

Does hookup culture differ on Catholic campuses?

Daniel is “free-spirited and open-minded” about hooking up. As one of the [70 percent of students](#) who do so each year on U.S. college campuses, he embraces hookups and their culture of students having sexual encounters without expectations of any feelings, much less relationships. Hooking up, according to Daniel, is all about “fun,” “gratification,” “curiosity,” “party culture” and “hormones.”

As Catholicism teaches abstinence before marriages, there is a common perception that Catholic schools would be places without hookup culture.

But, are they?

Different types of Catholic cultures

In fact, all of the previous research indicated students on Catholic campuses hooked up [just as frequently as their peers on other campuses](#), and maybe a bit [more often](#).

Daniel was one of the students who spoke to me as I [surveyed 1,000 students on 26 Catholic campuses](#) between 2013 and 2015. As I started my research in 2013, I greatly increased the number of students and campuses being studied.

My first finding was there wasn't any one type of Catholic campus – but three.

Some students described their campus as “very Catholic.” Mason, a sophomore, described his strongly Catholic campus by saying, “People identify with it and are drawn to it... . The Catholicism resonates through all the campus.”

Campuses that students described as “very” Catholic had similar characteristics. Approximately 80 percent of the students identified as Catholic; everyone was required to take three classes in theology; and residence halls were segregated by gender.

Then there were the “mostly Catholic” campuses. On average, 75 percent of students on these campuses were Catholic, and everyone was required to take two classes in theology. Their dorms were mostly coed. Students described this culture as Catholic because it was “very nice” and “very hospitable.”

Finally, there was a third category – the “somewhat Catholic” campuses that I found. Students like Brooklyn, a sophomore, described this Catholic culture on her campus as being “there if you want it but is not in your face.” On these “somewhat” Catholic campuses, around 65 percent, on average, identified as Catholic. Students took one class in theology, and every residence hall was coed.

Different types of hookup culture

My second finding was that each of these Catholic cultures generated a different response to hookup culture.

On the very Catholic campuses, fewer than 30 percent of students hooked up. As one student put it, their school was “not like going to a state school because we don’t have parties here.” Instead, these schools were more like [evangelical colleges, with hardly any hooking up](#). Even though the schools did not require an abstinence pledge, the Catholicism, to use Mason’s term, “resonated” throughout the campus bound students together in a common opposition to hooking up.

On mostly Catholic campuses, 55 percent of students hooked up, a number that is lower than the [70 percent of campuses in general](#) but also higher than 30 percent of very Catholic schools. While the Catholic culture of these campuses was not

strong enough to oppose hooking up, it was strong enough to transform it. The “friendly” Catholic culture changed hooking up from something with “no-strings-attached” to “a way into relationships.” A majority of students hooked up because relationships made hooking up seem ok. As one student said, “Hooking up is just a way to get there.”

While one might expect somewhat Catholic campuses to have the highest rates of hooking up, this was not the case. Fewer than half of the students – 45 percent – hooked up. Not quite as low as the 30 percent on very Catholic campuses, but 10 percent lower than on mostly Catholic campuses.

When I asked students on these campuses about hooking up, they said, “I can’t really say, but I would assume hookup culture exists everywhere” and “I am mostly oblivious to it.” Students still resisted the “no-strings-attached” hookup, but they were left on their own to do so. The “not in your face” Catholic culture of these campuses neither made hooking up as rare as on very Catholic campuses nor made it as acceptable as on mostly Catholic campuses. As Jackson, a senior from one of these somewhat Catholic campuses, said, “In my group of friends, hooking up does not exist. In certain cliques, in certain social circles, it does.”

Overall, fewer students hooked up on Catholic campuses than on campuses in general. However, it wasn’t simply that a more Catholic culture meant less hooking up. It was just that a Catholic culture had an impact on the ways in which students thought about hooking up.

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