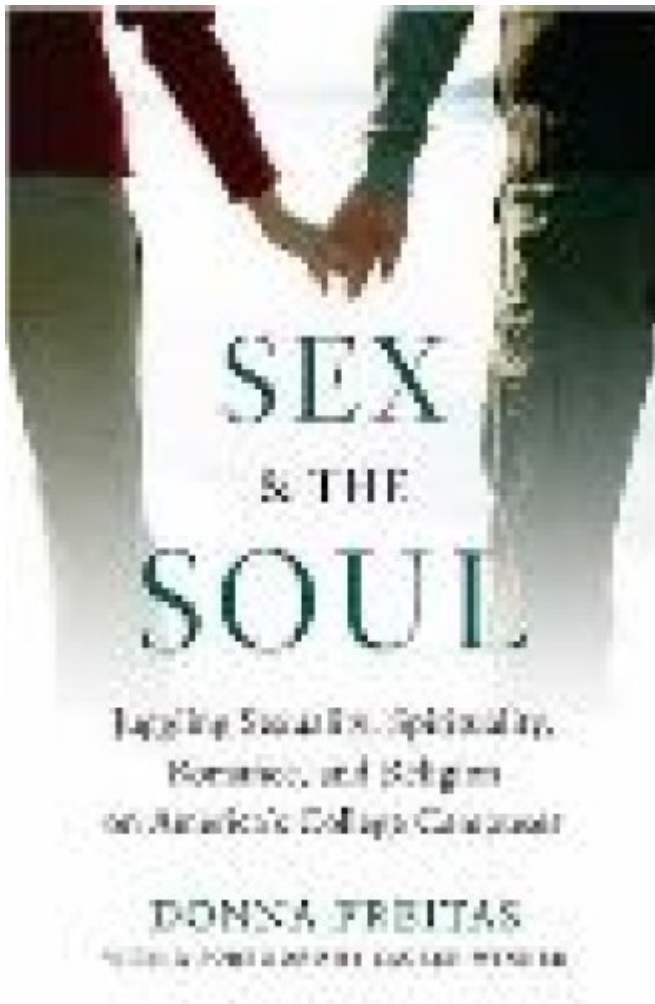


Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses

Donna Freitas

When I was a student at St. Olaf College in the 1990s, sex was not the center of my educational experience. Of course, it had its place. But I was busy with a lot of other things too. I was concerned about my future. I was cultivating friendships and contemplating a life of service in a way perhaps embarrassingly akin to what college administrators hoped for when they fashioned the college vision statement. I studied a lot, traveled abroad and spent a lot of late nights talking with both male and female friends. My friends and I did not date in the way that previous generations did, but neither were we participants in hookup culture the way it is currently portrayed. We simply did our best to learn about relationships and partners on our own terms—not flawlessly, not always in ways we wanted to tell our mothers about, but not without moral conviction either.

As Donna Freitas would have it, a lot has changed. If I went to college now, I would have to make my way through a minefield of demeaning college theme parties where boys dress as executives and girls as “office hos.” I could expect to be belittled as prudish if I didn’t participate or derided as a slut if I did. Long gone would be the late-night conversations, replaced by insipid interactions based on physical attraction alone. If I were at a secular college, I would be trying to figure out which bra went with my see-through blouse. If I were at an evangelical college, I would be desperately trying to find a man to marry me before I gave in to my sexual urges.

On the basis of interviews of 111 students at seven colleges (and online surveys completed by 2,500 students at the same institutions for this study funded by the Louisville Institute), Freitas identified two atmospheres on college campuses. At evangelical schools, “purity culture” reigns: young men and women are striving to keep themselves virgins until marriage in a way that crowds out other concerns. At every other kind of school (by which Freitas means Catholic and secular institutions), the hookup culture dominates. Instead of dating, young men and women sleep with each other as soon as possible and then attempt to maintain a relationship after their initial sexual encounter. Referring to the nonevangelical colleges where she did her research as “spiritual colleges” (because most of the students she talked to there placed a priority on the “spiritual” over the “religious”), she offers this summary: “Students enrolled at a spiritual college can assume value will be placed on diversity, an almost unlimited sense of freedom, a work hard/play hard party ethic, and, of course, hookup culture.”

Dating is a thing of the past. Most students idealize romantic relationships but have little experience with them. College students long for relationships they don't have while getting their sexual needs met in meaningless encounters with random strangers.

Church-affiliated colleges like the one I attended—that are both non-Catholic and nonevangelical—do not have a place in Freitas's schema. She did not talk to any students from such colleges, so the reader has no way of knowing how these students would fit into the schema or whether they would present an alternative to hookup culture and purity culture.

The focus on only two college atmospheres is only part of the book's problem. Nearly all of the interviewees told Freitas that they did not fit neatly into these categories. Though she claims to take their objections seriously, she maintains her view that there are "basically two atmospheres." Instead of changing or adjusting her schema in light of student comments, she merely catalogues students as exceptions to it.

Once Freitas has explained how the two atmospheres work and why both are problematic, she writes of the people she interviews as "lost souls" who are either victims of or exceptions to their cultures. She sees students as floundering—without clear boundaries, without a clear sense of right and wrong and without a reason to say no to the permissive culture around them. But because she neither articulates nor reflects on her own experience, values and perspective, I have a difficult time knowing how to judge her responses. Is she unnecessarily prudish? Is she overreacting? Is she dead-on accurate? I need to know more about her before I can determine this. On a topic as sensitive as sexuality, such insight is absolutely essential.

To her credit, Freitas did ask real people real questions, and she offers extensive quotations from interviews. But I came not to trust her very much as a listener, as a person to whom I would want to tell my own story, because she seems to regard students' stories through a predetermined lens. In an interview presented early in the book, Amy Stone, a virgin, tells Freitas that she has had encounters that she considers spiritual as well as sexual. Freitas dismisses Stone's version of the spiritual as emotional and uncommunal and therefore insufficient. This judgment happens too quickly for me and before we can understand what Stone meant by spiritual. Despite the fact that Freitas quotes many of the students at length, I feel like I can't

quite hear their voices.

Freitas's strongest critique is directed toward the Catholic Church and Catholic institutions, which, she contends, have provided young people with a set of irrelevant rules gleaned from unidentified sources and thus have left them utterly rudderless. She admires, to some degree, evangelical campuses that have a strong, unified culture when it comes to sexuality, but she recognizes that such unity comes at a price. On these campuses students cannot always be honest about their sexual histories, and sexual minorities face particular pressure and alienation.

There are three categories of students that Freitas regards positively: "heroic virgins"—people who maintain their virginity against all cultural odds, drawing on their faith to give them strength and courage; "sexually active seekers"—people who try to find spiritual meaning in their sexual experiences; and "born-again virgins"—people who have made what they consider sexual mistakes and are attempting to repair those mistakes and the damage they believe was done to their religious commitment. Freitas affirms these students because they at least attempt to integrate sexuality and spirituality, something most students find impossible.

Parts of this book are clearly directed toward college administrators and parents who are sending their children to college. In a section at the end Freitas addresses parental concerns with "Top Ten Questions to Ask About Sex (and Love and Romance)" and "Top Five Questions to Ask About the Soul" during a college admissions tour. She then includes bulleted lists on how to use the questions. The presentation of such magazine-article advice in a book like this struck me as condescending. Furthermore, these lists are odd because they separate sex and the soul—even though Freitas frequently points out that such separation is damaging.

Ultimately Freitas wants to see a cultural change at the "spiritual colleges." She wants administrators, faculty, students and parents to recognize that the relationship between sex and the soul as it stands now is unhealthy—that neither the interiority of religion at "spiritual colleges" nor the rigid demands and high costs of failure at evangelical colleges serve young people who are trying to cobble together a relationship between sex and the soul. Her recommendations—again presented in bulleted lists—include elements drawn from both the spiritual and the evangelical colleges. They include instilling a strong sense of right and wrong, tolerating religious diversity and developing a framework to help students distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships.

That's all well and good, but I am left with the feeling that young people's voices have yet to be heard and that whatever is beyond the extremes of hookup and purity cultures remains to be seen.