

Reflective Essay

During my enrollment in ENGL395, Writing for Health Professions, I was assigned to complete a research review article that would provide a comprehensive outlook on a health issue with particular prominence on college campuses. After considering many different subjects, ranging from depressive disorders to malnutrition, I chose to shift my focus to the more taboo topic of sexual health. Although strides have been made in terms of more open communication surrounding sex, the act itself has yet to escape overwhelmingly negative stigmatizations. This is especially notable on college campuses due to the recent endorsement of what is known as hookup culture, consisting of noncommittal sexual activity among students. In choosing this topic, I felt as though more research should include the potential benefits of casual sex, rather than focusing on the blatant risks. Thus, my assignment was centered on the presence of hookup culture on college campuses in the United States, and both benefits and potential issues that could arise from the way that many college students choose to engage in sexual activity.

In order to provide a holistic representation of hookup culture, the use of both primary and secondary sources was essential. As my research process began, I relied heavily on the use of the University Libraries' online database. I found the ability to search for articles with key terms, like "hookup" and "casual sex," extraordinarily helpful. That being said, while much more research had surfaced on the phenomenon of hookup culture than I had anticipated, the primary sources that I found only focused on narrow ideas within the topic. It seemed as though each peer-reviewed article simply discussed risks related to sexually transmitted diseases, which is an inevitable risk related to any form of sex, even outside of the context of hookup culture. The culture itself, as a new means of perceiving sexual activity, did not seem to be reflected in scientific and unbiased terms. When turning to secondary sources, I found it difficult to locate research that was not laced with individual predispositions regarding casual sex. Authors often took extreme stances on the issue, leaving me with articles that were heavily opinionated and supported by personal experiences. After analyzing both sides, it soon became clear that many factors affect the overall nature and benefits and drawbacks of hookup culture.

With this in mind, I found it necessary to take a new approach in my compilation of research. Rather than solely analyzing the consequences of hookup culture as it is in its current state, I decided to trace the growth of this phenomenon across the United States. By examining the societal changes that may have led to an increased presence of casual sexual activity, I believed that I would develop a greater understanding of the motivations behind this behavior, and how it became adopted by an overwhelming amount of young adults. That being said, as new research surfaced, I found that the incidence of casual sex is not something that is uniquely associated with hookup culture. While many recent articles discuss the risky nature of sex on college campuses, it is notable that the amount of noncommittal sex happening now is not significantly different than the amount that happened in previous decades. This breakthrough in my research meant that, rather than solely focusing on the pros and cons of hookup culture, I would have to address the question of whether or not this new culture is actually linked to riskier sexual behavior on college campuses.

With this additional point of focus, I planned to examine general sex trends on college campuses during the past ten years, and to determine if drastic changes occurred in the both the manner in which college students engage in sexual behavior and the amount of individuals who choose to do so. At this point in completing the assignment, I was overwhelmed by the many situational characteristics and lack of definitive conclusions surrounding the consequences of becoming involved in casual sex. After seeking guidance from my professor, Joseph Ross Angelella, I was provided with reassurance and support in terms of my ability to discuss each facet of the issue. This allowed me to feel more confident in representing the topic of hookup culture as a complex and multisided phenomenon, composed of both positive and negative aspects that are defined on an individual basis.

Once I embraced the idea that the implications of hookup culture are predominantly subjective, it became much easier to apply secondary sources and survey data to my article. While primary sources were used to display factual data and statistics, secondary sources were used to suggest the experiential variability that one may have when engaging in casual sex. I chose to use sources in popular media and works that showcased interviews with a variety of college men and women, as this supported the individuality of the act of hooking up, while encouraging the integration of sex as a topic of conversation. In order to ensure that the information being presented was credible, I examined the ethos of each author. Thus, notable secondary sources were often written by professionals, including university officials and psychotherapists.

Completing this assignment taught me how to gather a multitude of research documents and analyze them by categorizing and interpreting data. This was a very challenging process, due to the fact that each source suggested the existence of variability rather than forming definitive conclusions. That being said, I enjoyed studying my topic and am proud of the success that I had in identifying trends in research, locating gaps in knowledge, and discussing new directions for future studies. If I could change one thing about my research experience, I would have gone to the library to inquire about the gathering of secondary sources. During my undergraduate career thus far, I have only turned to the library for peer-reviewed articles. In retrospect, I feel as though I may have benefitted from asking a professional about how to ensure that secondary sources are both credible and used properly. If a tool became available to assist in determining when secondary sources may serve an important role in an assignment, I believe that many students would be able to utilize them and improve their written work.