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College Students' Experiences in Abstinence-Only Sex Education: A Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract

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In the United States, one-third or more of all public school districts have abstinence-only sex education as the sexuality curriculum of choice. These curricula are guided by principles stressing the importance of abstinence before marriage for adolescents. While many evaluations have examined students' changes in attitudes and intentions toward abstinence as a result of these curricula, and failed to find differences in sexual behavior, it is important to explore more of what the lessons of abstinence-only have truly meant in students' lives. This study explores abstinence-only sex education as a site of cultural control between competing groups and an experience negotiated by a large number of young people across the United States. Fifteen college students from Emory University and Georgia State University were interviewed to provide self-reflective commentaries on the experience of abstinence-only sex education in their lives as young people. The interviews explored the real-life value of the abstinence-only instruction and other sources of sex and relationship information, students' approaches to several ideological topics of concern identified by critics of the abstinence-only model (e.g. virginity and marriage), and students' descriptions of the "ideal" sex education that they wish they could have had when they were younger. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed with qualitative text analysis software. Emerging patterns suggest that students felt abstinence-only sex education to be of mixed value, with low overall impact but several memorable features, both positive and negative. Many narratives emerged of personally and socially varying definitions and negotiations of concepts like abstinence, virginity, and marriage, rather than a simple acceptance of the ideas typically presented in abstinence-only sex education curricula. A clearer picture of the "ideal" sex education emerged, with strong support for sex-positive, inclusive, comprehensive curricula. Future endeavors in research and policy should seek to expand the role and voice of young people in determining the future of sex education, to keep it relevant to their personal, cultural, and sexual health needs and desires.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Context

Why Sex Education?

School-based sex education is a topic of interest because it represents a formal method of socializing a society's youth into behavior in conformity to sexual norms, values, and attitudes approved by influential groups in that society. As an explicitly public method of sexual socialization, school-based sexuality education faces a number of pressures and expectations from different groups in the United States. It is widespread—21 states and the District of Columbia mandate some form of sexuality education at the state level, and more than two out of three local school districts mandate it (Guttmacher Institute 2010; Dailard 2001). The sexuality of adolescents and young people, especially with regard to negative public health outcomes like teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease (STD) transmission rates, is an area of great public concern. School-based sex education represents one arena in which these outcomes may be influenced—an important goal when there is a 7-10 year gap between the average age of first sexual intercourse and the average age of marriage for American young people (Kantor et al. 2008). The framing and direction of sex education, in the information, values, and attitudes taught, can thus be understood as a key element in the effort to produce what might be called "good sexual citizens" (Fields and Hirschman 2007:4).

In this study, I seek to explore one very specific form of school-based sexuality education: abstinence-only sex education, sometimes called abstinence-only-until-marriage. Abstinence-only sex education has enjoyed widespread, though controversial, use in many American public schools and community programs and functions as the sexuality curriculum of choice in a third or more of public school districts in the United States (Doan and Williams 2008). Abstinence-only sex education curricula are founded on the belief that young people

should abstain from sexual behavior until marriage. This frame forms the ideological core of these programs, which have been a focus of many policy debates. Empirical studies (listed in Chapter 2) have consistently found few positive results from the abstinence-only approach, with little evidence of its effectiveness in preventing premarital sexual activity. Critics of abstinence-only sex education, often advocates of a more comprehensive style of sex education, suggest that these programs are not only ineffective, but also ideologically skewed, promoting very specific concepts of the practice and value of human sexuality in society.

Few studies have gone beyond the effects of sex education on young people's behaviors to look at the meaning the programs have had for the students themselves. This study seeks to analyze the *meanings* that young people themselves have developed from these abstinence-only sex education programs, which may tell a somewhat different story than the measurable rates of different kinds of sexual behaviors. I explore the ways in which a small group of young people have responded to the programs' messages about abstinence and sexual behavior, and their reactions to a number of the most controversial topic areas within these programs, within their existing social context. These may give us greater insight into the lessons and impacts these programs have truly had in students' lives, if they exist at all. Finally, I assess what these young people feel would be the most "ideal" sex education, with the goal of discovering recommendations for directions in sex education policy more answerable to the needs and desires of young people.

In this first chapter, I introduce the topic and give its context within the contemporary American ideological struggles known as the "culture wars." In Chapter 2, I dive into the background of abstinence-only sex education, describing its historical development and research into its content and effectiveness. In Chapter 3, I describe the design and methods of my original

research study interviewing 15 college students about their experiences in abstinence-only sex education. Chapter 4 consists of the body of my findings from this investigation. In Chapter 5, I draw my findings to a conclusion and place them in the larger picture of ideological control once more, with suggestions for future research and policy.

The Sociology of Sex Education: Sexual Ideology, the Culture Wars, and Cultural Control

I. Sexual Ideologies

An important component of sex education in the United States is the sexual ideology that informs what content individuals and groups wish to see presented in these curricula—or whether they wish for these programs to exist at all. In the United States especially, a great diversity of religion, culture, morality, and moral values makes it difficult for any sort of consensus to be formed on what should be the ideological backbone of sexuality education programs. A *sexual ideology* is an internally consistent system of belief that answers "questions about the nature of human sexuality, its purpose, its proper role in human relationships, and the moral guidelines that ought to govern its conduct" (McKay 1999:36). The sexual ideologies most prevalent in American society tend to reflect the centuries-old ideological perspectives of Western society, with social relationships and society as a whole being shaped by sexual regulation. McKay (1999) further identifies Christianity's ascent as a dominant system of meaning in Western society as a major force in promulgating the restrictive sexual ideology that has permeated and colored much of Western culture.

Sexual ideologies are frequently characterized as a dichotomy of types and ideals. These ideologies are most frequently portrayed as either restrictive or non-restrictive (permissive), and can be defined in terms of their opposition to each other. Luker (2006) framed the clash of sexual ideologies in the familiar language of politics, with sexual conservatives and sexual

liberals at odds. The conservative/restrictive sexual ideology encompasses several systems of thought that entail individual differences but nevertheless contain many similar assumptions about the purpose and practice of human sexuality. Pollis (1985) describes the characterization of the conservative/restrictive sexual ideology as part of a religion-based Jehovanist world view. This ideology, possibly the most common in Western society, constructs sexuality with narrow definitions of what is permissible from a societal perspective and treats sexual expression as potentially negative or dangerous (Pollis 1985). In the Jehovanist ideological worldview, sexual reality poses a threat to identity, as sexual arousal and activity are understood to subject the participants' moral identities to exchange, mingling, and even alteration. Women in particular are "especially vulnerable, as it can take only…a few particular partners or acts to trigger the process which transforms her from pure and good to impure and bad" (Pollis,1985:287). The Jehovanist ideology thus casts human sexuality as a polluting or corrupting force, identifying procreation as the only legitimate form of sexual expression. All sexual acts or desires beyond the prescribed limitations (i.e. in heterosexual marriage, for procreation only) are regarded as illegitimate and despicable. Jehovanist thought earns its name through its general association with Western Christianity and its reliance on biblical injunctions against immoral sex derived from a divine mandate. However, there have been many groups which use non-religious claims to present so-called illicit sex as inherently deplorable, reflecting Jehovanist tendencies without utilizing biblical authority as a source of reasoning (McKay 1999).

Other sexual ideologies that fall into the conservative/restrictive spectrum include the Romanticist and Absolutist ideologies, which in many ways are almost synonymous with Jehovanist ideology, but also carry certain distinctions from the Jehovanist worldview. The Romanticist ideology provides for an evaluation of sexuality as positive, as long as it is carefully

controlled (McKay 1999). A Romanticist ideological view allows for the beneficial aspects of sexuality as an enhancement of intimate relationships, but only those that are normative within the preferred family and moral order. Certain sexual acts are granted moral validity only within the social and spiritual intimacies of a committed heterosexual marriage in the Judeo-Christian tradition, with any deviance representing a path into "national crisis and social decline" (McKay 1999:42). The core conservative/restrictive ideological idea of sex as something with potential for catastrophic consequences is reinforced (Pollis 1985). Nonconforming sexual expression is thus stigmatized: nonmarital sex is seen as a violation of the intense sex-commitment link, homosexual sex as a violation of the coitus-centered marital norm, and adolescent sex as too immature for the kind of committed marriage relationship in which sexuality may be celebrated. The Romanticist sexual ideology thus differs from the Jehovanist ideology mainly in its limited embrace of the positive aspects of sexuality, but in a context limiting sexual choices, which is the hallmark of a conservative/restrictive sexual ideology.

The Absolutist sexual ideology is also largely convergent with Jehovanist sexual ideology, since it is based in moral absolutism, whereby the rules governing the practice and expression of human sexuality have been predetermined by an exterior authority—generally God or the early Christian scholars—and are therefore fixed and immutable (McKay 1999). Luker's (2006) interviews with sexual conservatives in the United States revealed a line of thought in which the moral order of society was determined either by the Ten Commandments or some form of natural law, with the rules for sexual behavior firmly set. McKay (1999:50) cites Guindon's (1986) description of Absolutist sexual ideology as "moral regulations [that] apply basically for all times, all societies, all cultures, all age groups, and all individuals alike." With such stringent and universal rules for human moral and sexual behavior, there is no room for alternatives or

deliberation; procreative intercourse in the context of legitimate heterosexual marriage is the standard of morally acceptable sexual behavior (McKay 1999). Absolutist sexual ideology thus relies on religious or natural moral dictates for the norms for acceptable and unacceptable sexual acts, and seeks to curtail the spread of sexual tolerance (Scales 1983). The conservative/restrictive ideologies share a common understanding of the need to limit sexual behaviors outside of a specific social or moral standard. Advocates of these worldviews often favor the enforcement of these rules through legal or social regulations.

Liberal or permissive sexual ideologies, on the other hand, can be seen as the heirs of a number of demographic, scientific, and philosophical transformations that alter the focus of sexual ethics from an absolutist, act-centered moral code to moral inclusion of individual differences and person-centered concerns like consent, respect, and pleasure (McKay 1999). These are fundamental breaks with the set of conservative/restrictive ideologies, and sexuality itself is perceived as a generally harmless or positive force contributing to self-fulfillment and happiness. The Naturalist sexual ideology is based on secular and evolutionary views of human nature, with sexual desires and expression being part of a natural, biological process. Sexuality is removed from the realm of the sacred and placed into an ordinary or everyday context (Pollis 1985). The Naturalist view of sexuality lacks the spiritual overtones of the Jehovanist or Absolutist ideologies, and the authority for sexual decision-making is situated squarely in the hands of the individual (McKay 1999). There is an expansion of normative latitude concerning the details of sexual activity (the whos, whys, whens, wheres, and with whom) in a Naturalist worldview, as well as a significant reduction in those sexual aspects or acts that are considered deviant, perverted, or immoral (Pollis 1985). Naturalist sexual ethics endorse a respect for an individual's moral autonomy with regard to sexual choices, and primary value is placed on

concern, compassionate respect, and tolerance for other people and their sexual choices (McKay 1999).

The Liberal sexual ideology also evaluates sexual conduct on the basis of secular moral concepts such as individual rights, autonomy, and the distinction between morality and law. It is the Liberal ideology that has contributed to the relaxation of many legal restrictions governing sexual matters, advocating the moral stance that no state is responsible for citizens' sexual behaviors so long as they are neither infringing on others' rights nor having a demonstrably harmful effect (McKay 1999). This utilitarian attitude toward social regulation stands in stark contrast with sexual conservatives' assumptions that moral precepts should determine civil law. Individual choices and contexts come into central focus, which Luker (2006:136) characterizes as "situationist morality." The overarching concept of pluralism also plays into the Liberal sexual ideology, as sexual liberals feel that many choices and options for sexual desires, expressions, and activities exist, and no fixed, universalized standard is accepted. These evaluations most often bring into play the moral principles of liberalism, such as honesty, equality, responsibility, and tolerance (Scales 1983). These principles are applied to all areas of life and human interaction, including the sexual, so rape, exploitation, sexual battery, recklessness, or other violations of others' rights are not acceptable behaviors. Such principles and values further inform the Liberal set of attitudes toward the content of sexuality education. Contraception, homosexuality, or masturbation become topics acceptable for sex education, especially when they address what students specifically wish to know (Scales 1983). If a sexual activity is perceived as being responsible—in the sense that it is rationally considered and efforts to reduce harm are undertaken—then it likely encounters little objection from the sexual liberals. The liberal/permissive sexual ideologies' displacement of the moral focus from the specific

sexual acts to the individuals involved (and their rights and dignity) departs significantly from conservative/restrictive sexual ideologies, and advocates a neutral, pluralist approach based on the recognition of many sexual options and choices (Scales 1983).

II. Ideology and School-Based Sex Education

The interplay of these ideological divisions is highly visible in the conflict over school-based sex education. Viewed as the formal social method of transmission of sexual information and values in a public institution, sex education in schools offers an opportunity for much argument. What information should be included and what values reinforced create ideologically-based disagreement over sex education curricula. Luker (2006) describes *information* as the key to understanding sexual liberals, sexual conservatives, and the ways in which each group seeks to shape sexuality education. For sexual conservatives, the ideological base sees sexuality as a threatening or contaminating force from which children and adolescents ought to be protected, and thus sexual information should be tightly controlled and limited. Most of the people who subscribe to the conservative/restrictive group of sexual ideologies prefer school-based sex education to present religious or family values, treating the family as society's cornerstone and an institution that is threatened by deviant sexual activities (Halstead and Reiss 2003). The endorsement or toleration of activities other than procreative intercourse within heterosexual marriage is unacceptable to these sexual conservatives, who idealize a traditional family structure with more traditionally-understood gender roles (Luker 2006). This group is more likely to support the ideals of purity, chastity, or virginity for unmarried people, and to endow the institution of marriage with great spiritual and emotional meaning. Through a sexually conservative lens, the world of sex holds many dangers if it is not contained in marriage, and the

goal of sex education is to socialize young people into controlling their sexual impulses until they have reached that mature, committed ideal.

For sexual liberals, practically the opposite is true. Since sexuality is conceived as a neutral or positive force, the emphasis of sex education from a sexually liberal perspective is on teaching the necessary information for young people to make rational, responsible sexual decisions. The principle of responsibility is embodied when young people make informed choices that do not result in harm to self or others (Scales 1983). Beyond that, however, a sexually liberal form of sex education would offer few judgments or proscriptions, as sexual liberals believe in tolerance for a high degree of sexual variation (McKay 1999). For this group, a good foundation in the strictly factual topics of sex education—human growth, puberty, fertilization, and so on—is lost without a context of the liberal principles of freedom, dignity, equality, rationality, and self-determination as they concern human sexuality and relationships (Halstead and Reiss 2003). Acknowledgement is afforded to a wide diversity of sexual expression and family organization, taking the sexually liberal perspective that marriage is simply one among many sexual and life choices. Sexual liberals are more likely to make room for plans for higher education and career beginnings as preceding marriage in an individual's life, and thus take a more lenient viewpoint on premarital sex, as it is expected when marriage is delayed (Luker 2006).

Ideological affiliation, then, plays a substantial role in how people approach sexuality and the norms and values they wish to see approved of and expressed in school-based sex education. Abstinence-only sex education, with its clear emphasis on premarital abstinence and the limitation of sexual information that could be perceived as tolerating nonmarital sexual activities, clearly owes its ideological foundations to the conservative/restrictive group of sexual ideologies. McKay (1999) links the emergence of abstinence-only sex education, which is itself

a part of the social politics of the New Right, with a resurgence of the Romanticist sexual ideology in the 1980s and 1990s. Proponents of abstinence-only sex education often place the focus on marriage as the ideal and the only acceptable location for sexual activity. Abstinence-only curricula put forward matters such as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS), adolescent pregnancy, abortion, single motherhood, and skyrocketing divorce rates as evidence of the dangers of sexual permissiveness (McKay 1999). Abstinence-only sex education programs seek to address the prevention of these dangers through the prevention of adolescent sexual activities.

Comprehensive sex education curricula, alternatively, tend to present most of these perceived dangers as negative outcomes that are preventable through sex education providing both accurate information and encouragement for responsible sexual behavior. Thus, comprehensive sex education programs in general have their ideological basis in the liberal/permissive sexual ideologies, and share the goal of increasing students' level of information so that informed, responsible decisions might be made with medically and scientifically accurate data. When young people have more knowledge of and access to the means necessary for preventing the negative health outcomes of unprotected sex, supporters of comprehensive curricula argue, there can be movement towards a healthier, more fulfilled society (Scales 1983). The striking difference in educational approach between these types of sexuality education might stand primarily in the way they define a *problem*: for abstinence-only sex education advocates it is adolescent sexuality *itself*, but for comprehensive sex education advocates it is unsafe (unprotected) adolescent sexual activities. This difference in framing, which stems from and is also symptomatic of deep ideological divisions, lies at the heart of the debates over sexuality education in the nation's public schools, in which abstinence-only sex education is currently the

most in favor. Abstinence-only sex education is the subject of a large amount of federal legislation and the favored recipient of federal funding, which confers a sense of legitimacy on curricula that currently reach a substantial number of American public school students.

III. The Culture Wars and the Sociology of Education

As different status groups in contemporary American society struggle for cultural domination and control, this ideological conflict extends into schools. Dill and Hunter (2010) identify the institution of education, especially public education, as a central place for cultural conflict. Because the educational system is "one of the key institutional contexts through which a society tells itself a story about itself," the consequent ability to essentially define reality and reproduce community and national identity through schooling becomes crucial for groups seeking to form and legitimate the social order (Dill and Hunter 2010:276). Collins (1979) argues that control of cultural resources and organizations permit "consciousness communities"—which Max Weber called status groups—to enact and reinforce forms of social stratification and difference (Collins 1979:58). In this sense, similar to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural conflict, control over the "reality-defining institution" of education gives these groups the ability and power to lay out the terms of public life and, ultimately, "the meaning of America" (Dill and Hunter 2010:276). I would then argue that the oppositional groups competing for more-or-less cultural control of sex education in the United States, proponents of either abstinence-only-until-marriage or comprehensive sex education, are part of these distinct "consciousness communities" struggling to have their moral visions and political interests served in the greater process of the American "culture wars."

Sexuality education is in itself a particularly important site of moral concern because of the way educational curricula are "frameworks through which knowledge, culture, belief, and

morality are mediated as taken-for-granted reality" (Dill and Hunter 2010:278). The efforts of public schools to instill some kind of "proper social values" are widely supported (Levesque 2002:113). Schools shape and constrain present and future choices to create a society in which adolescents end up taking their social responsibilities seriously (Levesque 2002). In the context of sexual (and moral) education, the struggle emerges to determine which realities, which values, and which choices are presented to the nation's youth for the sake of creating the good society. Irvine (2002) characterizes the contemporary debates about sex education as echoing the tension between opening or restricting the overall public discourse about sexuality: advocates of comprehensive sex education argue that silencing sexual discussion fosters ignorance and sexuality-related social problems like teenage pregnancy, whereas advocates of abstinence-only education favor restriction of sexual discussion so as to protect young people and preserve traditional concepts of sexual morality. With such differences in moral visions for sexuality itself—as reflected in the deep ideological distinctions between the sexually conservative and sexually liberal groups—the shape and framing of sexuality education allows for the exertion of larger cultural control. At the deepest and most fundamental level, Luker (2006) argues:

> Fights about sex are also fights about gender, about power and trust and hierarchy, about human nature, and not surprisingly, about what sex really is and what it means in human life. Even more deeply, fights about sex are fights about how we are to weigh our obligations to ourselves and others, issues that themselves are tied to our notion of what it means to be a man or a woman" (2006, 7).

Chapter 2: Background

Abstinence-Only Sex Education: History and Federal Involvement

In the United States, public health and educational programs to reduce the incidence of the negative outcomes of unsafe sexual practices have been a subject of consideration for a relatively long time at many levels of government and social organizations. Some of the first efforts at public sexuality education were made by the American Social Hygiene Association (henceforth ASHA) in the beginning and middle of the 20th century. These efforts were largely focused on family life education that attempted to redefine certain gender roles, venerate marriage and motherhood, and train students for responsible parenthood (Luker 2006). In the post-WWII years, "education for personal and family living" meant proscriptive programs for sexual restraint (Moran 2000:131). The focus for sex education programs in the 1950s was on the family as "a repository for human satisfactions that were increasingly unavailable outside the home;" family dysfunction, then, was considered the source of so-called status offenses like promiscuity and juvenile delinquency (Moran 2000:132). In 1953, ASHA spearheaded efforts to transform sex education into Family Life Education, or FLE, with the intent of building happy and well-adjusted people who exhibit behaviors that do not cause "trouble for the community and misery for the individuals involved" (Moran 2000:138).

But with the sexual and cultural revolution of the 1960s and the legalization of birth control and abortion, many parents and sex educators saw sex education as the best response to what felt like the moral decline and negative sexual outcomes of the younger generation, and the push for more school-based sex education gathered momentum (Moran 2000). By 1968, nearly 50 percent of all U.S. schools were offering some form of sex education. Nevertheless, most of the courses seemed to be geared toward adjusting students to a fairly traditional standard of sexual behavior and upholding traditional morality. Moran (2000) explores the case of a

comprehensive sex education curriculum in Anaheim, California in the late 1960s that sought to teach not a series of moral prescriptions but instead a framework for students to make their own moral decisions; controversy erupted from Anaheim conservatives who saw this effort toward tolerance and neutrality as an attempt to make religious considerations irrelevant, undermine the authority of parents, and encourage sexual activity. Conservative opposition to comprehensive sex education has since often taken this tone, pointing out that rising rates of intercourse between unmarried adolescents in the 1970s proceeded directly alongside increased availability of contraception, abortion, and sex education (Moran 2000). This correlation, while not proven as causal, was based in truth and gave conservative opponents the opportunity to brand sexually liberal policies as failures. While unwanted pregnancies declined among adult women in the 1960s and 1970s, adolescent pregnancies were on the rise, providing more incentive for a reimagining of sex education policy. Nearly 1 million adolescent girls became pregnant each year in the 1970s (Doan and Williams 2008). It was at this point that the U.S. Congress turned its attention toward legislation aimed at preventing pregnancy among adolescents.

The first of the federal government's legislative acts moving against adolescent pregnancy was the Adolescent Health Services and Pregnancy Prevention Care Act of 1978. It exemplified the clinical approach of the federal government, focusing on increasing adolescents' access to federally funded contraceptive and abortion services (Doan and Williams 2008). Family planning and other types of clinics received funding under Title X of the Public Health Service Act to deliver such services to both poor women and adolescents, while public schools introduced some limited educational programs centered on physical and sexual development, sexually transmitted disease prevention, and contraceptive use (Doan and Williams 2008).

A number of politically and socially conservative groups (such as Concerned Women for America and Focus on the Family) firmly opposed these legislative attempts to reduce adolescent pregnancy, on the grounds that sex education fundamentally belonged in the home and not at school. Efforts to end public sexuality education, however, ultimately proved futile. Doan and Williams' (2008) research showed that these largely Christian conservatives changed tactics, from elimination of the programs to alteration of the content of school-based sexuality education. Programs funded under Title X, to these groups, encouraged a dangerous "contraceptive mentality" in adolescents that would promote adolescent sexual activity (Doan and Williams 2008:27). Sexually conservative groups and individuals began to shape public policy for the prevention of adolescent sexuality rather than supporting it, as they felt Title X did. This type of morality politics earned its first major victory in 1981 with the passage of the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), the first-ever federally funded sex education legislation. The AFLA was a sexually conservative response to the increase in adolescent pregnancy, abortion, poverty, and unwed motherhood through seeking to prevent what Sen. Denton called "*the problem of premarital adolescent sexual relations*" (Levine 2002:99; emphasis hers). It stipulates the promotion of adoption as an alternative to abortion for pregnant adolescents, forbids federal funding to any organization or agency that advocates abortion, and most centrally focuses on the development of "chastity education" programs that emphasize abstinence and self-control (Perrin and DeJoy 2003; Levine 2002:97). The AFLA was signed into law as Title XX of the Public Health Service Act within the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 without hearings or floor votes in Congress (Doan and Williams 2008).

Other than a failed effort in 1994 to amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to restrict the content of sexuality and HIV education in schools, which proved unworkable due

to several statutes preventing direct federal involvement in state and local curriculum standards, the sexual conservatives did not make any significant policy changes until 1996 (Perrin and DeJoy 2003). That year saw the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), commonly known as welfare reform. Congressional Republicans, who most often (but not universally) identify with sexually conservative attitudes and goals, sought to reduce welfare dependence by reducing illegitimate births and strengthening the family (Doan and Williams 2008). This goal would be accomplished through abstinence-only sex education, as abstinence from sexual activity is what sexual conservatives prefer to be taught as legitimate sexuality education. Legislation with a specific definition of abstinence education was added into the miscellaneous provisions of the welfare reform bill in the final hours of negotiation without public debate or a separate vote (Doan and Williams 2008). With this action, the Republicans secured a provision under Title V, Section 510 of the Social Security Act for abstinence-only sex education programs that follow an eight-part criteria set, known as the A-H definition (see Table 1).

Table 1. A-H Definition of Abstinence Education.
Title V, Section 510 of the Social Security Act defines "abstinence education" as follows:

"For purposes of this section, the term "abstinence education" means an educational or motivational program which—

(A) Has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity;
(B) Teaches abstinence from sexual activity as the expected standard for all school age children;
(C) Teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems;
(D) Teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity;
(E) Teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects;
(F) Teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society;
(G) Teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances; and
(H) Teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity."

(Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Pub. L. no. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2105.)

Originally, states were allowed some flexibility in which particular aspects of the A-H definition they chose to emphasize with their programs, as well as what types of programs they used the money to fund. However, many abstinence-only advocates, like the National Coalition for Abstinence Education (NCAE), publicized their dissatisfaction with many states' watered-down versions of abstinence-only sex education and called for stricter enforcement of the abstinence definition. Upon assuming office in 2001, President George W. Bush heeded those criticisms and advocated for Congress's authorization of a third funding stream for abstinence-only sex education, under Special Programs of Regional and National Significance: Community-Based Abstinence Education, or CBAE. CBAE provides money directly to community organizations, mandates compliance with the A-H definition and, as of 2006, stipulates programs' stronger endorsement of marriage and moral purity. The 2006 changes additionally included shifting CBAE programs' promotion of abstinence from the grounds of reducing risky behavior to "improv[ing] preparation for a stable marriage," in a way that nearly echoes the family life education promoted by ASHA in the 1950s (Doan and Williams 2008:42).

While the AFLA has enabled limited but steady funding for abstinence-only education since its establishment, Section 510 of Title V originally authorized $250 million for abstinence-only sex education over five years, and was reauthorized by Congress in 2002. The federal government provides $4 for every $3 provided by a state, and since a variety of sources for state funds are permitted, Title V can represent a lucrative source of federal grant money (Doan and Williams 2008). Under Title V, the federal government authorized $500 million total to be spent on abstinence-only sex education from 1997 to 2006. In 2007, Congress passed legislation requiring all state programs receiving Title V funding to comply with *all* eight points of the A-H definition of abstinence education; other more stringent rules on the content include the

requirement of “assurances that funded curricula and materials ‘do not promote contraception and/or condom use’” (Doan and Williams 2008:42). Community-Based Abstinence Education, first authorized for $20 million in fiscal year 2001, has experienced the most rapid rise in funding, with the House and Senate Appropriations Committee ultimately approving $176 million for fiscal year 2007 (Doan and Williams 2008).

While states are not required to accept federal grant money for sex education, many states and communities perceive the presence of federal funding granting legitimacy to abstinence-only sex education programs. Several states have refused Title V funding on various grounds, ranging from lack of requirement flexibility to lack of proof that abstinence-only sex education is effective (Doan and Williams 2008). However, many more states still receive federal funding for abstinence-only sex education programs, and the substantial investment from the federal government has helped to greatly increase the numbers of curricula and materials available to schools and community programs. With over $1 billion authorized for the funding of abstinence-only sex education from 1997 to 2006, it is important to study the content and results of these well-funded programs to better understand what lessons federal money pays for—in short, to investigate the substance and impact of the “reality-defining” cultural institution of abstinence-only sex education.

Abstinence-Only: Problems of Content

Perhaps the most significant of the few attempts to analyze the content of major abstinence-only sex education curricula is the 2004 report, “The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs,” prepared by the United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform for Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA). Also called the Waxman Report, this investigation reviewed the thirteen most popular abstinence-only curricula used by

69 CBAE grantees in 25 states. The Waxman Report found that eleven of the thirteen curricula contained "major errors and distortions of public health information" (U.S. House of Representatives 2004:7). These errors and distortions ranged from the presentation of religious viewpoints as scientific fact to misrepresenting existing research on the effectiveness of contraceptives. Many of the curricula make use of a 1993 review study on condom effectiveness in preventing HIV transmission by Dr. Susan Weller, which mixed the results from consistent and inconsistent condom use to find an effectiveness rate of only 69%. The Department of Health and Human Services published a statement in 1997 alleging serious flaws in Dr. Weller's methods, and asserted the validity of studies finding high levels of condom effectiveness in preventing both pregnancy and HIV transmission. STD transmission and incidence rates cited in many of these popular abstinence-only curricula were also flawed; claims that condom use and contraction of an STD are correlated failed to take into account the reduction in transmission and acquisition of syphilis and gonorrhea in recent years. *Why Am I Tempted?(WAIT) Training*, one of the popular curricula, also lists tears and sweat as fluids that contain a risk of HIV infection, while the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) asserts that these body fluids have never been associated with HIV transmission. Abortion is almost universally presented in the eleven reviewed curricula as a negative event with ill psychological effects on women. Instead, research from the American Psychiatric Association suggests that positive feelings predominate in post-abortion emotions and that abortion has no independent effect on long-term psychological well-being (Paragraph: U.S. House of Representatives 2004).

Furthermore, stereotypes of gender roles and relationships are often explicitly or implicitly presented as scientific fact in abstinence-only sex education curricula. *Why kNOw*, an abstinence education curriculum published in 2004, directly states that "women gauge their

happiness and judge their success by their relationships…men's happiness and success hinge on their accomplishments" (U.S. House of Representatives 2004:16). Stereotypes of girls as helpless or dependent on men were also found, focusing on the protective role that fathers and husbands are supposed to play in girls' lives. Men are also presented stereotypically, with frequent references to sexual aggressiveness. *WAIT Training* lists sexual fulfillment and physical attractiveness as top basic needs only for men, while affection, honesty, and openness are listed only as women's basic needs in relationships. Adolescent sexual activity outside of marriage is generally characterized with a litany of negative outcomes, like isolation, unstable commitments, disappointment, the inability to make bonds later in life, depression, and suicide. *Choosing the Best Life*, another abstinence-only curriculum, makes the strong suggestion that premarital sexual activity directly leads to depression and suicide, while the cited source actually offered no conclusion on whether sexual activity is a cause or consequence of negative psychosocial outcomes (U.S. House of Representatives 2004). There appears to be a strong investment in traditional perceptions of gender roles and a consistent presentation of premarital sexual activity as carrying highly negative consequences—with or without misrepresentations of existing medical or scientific data.

Doan and Williams' (2008) study of four abstinence-only curricula reached many of the same conclusions about the framing of their content, which is not reviewed for accuracy by the federal government. Their review of *Sex Respect*, *Sexuality, Commitment, and Family (SCF)*, *Sex Can Wait*, and *Choosing the Best Life* revealed insights about the distribution of coverage of sexuality topics and the dominant cultural themes in these curricula. Doan and Williams' (2008) content analysis showed that very few of the curricula spent any time at all discussing divorce, homosexuality, or nontraditional family arrangements—which they deemed to be relevant issues

in the lives of students today. Instead, the reviewed curricula paid much greater attention to the harmful psychological and emotional effects of sex, the consequences of STDs and HIV, and decision-making or refusal skills. Egalitarian views of gender were found only in *Sex Can Wait*—one of the two curricula identified by the Waxman Report as *not* containing serious errors—and adolescent girls were often depicted as either lacking in sexual desire or flaunting their sexuality in order to tempt boys. The characterization of girls as flaunting their sexuality (often through wearing suggestive clothing) is often linked to more stereotypical views of adolescent boys, as it is widely suggested (as *Sex Respect* does) that adolescent boys can and will be carried away by their physiological reactions. *Choosing the Best Life* was cited as presenting the concept that the measured differences in brain activity between men and women applied to invariably different approaches to sex. Specifically, the curriculum states that adolescent boys find it easier to focus on the physical side of sex alone, while girls cannot separate it from the relationship as a whole. As Doan and Williams (2008) point out, though, there is little supporting evidence for these purported sexual differences, and studies on sex drive have linked it much more closely to external stimuli rather than levels of sex hormones or brain structure.

Discussions of contraception, if they are present, are framed almost exclusively in the negative terms of failure rates, which are frequently misrepresented or derived from unreliable sources. Discussions of how to access and/or use contraceptive methods are absent, in accord with the federal A-H definition, as are the individual advantages or disadvantages or the legitimate medical risk factors of contraception. Doan and Williams' (2008) study also noted especially the presentation of virginity as a precious treasure to be preserved, in order to guarantee a better or more stable marriage. The concurrent implication is that the failure to

preserve one's virginity is inevitably harmful to a future marriage and transforms a young person into damaged goods.

Further, content analyses of abstinence-only sex education curricula have noted gaps in topic coverage that may undermine the effort to promote responsible sexual behavior on the part of adolescents. Wilson et al. (2005) described 21 abstinence-only curricula in terms of their coverage of particular sub-concepts of sexuality-related content. While all of the curricula featured abstinence and most also covered topics like self-esteem or refusal skills, most of the abstinence-only curricula failed entirely to discuss relevant sexuality sub-concepts like masturbation, "the diversity of sexual values and behaviors in American society," sexual orientation, and "the common occurrence of sexual fantasies" (Wilson *et al*. 2005:93). These are possibly deeply connected to the way these curricula construct particular images of adolescent sexuality, with school-based sex education programs frequently attending only to the negative outcomes of teen sex and failing to address the cultivation of positive sexual health (Bay-Cheng, 2003). Curricula that are silent on the concept of sexual agency—especially with respect to female sexual desire, which is often unaddressed—could hinder the development of true sexual self-efficacy, in which adolescents feel able to assert their own wishes and take responsible precautions in sexual situations.

Similar failures are found in the exclusionary definitions of sexuality frequently employed in school-based sex education curricula, both abstinence-only and comprehensive. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, and queer/questioning (henceforth LGBTQ) people are mostly omitted from these curricula, and when they are mentioned, they are often "tacitly marginalized" through the use of linguistic distancing techniques and other methods (Bay-Cheng 2003:66). This heterosexism is reinforced with the general presentation of "normal"

sexuality as a monogamous, coitus-centered heterosexual relationship in which the man and woman usually adhere to conventional gender roles. Students of same-sex inclination may feel further marginalized by the emphasis on marriage as "the only legitimate arena for sexual expression," given that the institution of marriage is not an option for them in most states of the U.S. (Fields and Hirschman 2007). Bay-Cheng (2003) goes on to characterize the way in which most school-based sex education fails to discuss the social contexts of gender, race, and class in their bearing on sexual scripts, power, and meaning. More research is needed to understand how students perceive these explicit and implicit messages in the curricular content (or those aspects which appear to be missing), and how they influence their behaviors and understandings of sexual topics.

Abstinence-Only: What Are the Results?

Putting aside questions of abstinence-only sex education's explicit and implicit value-related content, it is important to investigate how effective such programs really are. Many evaluative studies of abstinence-only curricula implemented in various locales all over the United States have been conducted, with some mixed results. A sampling of studies focused on specific abstinence-only interventions (Jorgensen 1991; Denny *et al.* 2002; Barnett and Hurst 2003; Borawski *et al.* 2005; Denny and Young 2006; DiFiore, Mays, and Ross 2007; Trenholm *et al*. 2007) reveals several common themes in terms of design and results. Most of the studies evaluating abstinence-only programs employed a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design, and attempted to test for changes in adolescent behavior, attitudes, or other factors as a result of the intervention. Of those that tested for behavioral outcomes, almost none of the listed studies found any program effect on adolescent sexual behaviors—that is, the abstinence-only programs largely made no statistically significant difference on initiation or continuation of sexual activity,

number of sexual partners, rates of unprotected sexual intercourse, or reported pregnancies, births, and STDs (Kirby 2007). A systematic review of thirteen methodologically rigorous trials found no increase or decrease in the level of sexual risk—participants in both abstinence-only and control programs were equally likely to engage in unprotected sexual activity, be diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease, and have a similar age of sexual initiation (Underhill, Montgomery, and Operario 2007). Studies focused on virginity pledges—a common element of some abstinence-only curricula—found that while they may delay sexual initiation for up to 18 months, pledgers and non-pledgers had similar rates of STD infection, and those who take virginity pledges may be less likely to either use condoms or be tested for STDs (Brückner and Bearman, 2005).

While Kirby (2007) leaves room for some promising abstinence-only programs that have yet to show strong results in behavioral change, it must also be observed that many evaluations of abstinence-only programs are carried out on the criteria of knowledge or attitudinal/intentional change. In this area, abstinence-only sex education curricula have had some significant impact. Jorgensen (1991), Denny *et al.* (2002), Barnett and Hurst (2003), Borawski *et al.* (2005) and others all report significant gains in tested sexual health knowledge, especially STD/HIV knowledge, for participants in abstinence-only programs. Other areas of positive impact included reported favorable attitudes towards abstinence, increased intentions to remain abstinent, improved family communication, and hopes for the future. Certain measured trends in student knowledge and intentions, though, may be counterproductive for the end of improved sexual health for adolescents later in life. Borawski *et al.* (2005) discovered that program youth reported lower intentions to use a condom in the future; Trenholm *et al*. (2007) found that students in four abstinence-only programs were less likely than control students to report

condoms as “usually” effective against STDs, and much more likely to report that condoms are “never” effective against STDs. This stands in contradiction to the CDC’s findings that latex condoms are very effective in preventing HIV and in reducing the risk of transmission of other STDs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2010).

Results Continued: Attitudes and Intentions

When positive evaluations of student outcomes in abstinence-only sex education rely so heavily on changes in sexual attitudes and intentions, it is salient to understand exactly what attitudes and intentions are being measured. Reported attitudes towards abstinence, for example, are understood as potential mediators for adolescent sexual behavior (Trenholm *et al.* 2007). If, based on the assessments of content above, many abstinence-only curricula communicate particular social and sexual values, students may in fact be tested on their adherence to the attitudes and values embodied in the curriculum. In my brief review of evaluations of abstinence-only curricula, I found that many of the studies do not reveal the items used to test for attitudes or intentions, but the examples given provide a somewhat clearer picture.

Most of the studies asked students to respond on multiple-point, Likert-style rating systems to report their level of agreement or disagreement with particular statements. Typical statements include: “I respect people my age who do not have sex” (Barnett and Hurst 2003, 265); “I believe people my age should wait until they are older to have sex”, and “It is important to me that I get married before having sexual intercourse” (Borawski *et al*. 2005:426). Trenholm *et al.* (2007), who found attitudes towards abstinence to be a strong potential mediator for sexual behavior, used a five-part response scale: “(a) having sexual intercourse is something only married people should do, (b) it is against my values to have sexual intercourse as an unmarried teen, (c) it would be okay for teens who have been dating for a long time to have sexual

intercourse [reversed], (d) it is okay for teenagers to have sexual intercourse before marriage if they plan to get married [reversed], and (e) it is ok for unmarried teens to have sexual intercourse if they use birth control [reversed]" (55). These attitude items, for which statistically significant differences for students exposed to abstinence-only programs were found, were usually paired with measurements of intention—most often Likert-style responses to statements such as, "I plan to be sexually abstinent (not have sex) until marriage" (DiFiore, Mays, and Ross 2007:56). By measuring student responses to such items, evaluators and educators feel they can estimate the effectiveness of a program in changing the mediators that influence a student's current and future sexual choices and behaviors.

But do these responses matter? As Trenholm *et al.* (2007) and Kirby (2007) and others have found, the most methodologically rigorous studies of abstinence programs have shown no statistically significant behavior change, seemingly regardless of differences in stated attitudes or intentions. One explanation for this divide may lie in the possibility that students are not being completely truthful with their responses, or marking answers that seem desirable but do not match their true intent. It is also important to bear in mind the frequent attitude-behavior inconsistency found in many studies: researchers are frequently unable to find a strong link between a measured attitude and social behavior, with some attributing this to the influence of other personal and situational variables (Gross and Niman 1975). The idea that additional influences have a stronger bearing on adolescents' ultimate attitudes and decisions about sexuality has a great deal of support. Various studies on adolescents' sources of sex education have found peers and the media to be very important. Sprecher, Harris, and Meyers (2008) found over several cohorts of college students that same-sex friends ranked highest in terms of providing sex information, with dating partners, opposite-sex friends, the media, and

independent reading also being common. Bleakley *et al.* (2009) connected sources of sexual knowledge to beliefs about sexual intercourse, finding that students reporting parents, grandparents, and religious leaders as important sources also reported beliefs likely to delay sexual intercourse, and that students ranking friends, cousins, and the media as important sources reported beliefs increasing the likelihood of having sexual intercourse. Somers and Surmann (2005) related source and timing to actual sexual behavior, finding that earlier learning from any source and more school-based information on various sexual topics was predictive of less frequent oral sex and sexual intercourse, whereas learning from other sources (peers, media, non-parent adults) had less of an influence on behavior. In this way, then, mediators of adolescent sexual behavior can be located both inside and outside the classroom. What is left unclear is just how much importance an adolescent may assign to both the source of the sexual information and what is learned—and how what they have learned might influence later perceptions and actions. There is value in probing the experience of sex education (from any source) and its meanings to students in a way that offers depth and fullness—to which I now turn in my own investigation.

Chapter 3: Methods

The Researcher's Interest and Position: Experience and Reality

While sex education occupies just one "front" in the culture wars and struggles for control between conservative and liberal groups in the United States, my experiences as a young person in the public educational system and observations of my peers remind me of the "on-the-ground" consequences associated with these battles. While these status groups use the halls of power—from Congress down to the local school board—to exert influence on the nature and direction of sex education, I walked the halls of a middle school and high school where young people negotiated sex and relationships every day. As a white, middle-class female in a relatively affluent suburb of a major U.S. city, with mostly white and middle-class peers, there was a great deal of privilege in my situation and experience; this nevertheless did not change the fact that sex and relationships were an emotionally and socially fraught reality, about which many of my peers expressed fear and a desire to know more.

In the greater sense of my position as a young person in the United States, it is obvious (to me) that the consequences are real: most of the births to women younger than 18 are from unintended pregnancies, and almost half of all new STD infections occur among young people aged 15 to 24 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2011; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2010[2]). What is not seen in national measures of sexual health indicators are the countless conversations I participated in and witnessed among young people in and out of school, and on many Internet-based forums and social networks: deluges of questions and concerns about what sex is, what it means, how to avoid pregnancy and disease, how to negotiate pleasure, whether and about what to ask one's parents, how to explore. Our time in the abstinence-only sex education classroom largely did not answer these concerns, and in the

meantime, many people were already sexually active, or thinking about it. My interest in pursuing the meaning and impact of abstinence-only programs in the lives of young people has stemmed not from a solid conviction of their failure, but rather a genuine curiosity about what it *has* accomplished, and a focus on the actual experiences and concerns of students like me who went through it. To echo Joycelyn Elders, who would be dismissed from her position as Surgeon General of the United States for suggesting that masturbation be included in sex education: "Our children are out in the ocean drowning while we're sitting on the beach worried and talking about whose values and whose morals we are going to teach" (Lord 2010:173-4). I wanted to investigate and perhaps generate new narratives about this particular social experience, laden with value and meaning, that may or may not have its desired effect on the lives and minds of the young people involved.

Design and Purpose of the Study

While many different entities and organizations have concerned themselves with the effectiveness of different types of sex education programs, I wanted a chance to explore not just the measurable outcomes but how students themselves have really experienced and incorporated (or chosen not to incorporate) the lessons found in abstinence-only sex education. With the public health concerns associated with both the mediators of young people's sexual behavior and the behaviors themselves, it is important to study what students consider to be important influences so that better public health interventions may be sought. I also seek to engage several of the topic areas repeatedly addressed by critics of abstinence-only sex education, to find out if their objections to what seems to be biased, ideologically-influenced curriculum content have weight, by investigating how students understand these topics and give them meaning in their lives (or not). A better understanding of how students have genuinely experienced and given

meaning to the lessons of abstinence-only sex education can provide another, deeper look at how these curricula have affected young people in the United States, and whether they are worth the time, money, and controversy that has been dedicated to them. A final exploration of students' ideas of what they wish they had been taught in their school-based sex education will round out the study and permit students to bring up topics that we may not have otherwise addressed.

Per this description, my study involves three generalized "prongs" of inquiry:

1) Assessing the value or effect of abstinence-only in the student's life, whether the educational experience or any particular lesson truly mattered to them, along with any other important sources of information about sex and relationships (which may have had more influence than the classroom-based abstinence education);

2) An exploration of several individual topics of concern addressed by critics of the content of abstinence-only programs, to assess whether and how the students perceived this content as ideological, and investigate how they have understood and/or practiced them:
    a. Abstinence
    b. Virginity and non-virginity (including virginity pledges)
    c. Gender roles/sex differences
    d. Non-heterosexual sexualities
    e. Marriage;

3) A direct evaluation of what students found to be valuable about the abstinence-only sex education experience, what was not valuable, and developing a policy-focused "call to action" based on the students' own recommendations about the sex education they wished they could have received in school.

Research Methods

To collect data on students' experiences with the lessons of abstinence-only sex education and the other areas of inquiry outlined above, I conducted a series of interviews with college students[1]. For the purposes of this study, I interviewed 15 students from Emory College of Arts and Sciences and Georgia State University from October 2010 through February 2011. Emory College was selected as a research site for reasons of its convenience due to my affiliation

[1] This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Emory University, and did not require IRB approval at Georgia State University because recruitment was limited to publicly posted flyers and informal social networks.

with the university, and the broad range of regional diversity in its student population that is attracted due to its well-ranked academic status. Georgia State University was also selected for reasons of geographic convenience and access to a similarly broad spectrum of student population diversity. College students were also a population of interest because of their position as a group who could reasonably expect to postpone marriage until after their completion of a degree—which could present unique challenges to the goal of delaying sexual involvement until after marriage.

The Interview and Analysis Process

Students were recruited for interviews via public advertisements in on-campus areas on both campuses, an internal e-mail conference client used by the students at Emory College, and word-of-mouth among friends and co-workers (see Appendix 1). Students responded directly to me if they were interested in participating and if they considered themselves eligible based on my recruitment criteria: an Emory College or Georgia State University undergraduate student, age 18 or over, who experienced abstinence-only sex education at a public school in the United States. Upon being contacted by a potential interviewee, I asked them again to verify that they were eligible per the requirements I had listed on the promotional flyer. If they confirmed their eligibility, we set up an interview place and time convenient for both the interviewer and respondent. Interviews were conducted either in private study rooms, or the private living space of either the interviewer or respondent, depending on the respondent's wishes. The process of finding and interviewing respondents was slow and often somewhat frustrating, as there was no way of guaranteeing a steady rate of response based on promotional flyers, and I was unable to pay them for their time. Two potential respondents who contacted me refused to participate

without monetary compensation. On the whole, however, almost all of the students who contacted me volunteered to participate in an interview regardless of the lack of payment.

Written consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded was obtained before the start of each interview session. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 35 minutes and an hour. This self-selected group of participants consisted of nine women and six men, of whom ten were white, three were Latino/a, one was African-American, and one stated mixed African-American and Asian heritage. Questions about class status were not asked, but students' attendance at Emory University is somewhat of a control for a middle- to upper-middle class status; it is less obvious for the students attending Georgia State University. Regionally, the majority of the students I interviewed were from the southeast. Ten of the interviewed students were residents of the state of Georgia and had gone to public school there. Five women had had their abstinence-only experience in other states: Connecticut, Ohio, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Louisiana. To preserve the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used for all students. Table 2 shows the characteristics of the students in the sample:

Table 2. Respondent Characteristics.

Name	**Grade**	**Race**	**State**	**Religion**	**Signed virginity pledge?**
Adrian	Freshman	White	GA	Atheist	n/a
Whitney	Senior	White	GA	Atheist	Yes
Amanda	Sophomore	White	SC	Baptist	n/a
Hannah	Freshman	White	CT	Jewish	n/a
Gabriela	Senior	Latina	GA	Catholic	Yes
Carlos	Senior	Latino	GA	Catholic/Buddhist	n/a
Wendy	Senior	White	TN	Southern Baptist	n/a
Tara	Junior	Black/Asian	GA	Christian	No
Michael	Senior	White	GA	None	No
Andrea	Sophomore	Latina	LA	Protestant/None	Yes (rel)
Nicole	Sophomore	White	OH	Christian	Yes
Lucas	Sophomore	White	GA	Atheist	No
Sara	Junior	White	GA	Atheist	n/a

Jacob	Junior	Black	GA	Catholic	Yes
Ryan	Sophomore	White	GA	Methodist/Agnostic	Yes (rel)

Guide: For virginity pledge, Yes indicates student was offered and signed virginity pledge as part of school sex education; Yes (rel) indicates student signed virginity pledge as part of religious activity; No indicates student was offered a virginity pledge but chose specifically not to sign; n/a means student was not offered a virginity pledge at any point.

The interviews were intended to elicit self-reflective commentaries about the students' experiences in abstinence-only sex education, their assessments of their sources of information about sex and relationships, their understanding and incorporation of a number of specific topics, and their ultimate evaluation of their sex education experiences with suggestions for how it may have been improved. The interview guide, with my initial questions as I wrote them for submission to the IRB, is available in Appendix 2. In the process of interviewing, though, I took degrees of freedom with the phrasing and timing of specific questions, as well as following up on students' responses as they gave them. This gave me the chance to engage these students on a wide variety of topics and invite them to explore their own understanding and meanings of sex education and several concepts contained therein, as well as giving me a retrospective assessment of how influential these experiences were over time. I found that asking college students to give me retrospective accounts and evaluations of their experiences and ideas was beneficial for allowing me to build peer rapport with the participants, as well as hearing the voices and concerns of an unrepresentative group of a cohort of young people who have moved into another life stage from the middle and high school environments in which most abstinence-only courses are taught.

I used MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis program, to organize and code the interview transcripts. I transcribed several of the interview recordings, but also negotiated to have some of the transcripts done by other students, who were paid $15-20 per transcript and signed a contract and confidentiality agreement prior to receiving the recordings. I read the raw texts several times

and created some initial codes of emergent themes, though the approach was not entirely "grounded theory" because some of the questions I asked had specific answers to be organized rather than patterns to be found and developed in students' narratives. For example, whether or not a student signed a virginity pledge was clearly answerable with a yes or no code; any further related experiences with a virginity pledge were coded with their own features. Many of my codes were based on the question categories identified in my interview guide—for instance, collecting all pieces related to marriage or that discussed gender roles/sex differences in one place in order to observe any similarity of content or language. I identified patterns across interviews in response to my questions and also looked for counterexamples. Common themes were distinguished for the most open-ended questions, and I posed explanations in research memos. Some of the emergent themes were based on descriptive aspects of the participants' responses—as in, features of the sex education experience, such as "No Con Talk" for no discussion of contraception—and others were often evaluative, as with "Manipulation" for times when respondents discussed feelings of manipulation from their abstinence-only sex education instructors or materials. I selected quotations to illustrate particular interpretative points. While this sample is very small and unrepresentative, and I am thus unable to make real generalizations from these patterns, I nevertheless endeavored to discover and generate themes that describe and underlie these students' experiences.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

First Inquiry: Identifying and Evaluating Abstinence-Only, Its Importance, and Other Sources of Information

Each student identified some basic information about their school-based sex education course(s), though not all gave the same amount or type of information. Most of the students reported receiving some kind of sex education multiple times throughout their school careers, most often in middle school but also frequently in 5th grade or in varying grades of high school. Six of the students mentioned that at least one of their sex education experiences was sex-segregated—boys and girls received instruction in separate classrooms. Table 3 gives an overview of the students' course experiences, recognizing that not all gave the same level of information about the course itself:

Table 3. Respondents' Sex Education Course Characteristics.

Name	Grade(s) Taken	Course Length (if given)	Sex-Segregated (if given)	Context
Adrian	9th grade	1 week	Yes	Health class
Whitney	5th, 8th grades; 1 time high school	Not given	In 5th grade	Health class
Amanda	7th grade; 1 time high school	2-3 days each	In 7th grade	Pull-out program and health class
Hannah	5th, 8th, 11th grades	Not given	No	Health class
Gabriela	7th grade	2 weeks	Yes	Health class
Carlos	5th, 6th-8th grades; once high school	Not given	In 5th grade	Health class
Wendy	5th and 8th grade	2-3 days in 5th; 1 week in 8th	In 5th grade	5th: pull-out; 8th: health class
Tara	9th grade	1 week	No	Health class
Michael	Unspecified high school	Not given	No	Not specified
Andrea	Unspecified high school	Not given	No	Health class

Nicole	Unspecified middle and high	Not given	No	Health class
Lucas	5th, 6th-8th grades	Not given	In 5th grade	Health class
Sara	11th grade	Semester (mixed in throughout)	No	Health class
Jacob	6th, 8th, and 9th grades	Not given	No	Health class
Ryan	9th grade	Not given	No	Health class

Two of the students I interviewed, Tara and Andrea, mentioned school-sponsored extracurricular activities involving abstinence education, which they drew on as well as class-based experiences. For Tara, this was an abstinence-focused student club who attended a weekend retreat with similar clubs in Georgia, and for Andrea, this was a convention through the Louisiana Governor's Program on Abstinence. These were included—and church-based abstinence activities were excluded—on the basis that they were still part of the public institution with which I am most concerned.

Every student who was interviewed identified their school-based sex education experience as abstinence-only, whether their teacher called it that or not, based on the curriculum's presentation of abstinence. Students frequently used words like "dominant," "best," and "safest" to describe how their classroom-based sex education presented the idea and practice of abstinence. Michael, a white senior from Georgia, put it succinctly: "They were just like, 'Don't have sex.' They just kind of glossed over it." Others were certain that they knew it was abstinence-only sex education because it was abstinence, rather than any other form of sexual practice or contraceptive method, that was "the best birth control and form of disease control" (Lucas, sophomore). Another predominant description included the fact that forms of contraception like birth control and condoms were either absent or described almost exclusively

in terms of failure. Wendy, a white senior from Tennessee, added that "it was clear from the content that that was what it was because, for example, they didn't teach how to use condoms or birth control or anything else." Andrea, a Latina sophomore from Louisiana, knew her experience was abstinence-only because "they told us that abstinence was really the only way and that we should abstain. They were telling us that condoms just didn't work." Descriptions of abstinence as the "only way" or "best way" were common, as were the characterizations of different forms of contraception—if they were brought up at all—as still having the threat of potential pregnancy or disease transmission.

When characterizing this presentation style, most of the students had two similar veins of response: to acknowledge the truth of the "abstinence message," but also to describe the focus or insistence on abstinence before marriage as unrealistic. Like many of the quantitative studies of abstinence-only sex education have measured, the students in my sample exhibit the knowledge and recognition that abstinence from sexual activity <u>is</u> a distinct, viable, and appropriate choice for avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease. "The idea of abstinence being the only effective—like 100% effective—contraceptive is logically sound," shared Carlos, a Latino senior from Georgia. Many of the respondents noted that it is at least important for young people to learn and acknowledge the truth that abstinence is an effective guarantee against unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. As Adrian, a freshman from a small town in Georgia, described:

> I mean, I guess it is true that the only way to protect yourself from unwanted pregnancies and STDs, you know, 100%, is abstinence, so in that way, I guess that is an important knock on the head to some people. Like, hey, this is how you can really, you know, not have to worry about pregnancies or other things.

Nevertheless, even while admitting the truth of the "abstinence message" on its face, several of the students in my sample characterized their curriculum's concentration on abstinence as the

best or *only* way to be impractical or unrealistic. Amanda, a white sophomore from South Carolina, said that while she knew abstinence was not necessarily a bad idea, "it's not necessarily a practical idea, where it's actually going to happen, but it's not bad advice, in and of itself." Jacob, an African-American sophomore from Georgia, questioned its usefulness in the context of the high school experience: "I guess, because it was high school, it just seemed like abstinence was an unrealistic thing and it almost seemed like nobody else, because it was high school, nobody else was doing it [being abstinent]. So, it's not realistic, so why?" Many of the students I interviewed described their evaluation of the abstinence-only focus as unrealistic in comparison to what they saw around them: other students being sexually active. The theme of comparing the classroom experience to observations of the "real world" of peers, parents, and others would emerge strongly throughout all the interviews. Wendy called it "disappointing that they didn't really talk about having safe sex, they just talked about not having sex, which was a huge problem because many of the people [at my school] were having sex like that night, that day." None of the students I interviewed said that abstinence was *not* effective or did not deserve a role in sex education; however, most of the students described a social context in which abstinence as the "only way" was short-sighted at best, and possibly destructive at worst.

When asked to determine the ways in which abstinence-only sex education mattered or played a role in the course of their lives, well over half (n=8) characterized their experience as unimportant or even irrelevant. Sara, a white junior from Georgia, generalized from her experience and observation of her peers that "the sex education program really didn't influence anybody. It didn't affect anybody. Like, it was all kind of stuff that we already knew anyway." The reasons *why* they determined abstinence-only sex education to be unimportant or irrelevant, however, varied from student to student. Jacob said, "I guess I was never the type to really listen

to school stuff anyway." This echoes an important point that critics of sex education in general have made and which I will bring up in discussion—if students are already apathetic about things they are learning in the classroom, can we really expect them to treat sex education (of any form) any differently? Many other students cited other reasons for abstinence-only sex education's ultimate unimportance to them in the larger scheme of their lives and learning about sex and relationships, though. Nicole, a white junior from Ohio, said, "I think in the grand scheme of things, at the end it became irrelevant because the most important information I got from my mom, which helped me to make those decisions. And all those scary tactics they used weren't really relevant to what was going on, like, in our high school situation." A few respondents spoke like Whitney, a white senior from Georgia, who said, "It was very funny, the source of many inside jokes…It didn't really enter into any part of my life. It was pretty much just a joke, the whole class." For these students, it is unclear whether any classroom-based sex education would have felt effective or relevant; what is clear, though, is that their abstinence-only experience did not form a convincing basis on which to make later decisions.

While no student indicated that their time in abstinence-only sex education was the most meaningful or important experience for learning about sex and relationships, several (n=6) described an unambiguous sense that abstinence-only had *some* importance and that they retained some value from it. Insofar as it was a form of sex education, most of the students described learning at least some facts that they found to be informative and useful in their sexual health knowledge. Amanda explained that what was important to her were "actual facts—like how the penis works during sex specifically, I didn't know that. …That's pretty much it, actually. That's the only thing I learned that I didn't know before." Both the information and its presentation became important for Nicole, who evaluated her experience this way:

> The scare tactics. I feel like they didn't give too much false information as far as… I think a lot of um… Teenagers have a feeling of invincibility as in, "That would never happen to me." But anything, at least you know that, THAT is what we're telling you what could happen to you. These are the STDs, a lot of classes taught you um…how you could get them. And so… They don't leave you ignorant on how you're supposed to get it, if you were to get it. So I feel like they did their job in that avenue.

For Andrea, whose experience in abstinence-only sex education in Louisiana felt biased and lacking, the fact that she felt driven to "check the facts" about what she learned in the classroom was what became important for her: "So I think, if anything, it probably really encouraged me to—if I really wanted to know something I should just go look for it myself, and that's how I felt about the whole educational experience." This would seem to be an unanticipated benefit of the abstinence-only sex education curriculum, for those students who felt like they could not trust the content of what they were learning.

Almost every student had at least one particular image, lesson, or exercise from their abstinence-only sex education experience that really stuck with them—whether or not they considered it important for their overall growth or learning about sex. These stories were vivid and stayed with them because they evoked some kind of powerful emotion—usually horror or disgust, or just disappointment. A few of these are shared below:

> They showed a video of a woman giving birth. It was just gross. (Amanda, sophomore)

> I remember in my middle school—I don't know why we were told this story, to be honest. But looking back, I think they were trying to teach Chlamydia. This man, god, he was over 60, so it was very awkward. He told us this story about the man and wife who were about to get married. And the men were on a road trip, with a couple of his guy friends, over the weekend, like a bachelor trip. And I guess he must have had sex with a prostitute. I think that was what he was implying. Then he ended up giving his wife a disease. So when she had their baby several years later, the baby was handicapped because of the disease he'd given to his wife from his actions. Looking back, I think he was talking about Chlamydia. I just remember being so confused about that and I can remember this story till this day. I still don't understand why I was told that in

> 7th grade. But you can't handle that. It can happen. It's a terrible story. A scare tactic. (Nicole, junior)
>
> Most definitely. Like, they pulled out this tape and then, uhm, there's a long piece of tape, and I forgot how they got to it, but they were like, "Yeah, your virginity's like tape, and you know, if it's all worn out, nobody wants to use it and it's not that sticky anymore." (Tara, junior)
>
> The first day of it, we were allowed to ask anonymous questions on sheets of paper and he just picked them up. I actually asked, how do two men have sex, because I had no idea, and at one point, he picked up a question out of the hat and threw it away and went to the next one, and never got to that question, so I know he wasn't allowed to answer that. (Ryan, sophomore)

These and other experiences seemed to be characterized by a strong emotional response—but usually not a positive one. For most of the students who shared a story like this (n=12), their experience in abstinence-only sex education had a memorable aspect, but likely not by engaging with the material in a way envisioned by the creators of these curricula.

Sources of Sex and Relationship Information

When prompted by the question of abstinence-only sex education's relative importance in the grand scheme of learning about sex and relationships in their youth, most of my respondents indicated one or more different sources as being the most influential, described in Table 4.

Table 4. Respondents' sources of information about sex and relationships.

	Friends/Peers	Books	Internet	Other media	Parents	School	Signed virg pledge?
Adrian	Y		Y (but not looking)		No		
Whitney	Y (limited)		Y (but not looking)		No		Y
Amanda				Y	Y	Y (just some facts)	
Hannah	Y (limited)		Y (looking)		Y (limited)		
Gabriela	Y				No		Y
Carlos	Y			Y		Y	

Wendy					Y		
Tara	Y	Y	Y (looking)		No		
Michael	Y	Y	Y		No		
Andrea		Y	Y (looking)		Y		Y
Nicole	Y			Y	Y		Y
Lucas	Y				Y (limited)		
Sara					Y		
Jacob					Y (limited)	Y	Y
Ryan	Y			Y			Y

Guide: "Y" indicates respondent named source as among the most important and reliable sources of information about sex and relationships while growing up; "No," used for Parents, indicates that respondent was clear that there was no communication with parents on the topic of sex.

In responses that largely echo the findings of Sprecher, Harris, and Meyers (2008), most of my respondents named friends or peers as the greatest source of information about sex and relationships that was available to them as young people. Nicole indicated, "I was mostly talking to my friends who were in relationships." Michael, a white senior from Georgia, explained that his primary source of information about sex and relationships was "all my peers. Peer advice, peer pressure, just general conversation about what happens." He continued to describe some of the investigation about safer sex conducted among his friends, which was unavailable to them in their abstinence-only sex education classroom: "I didn't have any sources other than my friends about condoms. I remember we would go to, like, Kroger and buy condoms and be like 'Yo…what do you do with this? How does this work? How do you unwrap it?' We weren't playing with them, we were trying to figure it out in case the situation ever arose that we'd have to use one—we wanted to figure out how to use one." For Whitney, however, talking with her friends came with the recognition that they were just as young and inexperienced as she was:

> You know, your friends will giggle about it, but they don't know anything about it either, so anything you do learn is pretty limited and I don't think

> it's really a picture of what sex and relationships actually are, because the people you're hearing about it from don't know anything. They know as much as you do.

On the whole, though, the majority of my respondents named friends or peers as an important—and sometimes *the most* important—source of what they considered to be reliable information about sex and relationships.

For some of my respondents (n=7), friends or peers were considered to be a more consistent or reliable source of information than parents—if parents played a role at all. Five students indicated that their parents were of no help at all in the process of learning about sex and relationships. As Adrian described, "Like, my parents never talked to me about it, no one really talks to us." For Tara, an African-American junior from Georgia, there was a stark lack of dialogue about sex with her parents: "My parents were just, 'No.' It was 'no.'" A few students described a sense of either willful ignorance or apathy on the part of their parents when it came to discussing sex. Michael said, "My parents never talked to me about it. My mom kind of willfully assumed that I was a virgin, and my dad just didn't care." These sorts of experiences are an important consideration in discussions of sex education in public schools, because these students have shared stories in which parents—a key element for education about sex and relationships in the view of sexual conservatives—are noncommunicative or unavailable for discussion of these issues.

For the majority of the remaining students, however, parents either played a significant or partial role in the process of gaining information about sex and relationships. An interesting theme that emerged for some of these students (n=5) was of being "lucky" that they had a parent—usually the mother, though sometimes both parents—with whom they could talk about issues of sex and relationships and trust that they were hearing good information. This narrative

of luck seemed to emerge from an understanding from observations of peers that not everyone had parents or at least a mother with whom concerns about sex could be shared. Nicole said,

> I personally was very lucky, because my mom has always been really open about talking about things with me. And she has been pretty much the reliable source…in 9th and 10th grade, she would ask me, you know, 'Who are you going to the dance with?' We started talking about stuff. And I think she realized that I was really freaked out about sex or anything like that, because of all the ideas in my head from Health. You know, all these bad things. Of course she was not—did not want me having sex in high school. You know what I mean? She wasn't encouraging of that or anything. But she had me tell her the stuff I had, ideas I guess, constrained in my head, information... she freaked out a little bit… but my mom had never told me I better not have sex before I get married. She never said that. My mom is probably like the best source.

A few of these students reported that they did not have to wait to come to their parents with concerns, but rather were opened into dialogue from their parents' initiative. As Wendy explained, "Normally my parents would sort of…start conversations themselves with me, or with my brother and I. Um, it wasn't so much of I had a question and would come to them – they would open up these conversations and then I could ask questions." Amanda shared that she recognized that the relative openness of her parents was not a universal thing:

> I guess my parents talked about it. They never talked about specifically all, "This is what sex is, and this is how it goes down." More of like, general attitudes on sex. I guess they would… I mean I obviously got the sort of, you know, "this is your body at puberty" talk, and I guess like that was sort of—you could call it sex information. But a lot of it was like, "This is why we believe that sex before marriage is not the best option." And that sort of thing. But for other people, I don't know…

Thus, I found a diversity of reports among my respondents on the relative importance of the input of peers and parents—the two most-discussed of all the possible sources of information cited by these students. Not everyone shared the same level of dialogue or openness, and for some of the students who had good discussions with parents, having this resource was considered "lucky."

Second Inquiry: Exploration of Several Topics of Concern

Each interviewed student was asked a series of questions about several specific topics within the realm of sex education with a fairly open prompt—they were free to discuss their own personal understandings of the concepts, any role a concept may have played in their lives, how they learned about it, or anything else they wanted to share about the topic. The topics were selected by virtue of having been discussed in the Waxman Report and other critical articles as being possible arenas for ideological bias on the part of the abstinence-only sex education curricula. My goal with this section of the investigation was simply to explore whether these topics have had any bearing in the lives of these students who have experienced abstinence-only sex education, and if so, in what ways. Do these students' understandings of the topics reflect a particular ideological orientation? How have these individuals responded to, and made sense of, the lessons they faced in the abstinence-only context? I begin my exploration with the central topic of abstinence.

Topic 1: Abstinence

When asked about the concept of abstinence, every respondent provided some kind of definition for it at first. An interesting development was that while most of my respondents had the same general idea of what abstinence is, there were variations in precisely what it *meant*. Andrea stated, "Abstinence, abstaining from sex… I always see it as a way of being pure, or being clean for a while. Just because if you're not abstaining, the chances of something infecting you or happening would go up, just empirically." On the other hand, Gabriela, a Hispanic senior from Georgia, provided, "Well, I learned if you're abstinent you'll have sex with your husband and live happily ever after. And that's what I believed for a couple of years." Three students

referred very specifically to the role of penetrative intercourse, rather than "other" sexual activities, as an activity that necessarily negates the idea of abstinence. As Whitney explained,

> I mean, abstinence is not having sex, not engaging in sexual activities, and I guess if you define it like that you also get into the sticky question of what is sex. And personally I think people define sex and abstinence and virginity, each—like everyone defines it differently for themselves. So, I mean, I guess if you want to just have your cut-and-dried definition, abstinence is like, not having intercourse. But, I mean, I guess it involves like not having penetration—not having had penetration, you know…

Whitney's response echoed several others (n=6) who similarly believed or demonstrated that things like sex, virginity, and abstinence are (or should be) a matter of personal choice and definition. Sara stated directly, "It's something you can define for yourself." Amanda indicated that for her, "there are, like, levels. There's completely abstaining from sexual acts, and then there'd be like, abstaining from penetration intercourse. And um… I'd say I would define it both ways." Another holder of multiple definitions was Adrian, who compared his current beliefs about abstinence to what he was taught in his sex education classroom in the small town in Georgia where he grew up:

> I mean, at the present time, I can kind of see it as like, abstinence as being a policy that someone follows through, that you don't just randomly hook up with someone, you try to form an actual relationship before you engage in any kind of like, sexual activities. But back home it was the strictest definition of it: once you've had sex once, you can no longer be abstinent ever again.

This concept was frequent—the idea that abstinence is a way of not "hooking up randomly" with people, but sexual activity within the confines of a committed and meaningful relationship is completely acceptable. Nicole said, "I guess I wasn't totally interested in the thought of having sex because of all the terrible things that I thought were going to happen. That's why I was abstinent at the time. But now I guess the role it plays is that, like, I wouldn't just have sex with someone just randomly or anything like that. It would have to be in a relationship." My

questions revealed that this group of young people held several nuanced understandings of abstinence, which changed according to age, relationship status, and time—a somewhat different result than the A-H definition of "abstinence until marriage" may have been intended to produce.

A further dimension on the appraisal of abstinence as a concept and practice in this group was the feeling that it was part of an agenda "pushed" by their teachers or other adults—and that while abstinence was a perfectly legitimate choice, it was one that an individual needs to make for him- or herself without being manipulated into it. A strange emergent result, which would benefit greatly from further study, was that all six men I interviewed and only one of the women were very clear about a feeling that the instruction in their abstinence-only sex education felt like the idea was being "pushed"—all but one used that specific word. Carlos noted, "I mean, I have no issue with abstinence; if that's what somebody wants to do, then it's okay. But I think it's a choice that a person needs to make and can't be pushed on them by others." Michael felt very strongly about the way abstinence was taught in his sex education classroom:

> Michael: It was kind of, like, me never believing what they were telling me and being very analytical and critical. Like, the observance of the reality and what they wanted to stimulate, and kind of like, brainwash you, I guess.
> EG: That's a very distinct term there…is that the attitude you took to it?
> Michael: Yeah, I was very aware of it and just too aware of what they were trying to do…
> EG: What do you think they were trying to do?
> Michael: Just push their agenda out there. Don't have sex. Abstain. I don't know. Just suppress human things, I guess. Control, I guess.

Likewise, Jacob shared that to him, abstinence "was a concept that was there, but more adult-backed and pushed, and I guess the adults are either one-track-minded or slightly manipulative in the fact that they try to get you to do stuff." This perception of something like a power imbalance—in which the adults of the school or community are telling young people what to do with their choices and bodies—was, as shown above, mostly reported by the men in my sample.

While each of the young women had their own opinions about the idea of abstinence as it was taught in the sex education classroom, it was only Andrea who expressed her objections in a fairly assertive question:

> Andrea: Well, I understand that abstinence is the most surefire way to avoid pregnancy and transmission, but is it really the school's place to be telling children or adolescents what they should or should not be doing? In my state, Louisiana, the age of consent is 17, so legally if you wanted to, you could have sex at 17. In my high school, there were some people who were juniors or sophomores, who were 17.
> EG: So you're asking if it's appropriate?
> Andrea: I'm saying, is it appropriate to be saying it's something that shouldn't be done until marriage.

Several of the young people in my sample showed a similar skepticism and questioning of the school's "place" or responsibility to instruct students in the best choice, rather than acknowledging a wide range of options. This theme also came up later, when the students described their "ideal" sex education.

Topic 2. Virginity Pledges and the Idea of Virginity/Non-virginity

Virginity pledges have often been a focus of the criticism surrounding abstinence-only sex education. A common feature of abstinence-only programs, students are usually asked or encouraged to sign some sort of pledge that asserts their intention to remain abstinent until marriage. Given Brückner and Bearman's (2005) findings on the failure of virginity pledges to exert a protective effect against sexually transmitted diseases, I wanted to explore the role and meaning of virginity pledges for those students in my sample who had taken them, and the reasons for not signing them among those who had the option but did not take the pledge.

Among the students I interviewed, six admitted to specifically signing a virginity pledge, and two of those were part of religious activities rather than associated with school. Of the remaining 9 students, six said that virginity pledges were never a part of their sex education

experience, and three were given the option but said that they chose specifically not to sign them. Jacob's experience was similar to some of the others who said they signed virginity pledges in the course of their abstinence-only sex education experience: "I think there was a point when they gave us a card, possibly. I think I signed it, but I think everybody did. It was one of those mandatory things, they weren't like, 'You *have* to do this,' but it's something that everyone was doing not to seem promiscuous." Rather than making a careful, conscious decision to pledge virginity until marriage, these students signed the card simply because it was what was expected, and everyone else was doing it. Further research on this approach may reveal more about the actual effectiveness of virginity pledges and better ways of engaging with students' intentions for the future. For Whitney, though, asserting an intention for the future with regard to sex was a very "strange" experience. She said, "It was really strange! It made me think about things that I hadn't really thought about, because this was like in 8th grade, so we're all like 13 and 14. And I don't know, it was—it was very strange." Others, like Nicole and Gabriela, felt that they were very much in line with the goals of the virginity pledge at the time they signed it. Gabriela said, "I always thought I would just be a virgin until I got married. I didn't have any problems signing it. I was like okay, I'm already planning on doing this anyway, why not?"

For those students who opted specifically not to sign a virginity pledge, however, the reaction was very strong. Tara's response to be asked if she signed a virginity pledge was, "Hell no." Lucas expressed his choice somewhat eloquently:

> It was stupid. If I'm gonna be a virgin, I'm gonna be a virgin. It's not going to be because of a piece of paper my teacher hands me to keep me that way. It's either a lack of opportunity or a lack of interest or some sort of fear. If you're going to be a virgin, a piece of paper isn't going to play into it at all. You already made that choice.

Lucas describes a central dilemma faced by many of the students asked to make commitments in the course of classroom instruction: just how effective is that "piece of paper" supposed to be, without a serious personal investment from the student? Michael compared what he was being asked to do with the social environment of his friends: "I just wasn't interested. Just because, I mean, I might've even been a virgin at the time, but I wasn't bought into the system, that being a virgin was good or bad. Or like waiting…I don't know. I think it was just my friends—if you guys do it, and you're not bad people, and I accept it, then it's part of life, that's what it is." For these students, virginity pledges were of questionable legitimacy in a world where they felt like virginity was not a big deal, or something an individual makes a decision about without the input of "pushing" adults.

The concept of virginity/non-virginity elicited a number of interesting responses. Every student had something to say about it—especially with either how it was presented in the abstinence-only sex education curriculum they experienced, or the treatment of virginity in their social context. Virginity, though it is something everyone appears to have something to say about, was by no means universally similarly defined or presented. For some people, virginity was very important in high school, and it was a "big deal" for someone in their social world not be a virgin. For others, though, sexual activity was normal and very little value was realistically attached to the idea of virginity. Like the idea of abstinence, virginity could be differentially defined or valued depending on circumstance and time. As Tara demonstrates,

> Okay. Yeah, so, I mean, it was good to be a virgin. And if you weren't a virgin, I guess people would know you weren't a virgin in high school, you were like, "You're a slut" or "You're loose." But, I guess it all kinda depended on how you took it and how people knew of your virginity. So, if they knew like, I had a boyfriend for a long time, for like two years, and then, I felt like probably a year later everyone found out that I wasn't a virgin anymore so then they were like, "Oh well, it's probably her boyfriend. Well, let's keep it moving." But like, if you were a freshman and you weren't a virgin,

"Oh god. You're horrible. You're a slut. You're just all types of naughty and bad." The social value of virginity and non-virginity are, by Tara's description and the stories of others, largely dependent on the context of the loss of virginity and its relative value in regard to your age and position in the school. Hannah, a white freshman from Connecticut, recounted that "by the time we had sex education, I'd been having sex for, um, a while…. So essentially the stuff they told us in sex ed, for me, was completely not applicable. Abstinence-only? Okay, well, that already went out the door. And it kinda just was like a slap in the face, a little bit—it was just a reminder, like, 'Oh, cool, you're the freak in the class that's not a virgin!' By senior year though, when people were starting to get more involved, it was not a big deal." For most of the students, though, there was a strong recognition that the abstinence-only sex education programs placed a high value on virginity—Michael described virginity being presented as "good and preferable," and Whitney characterized it as "very safe." Lucas placed this emphasis in context: "I mean, it gave you the idea that virginity was something to be desired and aspired for. But again, that didn't play into the real virginity image as much as the reactions and relationships of your peers did."

Two of the students I interviewed were virgins, but had remained abstinent for very different reasons. I include their stories as comparisons to each other and the attitudes of the rest of the sample, all of whom had ended up having sex either in high school or college. Both were white senior girls, but their experiences were substantially different. Whitney described her experience in the class and the way that abstinence and virginity have somewhat "happened" to her:

> I mean, of course, they taught us that abstinence is the only way to be safe, and I have been abstinent, but I don't think that's really because of what I learned in class. I think it has more to do with who I am, and who other people are, and how I dislike other people… For me and my friends, virginity—

> it was really important not to be a slut, but other than that, we didn't really talk about it much…. I don't know how I feel about it now, really. I guess abstinence is not really on my "to-do list," but it's just something that's happened.

For Whitney, then, while virginity was not a particularly fraught concept at school or among her friends, it is something that has developed out of a lack of interest or opportunity. Wendy's experience, however, has been quite different. Wendy is a devout Christian from a small town in Tennessee, whose concept of abstinence and virginity is inseparable from her Christian beliefs and commitments. She explains:

> The reasons I hold onto my virginity aren't like, they don't have to do with the white dress, it doesn't have to do with being a woman or being like, "Because I'm a female and more emotional and my heart will break." I thought that the whole image of virginity presented at school was kinda, like, stupid. Like, it was just very based-on-nothing… I believe what I do because of, you know, a religious affiliation with a doctrine that I've chosen to adhere to. If I were not a Christian and didn't believe that God exists in the claims of Jesus Christ, then I would not practice abstinence, I don't think. It's definitely religious to me.

I believe that the juxtaposition of these viewpoints reveals something important about the way we must recognize that virginity is conceived of and approached among young people—it is not all the same. For students who do not choose to take an active stance about virginity and abstinence—to whom virginity might just "happen" if they do not happen to find a suitable partner, in Whitney's case—the signing of a virginity pledge meant nothing. Wendy, incidentally, never signed a virginity pledge.

Topic 3. Gender Roles/Sex Differences

One of the areas of greatest criticism directed at the curricula of abstinence-only sex education programs is the idea that they teach and reinforce gender stereotypes by presenting them as fact. It seems inevitable that curricula about sexuality must also address concerns of sex

and gender, so this area was one I was particularly interested in exploring. With my interviews, I hoped to investigate these areas to see what the students in my sample had to say about the gendered content of abstinence-only sex education curricula. By leaving the question as open as possible, I hoped to hear from the students whether they even felt that they encountered "gender lessons" in the course of their abstinence-only sex education, if they mattered at all, and what they may have absorbed from their experiences.

On the whole, the respondents asserted that there were few explicit "gender lessons" available to them through their abstinence-only sex education experiences, but that there were definitely some implications and anecdotal reinforcement of existing societal trends. Michael reported that "they didn't really teach us, in class, gender roles. I mean, it was implied that the woman gets married, and goes into the house. I mean, that was Savannah, the southern lifestyle, I guess." Similarly, Nicole stated that "they never taught us anything about being a man or being a woman." Amanda only remembered anecdotal "comments about, you know, guys pushing for sex. That it was more common for guys to be pushing for sex than girls. And I think I believed that then." The language of active male sexuality "pushing" women into sexual behavior was found among several of the other women in the sample. Whitney offered a thoughtful comment about this idea:

> You know, I feel like the fact that in sex education classes, teachers tend to highlight male sexual desire and tend to, you know, like put female sexual desire on the back burner, kind of suggests that males are sexual predators, which I think is quite problematic when you're also trying to stress heterosexual, heteronormative relationships. And I've always felt that, like, the genders were sort of presented in society and also in classes like that as, um, a bipolar dichotomy and also as foes? There's a better word for that, but you feel like they're always at odds with each other, and like, the man is always trying to get sex and the woman should always be reining in his desire and keeping him from having sex until marriage.

Several others (n=5) echoed this sort of feeling, in which the sexuality of men is presented and perceived as potentially dangerous or victimizing for women, and that the threats to women from sex are greater. Gabriela shared a sense that she felt she was taught "it was always the boys who were wanting to have sex, wanting to do it, and the girls were in control of whether it was going to happen or not." Some of the students commented on a sense that sex was consistently presented as something that could ruin a girl's life, not just with the specter of an unwanted pregnancy and young motherhood, but also by a different emotional reaction. Wendy had an especially strong emotional reaction to this, in response to one of the few reported instances of directly gendered commentary that I encountered:

> Definitely the biggest metaphor was this image that sex means so much to girls and it's so emotional and it means nothing to guys; they just want to have sex all the time. And this idea that the only reason that any boy is nice to you in high school is because he wants to have sex with you and this… Someone even used, I don't remember if it was a teacher or a student, but they said, like, "When a girl has sex, she gives away her entire heart. When a boy has sex, he just gives away one piece of his heart." And I just wanted to gag. It was just awful. I totally rejected it, I totally thought it was offensive, ridiculous, not founded in anything… There's absolutely no—there was no evidence. It was just like, no health professional or like psychologist or behavioral scientist will tell you that sex does something different to a woman than it does to a man, which is absolutely stupid.

On the other hand, Lucas reported feeling like his abstinence-only sex education "promoted a positive gender role for a man, if only because they said if you get a girl pregnant, you have to drop out of school and take care of the child. They never said, 'Leave the bitch.' I'm thankful that they always gave the best option possible, which was to be a man, drop out and take responsibility." Thus, the students I spoke with brought up a wide variety of responses to the concept of instruction in gender or sex roles, which probably also depended greatly on the particular program, school, and instructor. What is clear is that even in cases where direct

lessons in gender appeared to be absent, greater social narratives—as seen above, about active, potentially dangerous male sexuality, responsibility, and gender roles—definitely found a place.

One particular dimension that came up in a distinct way from four of the respondents was the role and effect of separating the genders for sex education classes. Although this was not an experience shared by all the students, the four who discussed it had a generally similar response: they did not like the separation, did not find it valuable, and questioned its usefulness. Carlos reported confusion as to the reason behind it, and "always wondered if the girls were taught the same thing. Nowadays, I'll talk anything with anybody but back then, it was like, this was something kind of taboo, that men and women had like their own things, which is why they were separated. Their own domains, their own rules." In content similar to the gendered division in active sexuality described above, Gabriela said, "When we separated into females and males, we were the ones being told, you say no, if a guy approaches you, be abstinent, you don't know if they have STDs or whatever. From my knowledge the boys weren't being told say no to women." This sense of confusion about what the other gender was being taught—and wondering why they had to be separate to learn it—was something that both the men and women who experienced this reported on. Adrian commented that he thought the separation and any real change in perspective based on gender was "unnecessary":

> In terms of the class, I would definitely say that one of the most unnecessary parts of it was breaking us up into the two groups of genders, because in essence the only thing that changed about the information was that, talking to the people that actually took it from the girls' point of view, it was, "These are the things that can happen to you and these are the consequences of what you could have to endure," whereas for guys, it was kind of seen as like, "You could ruin the girl's life, you could really hurt someone."

While the differences in consequences are factual and rooted in biological reality, it was clear from the objections of the four students who reported separation of the genders that they felt the

separation was unnecessary and created more doubt and confusion than it was worth. In short, they seemed to ask: are the genders really so different that they have to be separated and hear different things to learn about human sexuality? It is valuable to hear the feedback of students themselves on the (possibly unintended?) consequences of this teaching practice.

Topic 4. Non-heterosexual Sexualities

In response to many critics of abstinence-only sex education programs, who allege that these curricula "disappear" or bring negative stigma to the practice of homosexuality, I wanted to explore whether the students I was interviewing had encountered any curriculum content about homosexuality and what it presented to them. The students' reactions, on this subject, were all extremely similar. All fifteen students in my sample reported that their school-based sex education featured absolutely no content with regard to homosexuality or any sexuality other than one man and one woman in a relationship or marriage. Some of the respondents had no reactions about this to offer, or shared other stories of learning about homosexuality while growing up, but quite a few had very strong opinions on the subject. Ryan, a white sophomore from Georgia who considers himself to be bisexual or queer, was clear that "it wasn't mentioned at all. It impounded the idea that it wasn't right, because it wasn't included. Which says a lot, to me." Tara said, "There was none at all. As far as the classroom goes, there was no talk. I don't care if you're kissing a boy or girl, you're not having sex. That was the whole point: you're not gonna have sex." Wendy, as a committed member of a church that she characterized as "liberal," expressed a strong reaction to the absence of any mention of homosexuality in her abstinence-only sex education experience:

> I mean, not at all. Yeah, it got to a point where they – you know, if it's so conservative they can't even talk about using condoms, they're surely not

> going to talk about a continuum of sexuality. I mean, our school was so conservative, I had gay friends who were out and felt comfortable, weren't mistreated or anything, so I remember thinking, "Hm… you know, how hurtful would it be if I was sitting in a room and having someone teaching Sex Ed in the opposite orientation and, like, you being made to feel that you don't matter? You're not a person, just this… you know." I was very offended by that.

Other straight students in my sample reported feeling empathy for any LGBTQ students who may have been sharing their classrooms and hearing messages about sexuality that treated them like they did not exist. One girl in my sample, Andrea, is a lesbian, and while she did not talk about any particularly strong feelings about the lack of discussion of homosexuality in her abstinence-only sex education experience, she described a shared feeling of resentment with other LGBTQ students on the issue of the marriage focus: "I don't know if there is a lot of resentment from the LGBT side, but there's some, like, 'Okay, you're placing so much importance on marriage but you won't let me marry, so fuck it all, whatever!' It's outdated." The voices of LGBTQ students weighing in on the "until-marriage" focus of these sex education programs represent a unique perspective that once again places these curricula—and these students—in the crosshairs of the culture wars in the United States. State- and national-level policies about gay marriage, which have come into the national debate in recent months and years, are seen playing out in the reactions of students both gay and straight.

5. Marriage

The topic of marriage, as it related to the students' experiences in abstinence-only sex education programs, turned out to be one of the most fruitful and most fraught subjects for students' responses. For the majority of these students, they felt strongly about, or felt themselves to be influenced by, the instruction or implication that they were supposed to be

abstinent *until marriage*. As several of them noted, this necessarily sets up marriage as a goal or an expectation for young people to eventually fulfill. For some of my respondents, there was a perceived sense of conflict between the curricula's messages about virginity and the "specialness" of sex—which should be preserved for marriage—and the lack of what might be considered actual "marriage education." Jacob said,

> Abstinence was definitely paired with marriage. It was abstinence till marriage. I guess it was one of the main reasons for my cynicism about the subject… Oh, so, when you're married you can do it all the time—so it's obviously not the most special thing *after* you're married. Couples, I'm pretty sure, do that all the time. So it was like they were making this really special, but it's not that special, because if it was, every time they do it, it would be a ritual or a special thing. Abstinence was always paired with marriage, and marriage back then seemed like such a far-off thing and sex seemed so much closer that it just seemed unrealistic. From the class, it wasn't that the sex education was about marriage was great, life is great when you're married, it was just, you shouldn't have sex until you're married. They never really covered marriage as a topic.

In Wendy's experience, "They used words such as, 'You should be so proud when you get married that you're still a virgin.' And the whole white dress symbolism was brought up a lot. But beyond the concept of marriage and virginity and not having sex until you're married… They didn't really talk about marriage, itself." In the opinion of most of the students who brought up this divide, the focus on marriage as the proper context for sexual activity ought to have been paired with more education about marriage, rather than leaving it simply as a goal to be achieved, where abstinence can end.

Several of the students expressed ambivalence about the idea of getting married at all. Some of them had negative observations about marriage to share, based on their own parents or the parents of friends, but some simply admitted that marriage as a goal did not interest them or that there was a possibility it simply would not happen. These notions were largely bound up with ideas about abstinence, as Amanda demonstrates. Her ultimate decision to become sexually active, she said, depended on "the thought that I might never get married. I'm like, no, that's

dumb. Not just gonna never have sex just because I'm not married." For Ryan, who is bisexual or queer, marriage is not an option anyway: "I got angry about it—if I was with a guy, I wouldn't be able to marry him and that wasn't fair, so I just threw marriage out the window because it's just something I'm not going to do." Gabriela shared the process by which she eventually changed her mind:

> I always thought, I want to save it for someone special. Hopefully that's the day I get married. I got to be 17. . 16, 17, 18, I started thinking, it's not really about marriage. It's about who I trust and who I sincerely feel good with and that's when my views changed. But up until 17 years old I was still pretty much like, "until marriage, until marriage." But then I saw things around me, my mother and father fighting. And then I was like, well, a husband…having one man in my life, it's ridiculous to think that there's one perfect man and we're going to live happily ever after. It's going to be with someone special, but not my first husband.

Gabriela was not the only one to share a disillusionment with the "happily ever after" version of marriage that she felt was presented in popular media and the abstinence-only curriculum she encountered at school. Whitney, whose parents divorced when she was very young, said, "My understanding of marriage is very, very flawed. Marriage is a cracked mirror, like there is nothing really good about marriage, as I have seen in my life." Nicole framed it with her considerations for the future: "I guess I don't wanna get married until I'm probably 26 or 27. The thing I'm scared the most about is how many people get divorced. Even my parents, they are not divorced, but they have come close to it so many times that, even with people's parents who are still together, it can be very rocky. So I don't know. I guess ideally I want to get married, but it kind of freaks me out to think about that." Lucas shared a similar disenchantment and saw the presentation in abstinence-only sex education curricula to be extremely limited:

> I mean, everyone wants that fairy tale, that relationship where they're swept up off their feet and everything's perfect and wonderful…at the time, it seemed highly desirable, but it kind of sucked that you had to wait for that to have sex. As of now, it's exactly that: a fairy tale. Nothing worth having isn't worth work-

> ing and fighting for, and nothing comes easy. Within the world of abstinence-only sex education, that is what you do: you get married. Period. Whereas in the real world, as we're all aware, there are a multitude of other options.

Here, Lucas and others struggle with what many of the critics of abstinence-only have offered: the lack of pluralism and inclusiveness of options outside the end goal of a heterosexual marriage. In so many ways, the curricula appeared to lack what the students generally observed, which is reflected in the current trends of marriage, divorce, and cohabitation. The Pew Research Center (2010) published the results of a national survey revealing that marriage is on the decline for all groups; 52% of surveyed adults were married, as compared to 72% in 1960. Nearly 40% of survey respondents believed marriage is obsolete, and cohabitation has nearly doubled since 1990 (Pew Research Center 2010). For many of the students I spoke with, the curriculum they encountered did not reflect the social realities they saw every day in terms of people getting divorced, having relationships without being married, living alone, and otherwise defying the "ideal."

Third Inquiry: Evaluating Abstinence-Only Sex Education, and Creating the Ideal Sex Education

In the third segment of my exploration, I sought to have the students offer their own assessments of their abstinence-only sex education experience—what was good and valuable, what was wrong, what was missing altogether—and combine that with an articulation of what they feel would be the features of the sex education they wish they had had when they were younger. In doing so, I felt I could get to the most crucial aspects of how students felt about abstinence-only sex education. Without tying it to any specific hypothesis, I was able to leave this section entirely open to the range of possibilities—students could potentially name many

aspects of abstinence-only sex education as valuable and worthy of keeping, or wish to include things that I could never anticipate myself.

Despite a number of criticisms that each of my respondents had to offer on the subject of abstinence-only sex education, each of them considered several aspects of abstinence-only to be positive, useful, or valuable. These range from features that are part of any sex education program—instruction on the anatomy and physiology of the human body, for example—to a positive appraisal of the abstinence-only approach to making positive and healthy choices about sex. For Carlos, his experience in abstinence-only sex education taught him more than he knew before about "the anatomical parts, description of methods, with, like, the discussion of sexually transmitted infections." Gabriela admitted that it was important that "they would teach you kind of, what's going on with your body, like what's changing… like that's when I learned about my period and everything. Ever since then I've always kept those little calendar things in my wallet." About half (n=8) of the respondents named the STD education available to them through abstinence-only as a really valuable aspect. These students believed that the presentation of sexually transmitted diseases and their consequences is very important because these diseases are real, and people who are sexually active should be aware of them and act to protect themselves. Several students even indicated an appreciation of the "scare tactic" method (which others objected to and considered to be a negative feature of the programs they experienced) as highly effective. Wendy said,

> I also think, so they showed a lot of those awful graphic pictures of infected genitalia and stuff, and as awful as they are to look at… I think that's really good. I think that young people are naive and stupid and I know a lot of young people who were making very uneducated, very uninformed choices about sex. It was very unsafe. And I think those images… I think it's like, a good wake up call to shove that into a person's face and say, "Look. If you're having sex with someone and you haven't had a conversation about who their past sex partners were, or you haven't gone to the doctor or the public health office and get tested,

this is what you're risking." Because it's bad.

Jacob considered the STD education to be the only worthwhile part of his experience in abstinence-only sex education: "It did teach me about a lot of diseases, so I was aware of that. I just didn't really care about anything else. But the disease part was pertinent, so that mattered." For most of the students I interviewed, it really was valuable that these curricula would address what are very real—and sometimes very negative—consequences to sexual activity. As Adrian put it, "I mean, as a whole, the idea, like the idea that you want to teach students about the negative consequences is important. It's still an important lesson for young people to know."

Some of the students (n=5) made reference to positive features not having to do with the factual education about the human body or realistic education about STDs. Like with the discussion of the comparative value of abstinence, these students felt that it is genuinely important and useful for a curriculum to present abstinence as a worthwhile choice. For these students, abstinence as an idea and practice is *not bad*, and it is good for it to be treated in a positive light by these curricula. Tara shared, "I think I probably made abstinence to kind of be the bad guy, just because of my high school experience—because it was like they would say, 'Be abstinent,' but nobody was abstinent… But you know, it does work for some people. So it's not to say that it doesn't work at all for anyone. So, you really focus on that, but I would never say, 'Abstinence is just stupid, don't ever teach that,' because it definitely serves a purpose." For Amanda, abstinence until marriage "isn't a bad idea. It just depends on why you want to get married." Others discussed the benefit for teaching young people to make healthy choices about sex. Andrea said, "From abstinence, the only message I can take, and I'm really streamlining, is just don't have sex with someone that you don't love….I guess it's just about knowing what you want, and plan accordingly, and don't get hurt." Tara further linked this notion to the concept of

self-development—that it is valuable for young people to have goals and think about things other than sex:

> Um… Inspiring people to set goals higher than sex. One thing I do agree with as far as being abstinent, is um…the kind of a guarantee that you won't be deterred from whatever path you were going on. But that is assuming you have goals, 'cause a lot of students don't have goals. Yeah, I feel like that's probably the best part of being the abstinence program, they just kind of encourage you to do other things… We leave here and it's kinda like… Remember what you're doing. And why you're here. I feel like that's the best message any student should have to hear… To be focused and determined in what you're doing, and not allow things to deter that.

This sentiment, expressed by a young African-American woman who went through abstinence-only sex education, is largely reminiscent of some of the findings for programs utilizing youth development strategies to prevent teenage pregnancy. Students who feel like they have goals and purpose, who are connected to their communities and perform service, are less likely to become pregnant and teen parents (Kirby, 2007).

At the same time, the students I interviewed had much more to say about the negative features of these programs than the positive aspects. This could, again, be very much due to self-selection bias—I was interviewing volunteers who had to feel strongly enough about the subject to want to speak with me. These reactions and responses are, by nature, unrepresentative of the total concerns of all students in the United States who have experienced this form of public sexuality education. Nevertheless, their criticisms and objections emerge from their real experiences.

One of the principal objections voiced by a majority of the students I interviewed (n=12) was the presentation style focused exclusively on negative consequences—frequently mentioned as "stigma"—along with the apparent implication that these consequences were inevitable. This ranged from disliking a consistently negative presentation of sex and sexually active people, to

objecting to the way that the specific negative consequences of sexual activity were presented as inescapable. These objections were often based, once again, on observations of the world outside the sex education classroom, as well as information gained later from different sources about sexually transmitted disease, contraception, and safer sex practices. Michael described the disconnect he sensed between the presentation of sexually active young people as inherently "bad" in his abstinence-only sex education class and the realities of the social world around him: "All my friends were sexually active. And I didn't think they were bad people, like the way the school said that people who had sex were bad people. So I was already predisposed I guess." Adrian complained that "in essence, it just kind of conditioned people to believe [sex] was this kind of bad thing that had repercussions, something that you aren't supposed to discuss and some kind of like, bad part of human nature. And, I don't know, it kind of goes back to that idea that because they don't talk about it and only talked about, like, the negative stigmas associated with it, it made it feel like the emotions themselves were just as damaging as the consequences that could happen." Every student discussed the role played by these "negative consequences" at some point, and while none felt that they should be left out from the curriculum, most felt negatively about the exclusive focus on, as Sara put it, "everything that could possibly go wrong." Nicole shared that she felt misinformed about the inevitability of condom failure:

> I mean, yeah, what they said about getting pregnant…they didn't give us any alternatives. They basically made it sound like if you had sex, you will get pregnant. I can't even tell you how I had this misconstrued idea about, condoms just don't work. We all had this idea, like, even if you had sex with a condom, you *will* get pregnant. Of course, that *can* happen, but to me there was just no chance it was going to work.

Lucas echoed with what he had learned after spending "six years being told, 'This will happen, this will, you know, if you have sex with someone with herpes, you *will* catch herpes and it will be horrible for the rest of your life,' but they never point out that cold sores are HSV 1…yeah.

It's the same thing, they don't give you the whole picture and exaggerate to make everything frightening." To these students, the exclusive presentation of negative consequences of sexuality, and a negative appearance of sexuality in general, did not match their other experiences and was distasteful.

Different groups within the group of students I interviewed named several other objectionable aspects in their abstinence-only sex education experiences. Close to the "negative consequences seemed inevitable" theme was that some students felt they encountered bias or outright lies in their course content. An additional theme that is conceptually close to this was the feeling that some of the content appeared to be teaching religion or morality—which, for the students who highlighted this problem, was problematic both on its face (teaching religion or morality in school is itself wrong) and in terms of the failure to address all students (teaching religion or morality did not answer everyone's needs). Andrea, for example, fact-checked the information she was given in her abstinence-only sex education class because "I had a lot of conflicting things with what my mom was saying and what certain pamphlets say and what these people were telling me. And I kind of knew that there was a bias on their part and I just really needed to check. I thought the information was completely biased, wherever they found it—if they found it, I don't know if they were straight up lying—about condoms not working." Several other students (n=6) voiced similar concerns about bias and what seemed to be deliberate misinformation. Whitney shared that her abstinence-only sex education class never discussed the existence of the clitoris on the female body:

> One thing I do remember is, um, how diagrams of penises, they will discuss how this is the part of the penis that makes things feel good. But when they get to the diagram of the vagina, you don't talk about what makes the vagina feel good. You're just like, "Oh, you stick it in there, and it just sort of happens." And I'm like, you have no idea what a clitoris is, and you know, they just are happy to keep you in the dark about that. Because, of course, I guess if girls

> thought that, you know, there was something good about sex, they might want to have it! And that would not do so well with the abstinence thing.

The objections to distorted or omitted information were often accompanied by displeasure with what felt like unnecessarily religious or moral education. Ryan said, "It was one of the few times I felt like morals were being pushed. I had to fit within the morals of the curriculum and it just felt very odd to me that I had to go with certain morals." A number of students in this group (n=6) named what seemed to be explicit or implicit Christian religious ideals being transmitted to them, in a way that made them uncomfortable. Wendy said, "They talked about this idea of marriage and your wedding day… And how this is, like, sacred and highly romantic and special…… I mean, yeah, they can't explicitly say, they can't teach religion in public school. But this is the 'Bible belt' so the way they're teaching it is Christian." Lucas also felt that his abstinence-only sex education class was promoting the ideal of Christian marriage, and described why he felt that this focus was out of place in his large, diverse high school:

> Like, they're taking their views of how their religion takes on sex and they're putting it on a multicultural and international population that really at this point in their lives just need truth and honesty, because they're not going to listen, so the best thing you can do is arm them with the most accurate information possible to make educated choices. Instead, you're arming them with flawed information they're going to disregard and then act in highly hazardous ways.

In this way, the religious and moral lessons were sometimes seen as not just limiting, but also potentially dangerous for students who may have needed fuller information. Other themes that emerged in the critical examination of what the students thought was negative about their abstinence-only sex education experiences largely covered functional concerns: the use of "scare tactics," the lack of information about contraception, and a focus on the ways contraception is "ineffective" (often coupled with suspicion that this information was distorted or biased). Three students described a sense that the length of their sex education was insufficient—two days or a

week were considered not enough to cover what needed to be covered. As Wendy put it, "That one week in eighth grade was probably the only chance a lot of students had to talk about sex and stuff like that, and it's kind of a shame that it was just one week and even then it was kind of…shoddy."

One particularly poignant and unique concern was raised by Gabriela, a Latina senior whose parents were immigrants to the United States from two different Central American countries. One of her objections, which was not shared by the other students in my sample but is an expression of the experiences of many bicultural students and especially Latino students, was that her abstinence-only sex education experience was culturally insensitive. I include her full argument here as to why she felt this way, because I feel that her story is best read in its entirety, as she shared it (with only minor edits for clarity):

> Out of the twenty something closest female friends I had in middle school and high school, only, like, three of us graduated and two of us are in college. All the rest either dropped out just because they didn't want to finish school or because, like, their legal status in the US kind of made them disappointed—like, if you can't get an education, why continue? So they just dropped out, and started working and making money. Because that's all they figured they could do in the US. It was really hurtful. So they either dropped out to just work, or if they got a high school degree, that's as far as they went. The majority of them left school because they got pregnant in high school. Senior year of high school, I lost five friends in one semester because they were pregnant. It was so prevalent in my high school, for the Latinas in my high school—it was very prevalent, all of them. Even for my sister and my cousins in California, it's pretty prevalent for women of my culture and I know it's for the same reason why I didn't know about sex. Because of our parents, who are, like, recent immigrants. We are either first generation, born here, or not born here and we were brought here too. The big role of Catholicism in Latin America or even evangelical Christianity, that's pretty big too. I feel that the role of the religion in our cultures has made it really so that young women, especially in the US, like when you have a clash of different cultures in the US, you see MTV, you see explicit sexual content, lyrics, and music and you are more aware of sex around you. But our parents and our home and our culture are telling us an opposing view, versus the US where it's more liberal, it's fine. I don't know—I felt that way at least, that it was definitely a clash of cultures, and I know that a lot of my friends got pregnant because they didn't know they should use protection or how to not get pregnant. Because there was no education in my culture. Like, our parents don't talk about those things. Because most of us are Catholic, they just say, "Don't have sex until you get married." They would drop out because they got pregnant and they would just move in with the guys or if the guys didn't want to help, or just different dilemmas. I felt like the reason why the girls were getting pregnant too, it wasn't the girls' fault—it was the guys' too. A lot of the Hispanic guys didn't know about protection, their parents were from other countries, so circumcision and a lot of things were different than what American boys knew or were taught. Even though I was born here, in my home it was always like walking into a completely different world than when I'm outside and in school. It's always been different than what I see. So I think that I'm kind of an outlier because my first time wasn't—my boyfriend had had sex before and he wasn't Hispanic. So I think that . . . he would talk to his mom about when he had girlfriends he was having sex with. He introduced me to her at his house and sometimes I would be there in his room. She kind of knew that we were doing something, so I felt that there was a difference in culture, seeing him with his parents versus when I'm at my Latina friends' homes and how they are with their parents. My boyfriend was more open with his mother about

relationships and sex, and I never got pregnant, but we never used protection. We were involved in sex for like a couple of months, like three months, before he left. We were having sex and he never came inside, and I feel that even that is kind of a form of birth control. I know there are controversial studies that women can still get pregnant that way. But I feel that just any form of knowledge of how not to get pregnant, for the men not to get the women pregnant, should have been given to the students. I feel that, honestly, the sex education that I received at my middle school was not culture-sensitive. There wasn't a cultural awareness of the difference of beliefs between American families and Latino families. I feel that they didn't really discuss myths or you know, something that is of great value to certain cultures, that I think would have helped not only my friends but their boyfriends too. I'm pretty sure their boyfriends didn't know how not to get them pregnant or what to do.

This case stood out to me, not only for the unique concerns Gabriela raised, but for her attention to the competing interests encountered by young people of all cultures in the media-saturated, polyvocal United States. The failure of her abstinence-only sex education class to address this, and her navigation of these issues, leads me to identify this as a particularly strong expression of a young person's criticism of the abstinence-only sex education model.

Creating the Ideal Sex Education

At the end of our conversations, I asked each student to tell me what they believed would be the features of their "ideal" sex education—the sex education they wish they could have had when they were younger. The retrospective perspective, I feel, came strongly into play here as my respondents were able to take into consideration all that they had seen and done in the time between their sex education experiences and the present, and give an answer based on this self-reflection. The responses that emerged followed several distinct themes, which I break down in list form.

Features that were mentioned by all or almost all students in my sample:

- A positive/neutral orientation to sexuality that assumes young people have sex
- Inclusiveness/comprehensiveness: expressed as "all options," "the full picture"
- Full and specific information about contraception and safer sex options
- Realistic scenarios of consequences (not exclusively negative or exaggerated)
- How and where to access contraceptives and sexual health services like STD testing

Features that were mentioned by a few students, but are nevertheless important and interesting considerations:

- Discussion of the emotional side/impacts of sex, and its role in romantic relationships; greater discussion of relationships in general
- Debunking popular sexuality "myths"
- Age-appropriateness
- Length: unspecified but desired to be longer than a few days/week/two weeks
- Not separating boys and girls for sex education instruction
- Further instruction on the interaction/impacts of alcohol and drugs on sexual activity

I found it somewhat striking how similar the stories and expression of wishes from the students were for many of the topics, especially those in the first list. Jacob characterized his ideal as "a very balanced view, a perspective of everything out there, all the choices you have, and kind of a, 'Here are your choices. Here are the best ways if you make this choice, or if you make that choice.' Present it, and you go out and pick what you want to do, and deal with it as you feel." Amanda put it succinctly: "I feel like it should be more inclusive, like everything you need to know." For Sara, "it would be a more valuable course if there had been more avenues open to people in the class, because abstinence-only is going to work for some people, but those are the people who were already going to be abstinent anyway. And the people who aren't going to be abstinent would find the class a lot better if—if there were actually other viable options and ways in which you could not be abstinent but still be safe and so be responsible."

An admission that people—even young people—do have sex, and can have it safely without inevitable bad consequences, was a strong theme for these students' ideal sex education. By their opinions, the best sex education would address the needs of young people who are *not* saving sex for marriage, both by being conceptually inclusive of them and by teaching practical ways to be healthy in sexual expression. Amanda said, "I feel like we should have done sex education for people who are planning on having sex, *not* fifteen years later." Ryan added,

> Be more realistic, more sex positive, and have open and honest conversations about sex in class. That would have been very meaningful to me, to have forums on it where we would be discussing our ideas, instead of being pushed. Give us all the options and tell us what's safe, and not safe, and mildly safe, and give us

all the information, don't hold back on us.

Perhaps the most dramatic and slightly humorous expression of this wish came from Wendy, who wanted this for her classmates even while having chosen, herself, to be abstinent for religious reasons:

> In my personal opinion, when you're educating people, you cannot give them too much information. I really think we should inundate people with like, resources, topics, questions, concerns, ideas, possibilities, like, everything. And then hold individual people responsible for the choices they make. Um, I don't think it's okay to censor anything. I don't think there should ever be a time where a teacher says, "I can't give you any information on that. I can't answer this for you." I think it should come away as, "Oh my god. Can we stop now? This is so much – I'm tired of hearing about this, reading this."

In the voices of these young people then, more information and more dialogue is desired, because most of them do not see sexuality as something to preserve or be protected from—as might be suggested by those who are ideologically sexually conservative—but as a part of life that anyone can face with the right preparation. It follows from this notion, then, that the students I spoke with wanted full and accurate information about all related sexuality topics, including contraception and safer sex.

Many of the students really urged the practical point of needing better information on contraception and safer sex, as well as access to health services in the case of contracting a sexually transmitted disease. Lucas mentioned that his ideal sex education would include "places they could go, like Planned Parenthood or wherever, to get more questions answered if they want and to get help if anything were to happen." Wendy would like sex education curricula to include "websites or phone numbers, sort of office locations of public health doctors and recommend other books or whatever. Just so there's never a time when someone has a question and they don't know where to get the answer." This would accompany a recognition, like the one discussed earlier, that sexual activity certainly does carry risks, and that it is a

legitimate danger that young people should be educated about (but not misinformed). Sara stated that in the sex education she wished she could have had, "You would let them know that these are legitimate risks—if you have sex, you do risk having disease, you do risk pregnancy, you do risk this multitude of undesirables that everyone who has sex is aware of. But I wouldn't make it seem like it's a horrible thing that's miserable." A realistic perspective on the possible consequences of activity, combined with a practical focus on tools young people can really use, emerged as strongly desired elements for an ideal sex education. Yet at the same time, what is most important is acknowledgment of the range of human possibility, even on things more abstract than just practical methods of keeping oneself safe and healthy. I close this section with one of the more eloquent comments on this topic, from Whitney:

> Let them know that there are other options out there, like—not just in sex, or in contraception, or in relationships. Just like, let them know that there is a wide world out there for them to experience, and that, you know, everyone experiences sex and relationships differently, and it's okay to not really know where you're going, and it's okay to experiment. Just you know—give them the tools they need to be safe while they try to figure out who they are and what they want out of love and relationships and sex in their lives.

Summary of Findings

Although my investigation's findings are difficult to distill into a discrete list of patterns and results, I offer Table 5 as a consolidation of my results:

Table 5. Summary of findings.

Pattern 1. The "abstinence message" is acknowledged as true, but unrealistic.

Pattern 2. Overall, the experience of abstinence-only sex education was unimportant or irrelevant to most students, taking into account their other sources of information.

Pattern 3. Nevertheless, some aspects of the courses, both positive and negative, were considered valuable or memorable.

Pattern 4. Friends or peers were most commonly ranked as the most reliable source of information about sex and relationships.

Pattern 5. Some students had no communication about sex with their parents, while some had some communication with their parents.

Pattern 6. The meaning of abstinence varies on a personal level.

Pattern 7. To some students, abstinence felt "pushed" upon them by adults.

Pattern 8. Not all students sign virginity pledges; those who do may either be invested in them or following the group, and those who do not have varying reasons for refusing.
Pattern 9. The idea and importance of virginity and non-virginity varies on a personal and social level.
Pattern 10. Few explicit "gender lessons" were experienced as part of abstinence-only sex education, but some cultural narratives about gender roles and men and women were felt to have influence.
Pattern 11. For those whose classes were sex-segregated, the practice was unnecessary and confusing.
Pattern 12. Any sort of non-heterosexual sexuality was absent from the curriculum.
Pattern 13. Marriage was presented as a goal for everyone, but many students showed ambivalence about it.
Pattern 14. Sets of positive and negative features of abstinence-only programs emerged.

Set 1: Positive Features includes:
Anatomy/physiology/function
STDs
"Scare tactics"
Abstinence as a good and valid option
Sex as a conscious process of healthy choices
Self-development focus

Set 2: Negative Features includes:
Negative stigma
Overly focused on consequences/Consequences as inevitable
Bias and lies
Instruction in religion and morality
Lack of instruction in contraception and safer sex

Pattern 15. The ideal sex education is sex-positive, inclusive/comprehensive/broad, realistic, and gives practical information.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

"Abstinence? I think it's a good view on sex if the world was perfect."

This study offered a brief glimpse at the meanings and responses created and negotiated by young people who have experienced abstinence-only sex education in public schools in the United States. Although my findings are greatly limited by a very small, self-selected convenience sample with a lack of real demographic and geographic diversity, I am able to offer a number of insights and recommendations for future research and policy. With my open and exploratory qualitative interviews, I did not limit my respondents' possibilities and tried to capture and express their voices as much as possible. In the process, I have learned a lot about the struggles and reactions of students much like me, who went through a particular educational experience and had something to say about it.

The college students I interviewed engaged with the concept of abstinence—and many of the surrounding issues like virginity, marriage, and consequences—in ways more complex than a simple acceptance or total rejection of the messages promoted in the classroom. They frequently highlighted points of cognitive and experiential disconnect between the goals and messaging of their abstinence-only sex education programs and the social reality they inhabit every day. As they observed, plenty of their friends had sex before marriage, and they weren't bad people—so how do you negotiate that? The students I interviewed were selective about the narratives and facts that mattered to them, and each had a fairly multifaceted approach to thinking about and practicing sexuality in a world with many competing interests. What became abundantly clear to me was that these students were certainly looking for information and guidance in navigating sex and relationships, and their experience in abstinence-only sex education was mostly considered to have been only partially helpful at best, and damaging at worst. As the quote from Amanda at

the beginning of this section suggests, these young people were aware that there is beauty and simplicity in a world where people fall in love, get married, and enjoy healthy sexual lives free of disease and other dangers. There is comfort and wholesomeness, perhaps, in the ideal of abstinence before marriage and strong families that is promoted by sexual conservatives and abstinence-only sex education programs. As each of these students revealed, however, that world feels more like an ideal than a reality, and in the meantime, their friends and peers are having sex, parents get divorced, and their lives have a high degree of complexity and uncertainty.

Although each of these students attended a different school, some of them in different states, and their sex education experiences are not the same, the unifying factor of the abstinence-only orientation resulted in a number of similar responses which could benefit from further study. The students I spoke with saw abstinence as a valuable concept that was sometimes "pushed" just a little too much, with the negative consequences of sexual activity exaggerated and made to feel inevitable. They wanted a form of sex education that acknowledges that young people have sex, and that sex can be safe, healthy, and even enjoyable. Marriage and families are still a big concern, but marriage, it seems, is a more complicated issue than a simple expectation—and, as we saw in the complaints of the two LGBTQ students in my sample, still not available to everyone. They told me that rather than silence, sex education should offer a discussion of a broad range of possibilities for many dimensions of sexuality—everything from an inclusion of homosexuality, to an acknowledgment that young people often have sex before getting married (and some people never marry) *and that's okay*, to full, specific, and accurate information about contraceptives and where/how to access them. Although each student recognized the legitimacy and even necessity of discussing all the potential dangers

associated with sexual activity, it cannot be said that they considered abstinence until marriage to be the solution, as the federal A-H definition and proponents of this form of sex education might wish. A positive appraisal of abstinence-only sex education programs emerged in the form of respect for the encouragement to make healthy choices for the future, to take responsibility, and to have goals in life. As Sara put it, "Sex isn't everything."

Where does all of this fit in the greater debate about sex education in the United States? It appeared to me from this research that a failure to acknowledge a wide range of sexual options is a failure to address the essential pluralism of our society, which is harmful to those students whose needs and questions receive no response. Many other policies and traditions in the United States regard this society's diversity as a strength and not a weakness; why not incorporate a similar approach in the policies addressing the sexual health of its adolescents? Moreover, it is important as a matter of good public policy and public health practices to ensure that programs financed and implemented by the government are effective in reducing risk and creating healthier citizens. In terms of reliable scientific evidence, sexual abstinence truly <u>is</u> the only way of 100% protecting oneself from sexually transmitted disease or unwanted pregnancy, but it is quite clear that most people prefer to make the trade of some risk for the pleasure and other advantages derived from sexual activity. Surveys estimate that 95% of Americans have had premarital sex, and 97% of all Americans who have ever had sex have done so premaritally at some point (Finer 2007). Finer's analysis (2007) also showed that 77% of respondents had had sex by age 20, with the median age of first sexual experience set at 17.2 for women and 17.6 for men. This fits with the finding that the average marriage age has been increasingly delayed over the past 25 years, to 25.8 for women and 27.4 for men, leaving a 13-year gap (on average) between physical sexual maturity and marriage age for most Americans (Finer 2007). A

significant majority of American adolescents have, then, decided to have sex before marrying, and I would speculate that this trend is unlikely to dramatically decrease. The most pragmatic public health policies would, in my view, take this evidence of most Americans' sexual reality into account. It is also important for authors of sex education curricula to realize that contraceptive and other protective behaviors still occur during marriage, and that sex education programs are an opportunity to prepare students for later life as well as managing current risks.

As discussed earlier, the debates over the content of sex education in public schools in the United States can be understood to form just one "front" in the greater struggles for cultural control over the national discourse about sexuality, gender, and the direction for America's future. This debate is current and ongoing even today. In December 2009, Congress passed a federal budget that eliminated the majority of funding for these abstinence-only sex education programs, reallocating more than $100 million in annual CBAE funding to more evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention and sex education programs (Future of Sex Education Project n.d.). This shift in allocation of federal funds may indicate a growing legitimacy for broader, more comprehensive programs. President Obama signed the new health care reform legislation in March of 2010, which made $75 million available for states to implement comprehensive sex education programs, but also revived $50 million in Title V funding for abstinence-only sex education programs (Future of Sex Education Project n.d.). The public educational system occupies a unique place in these battles because it represents what former Surgeon General David Thatcher called "the great equalizer:" it is a more universal force in a society where it is clear that not all parents are able or willing to provide their children with sex education (Lord 2010:180). As such, the model for sex education that earns public funding and approval should, in theory, reflect our hopes and goals for the sexual lives and futures of

America's youth. At the same time, what I have hoped to accomplish with this study is a small attempt to include the voices of young people in this conversation, and point out that regardless of the struggle for control among cultural groups, young people have their own concerns and negotiations that they feel should be addressed. The growing support for comprehensive sex education programs, even while facing continued support for abstinence-only sex education, may be seen to mirror the desires voiced by the students in the group I interviewed in a very promising way. It is my hope that future research will be able to expand the role and voice of young people in the United States in combination with solid, evidence-based recommendations for educational policy. To the extent that young people can be involved in this national conversation, I think that the inclusion of their voices would be a useful way to help move the political process in American society to uphold the cherished values of good health, responsibility, freedom, individual choice, and personal fulfillment.

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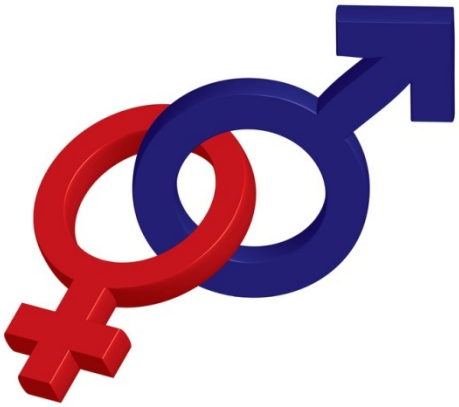
Promotional Flyer

STUDENTS NEEDED For Sex Education Study



Did you have abstinence-only sex education in middle and/or high school?

(It might have had a name like Choosing the Best, WAIT Training, Sex Respect, Why kNOw, Sex Can Wait, or Sexual Health Today, or your teacher said it was abstinence-only.

If the sex education you had in school emphasized abstinence until marriage as the safest choice and limited discussion of contraception, it might be abstinence-only, too.)

A new study (IRB00046822) being conducted by a senior undergraduate sociology student would like to find out about the experiences of students like you. This study is being conducted for my honors thesis under my advisor, Dr. Richard Rubinson.

- Looking for undergraduate students, men and women, age 18 and over:
  - Attended public middle and/or high school in the U.S.
  - Experienced abstinence-only sex education at school (not at a church or other community center)
- Approx. 45 minute interview at a quiet space of your choice
- Completely confidential and private

If you are interested and want to participate or have any questions, please contact me:

Emily Gardner, eagardn@emory.edu

Appendix 2
Interview Guide

Study: Student Experiences in Abstinence-Only Sex Education

Principal Investigator: Dr. Richard Rubinson
Co-Investigator: Emily Gardner

Interview Guide, Second Draft

I. Demographic Questions: Tell me a little background about yourself.
How would you define your racial or ethnic group?
How would you describe your religious affiliation, if any?
In what region of the country did you go to middle and high school?

II. Abstinence-Only Identification: As you'll recall from the recruitment materials, I'm interested in students' experiences in abstinence-only sex education…
Could you tell me a little bit about the sex education you had in school and the point in your life when you had it? For example, where you had it, how old you were, your feelings about sex and relationships at the time…

-Did you end up having sex education more than once? Where? Was there a difference?

What leads you to believe the sex education you received in middle or high school was abstinence-only in nature?

-Did you recognize the name of the curriculum, or did your teacher(s) identify it directly as abstinence-only?

III. Sources and Importance of Sex and Relationship Education
What were your sources of (what you felt to be) reliable information about sex and relationships as a teenager in middle and high school?

-Can you give me an idea of how important each of these sources was to you?

How did your experience in abstinence-only school-based sex education matter to you? How important was it to you in the grand scheme of learning about sex and relationships when you were younger?

IV. Content of Abstinence-Only Sex Education and Student Reactions
What particular ideas or beliefs did you feel you walked away with as a result of having been in abstinence-only sex education? Did any experience or lesson particularly affect you, in how you thought or acted? Why?
Is there something you feel you have really carried with you in your life, a particular image or lesson that had a meaningful impact?

So I'm going to ask a few questions about some specific topics in the area of sex education…

How did it influence your idea of **virginity** and **non-virginity**? What do those words mean to you?
Did you sign a **"virginity pledge"** at any point in your abstinence-only sex education class?

If yes: What meaning did this hold for you?
How important was the concept of virginity to you?
How about to your friends?
How do you think your friends or peers who didn't have abstinence-only would feel about virginity?

For each of the following concepts, please tell me how you understand and describe them, and what they have meant to you personally (either in how you have thought about them, or practiced them in your own life).

-**Abstinence**?
What role did your time in abstinence-only sex education play in shaping this idea?
How has this come into play in your own sexual choices, if at all?

-**Safer sex**?
How was this shaped by what you learned in abstinence-only sex education?
How do you think your friends or peers who didn't have abstinence-only would feel about safer sex?

-**Contraception**?
Do you feel like your friends or peers who didn't have abstinence-only feel differently about contraception and how it gets used?

-**The role of genders in romantic relationships**?
Do you feel that there are clear gender roles, or that there should be?
How have these come into play in your own relationships, if at all?

-**Differences between men and women when it comes to sex and relationships**?
Did your experience in abstinence-only sex education influence this? How?

-**Marriage**?
How much importance does it hold for you as a personal life goal or experience?
As an institution in general?
Did you feel there was a big focus on it in your abstinence-only sex education class? If so, what do you think it was trying to teach you?
How do you think your friends or peers who didn't have abstinence-only feel about it?

V. Evaluating the Sex Education Experience

What aspects of your abstinence-only sex education class did you feel were **valuable** to you?

What, if anything, did you feel was **missing or wrong** in what you learned?
Did you feel that you learned everything you wanted to learn in your abstinence-only sex education class?

Looking back on your own ideas and experiences, what do you **wish** you had been taught in your sex education classes?
How important is it to learn that lesson in a sex education class?
What do you think your friends or people like you would want to learn in a sex education class?

VI. Closing

Is there anything we have not touched on that you think would be relevant? Is there anything you'd like to return to, or a question you'd like to comment on?
Is there anything you think I should be asking the students I am interviewing?