Jun-2011

The Economics of University Sexual Health Programs

Margaret Brooks

Bridgewater State College, mbrooks@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation
The Economics of University Sexual Health Programs

Margaret Brooks

It is, perhaps, universally agreed that young adults need accurate and complete sexual health information so they can make wise choices. Yet in the last few years, questions have arisen about what this really means. A number of questionable sex education events have transpired on university campuses around the country, including live sex demonstrations, sex toy raffles and giveaways, and showings of graphic, violent pornography. As the word gets out about these types of controversial programs, university administrators must make hard decisions about what kinds of sex education programs should be offered to their students and who should be teaching them.

University Sex Education Programs

In recent years, weeklong programs dubbed Sex Week have been held at institutions including Brown, Northwestern, and Yale universities and the University of Kentucky. Student groups, not administrators, organized the programs. The events, billed as educational, used the universities’ names and facilities. They were open to everyone, including the outside community. Sex-industry representatives were significantly involved in many of the programs and sponsorships, along with contributions from nonprofit groups such as the Kinsey Institute and Planned Parenthood.

Judging from the program descriptions, the emphasis of most Sex Week programming seems to be aimed at promoting sexual exploration and pleasure, rather than teaching students about sexual health and safety. While some sessions cover more serious topics like women’s health and sex trafficking, others feature such offerings as pornographic-film screenings; a lingerie show using university students as models; and a topless porn star demonstrating bondage, discipline, dominance and submission to a student audience.

Short-term workshops of this nature are appearing on campuses too. Last April, a “vajayducation” workshop at Harvard featured a raffle for $1,000 worth of donated sex toys and the showing of a graphic film clip of a woman’s genitals projected six feet tall onto a screen. A Harvard blogger who attended the workshop reported “There is way too much hooting and hollering from the men in here. You dogs you.” Sexual harassment is of primary concern in such a learning environment.

Economic Forces

The sex industry’s recent interest in accessing students on university campuses is not surprising. Adult stores have been actively seeking new ways to market their products and services. X-rated sex shops have always had a rather seedy reputation, which deterred many customers, particularly women, from walking in. In recent years, online suppliers have provided fierce competition to the local sex shops by allowing people to browse and order items online from the privacy of their homes. As a result, many brick-and-mortar adult stores have struggled to survive.

Some have tried to redefine themselves as feminist or woman-friendly. Others, like the San Francisco sex toy retailer GoodVibrations, have experienced severe financial difficulties and changed ownership. GoodVibrations was sold in

Brown University Harvard University North University of Kentucky Yale University Brown University Northwestern University

Harvard University Northwestern University

Yale University Brown University Harvard University

SEX WEEK

University of Kentucky Yale University Brown University

Harvard University Northwestern University

Yale University Brown University Harvard University
September 2007 to GVA-TWN, a Cleveland-based company that operates a chain of adult stores in the Midwest. In Providence, Rhode Island Miko’s (former location from 1993-2007 is shown below) closed its doors in 2008 due to financial difficulties, and the former owner now runs a dog training business.

Some remaining sex stores have been trying to overcome social stigma and draw customers into their buildings by offering “educational” events. For instance, Good Vibrations, which has three locations in San Francisco and one in Brookline, offers an ongoing array of classes, ranging from specific sex techniques to kinky sexual practices.

Other adult businesses have tried to increase business by offering more discreet product delivery to customers. For example, a company in Chicago offers round-the-clock bicycle delivery of sex toys, while another sex shop in Huntsville, Alabama acquired a former bank and now offers customers drive-through convenience.

However, these marketing outreach efforts tend to be limited in size and geographic location. To gain access to much larger groups of potential new customers, many sex toy and pornography companies are sending their representatives into the community to reach them there.

The Move to University Campuses

Sex companies can use on-campus presentations as a prestigious, convenient and low-overhead means of accessing university students. A July 2010 workshop held in Oakland, California advised sex educator attendees on how to book “paid gigs” at colleges and universities. The program description states “Getting schools and organizations to pay you to show up and speak to rooms they fill for you! Face it, it’s hard organizing, promoting, hosting and running your own events. Why not get organizations to pay you to show up and share what you’re passionate about!”

In January 2011, the Adult Video Network Novelty Expo held a session at its annual conference entitled Sex Ed. The description read: “As the couples-friendly boutique continues to supplant the traditional adult book store, education is one of the key elements in transforming both company image and the customer base into a more profitable model. A panel of some of the leading designers and retailers who have pioneered in-store and online education for their staff and customers will provide an in-depth formula for success through higher education in this interactive workshop.”

PhinLi, a New York-based agency that books sex speakers on university campuses, offers this advice on its Website: “Get in cahoots with the students at the nearest college or university. Universities have large budgets for what’s called Student Activities… Most universities have some kind of a system by which a student who is keen can create a proposal and budget, gain cosponsors from across university departments and offices, and pull off a show…”

These descriptions indicate that adult industry agencies and representatives are making vigorous efforts to bring their programs on-site to universities. They are developing business models to gain entry to this market, often through student groups. However, when student groups are given independent funding and completely free rein in arranging speakers, this bypasses the universities’ normal hiring process for employees and consultants, and it circumvents normal curriculum review processes.

This “student affairs loophole” creates a strong incentive for outside sex interests to identify and befriend student group leaders in order to convince them to bring their representatives and products on campuses.

Such academic connections can boost the adult companies’ corporate credibility, and at the same time provide new opportunities to market products to young people through hands-on demonstrations, raffle donations and direct financial sponsorship. Some companies seek direct opportunities for their representatives to teach sex toy workshops on campuses. In many cases, event promoters are using social media like Twitter and Facebook to communicate directly with student leaders, negotiate sponsorship deals, and advertise scheduled events.

Pornographers are making significant inroads into university sex education programs as well. For instance, at Brown University’s 2010 Sex Week, the first 100 people in attendance were given packages of two, prepaid, 30-minute cards for Virtually Adult video on demand. At Yale University’s 2010 Sex Week, recent graduate Nathan Harden calculated that 11 of last year’s 34 events — nearly one in three — featured or were led by pornography stars or producers.

Problems and Protests

These sex education events do not always go smoothly, and public controversy does sometimes erupt. An optional “after-hours” live sex demonstration for more than one hundred students in one professor’s class at Northwestern University on February 21, 2011 attracted national attention and criticism.

Miko’s was forced to close its doors in 2008
A 2009 research study conducted by economist Dan Ariely at Duke University came under fire for offering participating students demonstrations and discounts on sex toys. Similarly, University of Wisconsin Law School administrators canceled a sex-toy workshop that was scheduled to take place in April 2008 because they felt it would violate university policy regarding the promotion of commercial products. And a screening of pornography at Yale’s 2009 Sex Week was stopped “midreel after organizers became alarmed by the film’s depictions of sexual violence against women,” according to an account of the event published in the National Review Online.

There may be long-term consequences for students. For instance, dozens of pictures of university students, some posing with sex toys, are featured on the Facebook pages of a frequent sex workshop presenter. News stories have identified specific student attendees at sex workshops by name and showed them wearing strap-ons or being flogged by the workshop presenter.

**Solutions**

Clearly, teaching students about sex is not the same as teaching them about other subjects such as architecture, politics, or economics. Special considerations must be made for student safety, institutional policies on commercial sponsorship, and the need to comply with state and federal laws on issues such as minors and sexual harassment. Privacy is important too. Even if the students gave permission at the time for their pictures to be taken or recorded, online postings can exist forever on the Internet, and years later can negatively affect students’ chances of finding employment. If sex education is to be offered at all, university administrators must take a leadership role in the scheduling, financial support, and monitoring of those programs.

University administrators should address these fundamental issues to ensure their programs are appropriate, safe, and not driven by commercial interests:

- **Who will choose the programs and schedule of events?** Although administrators can and should work with student leaders to develop the program, administrators should make the final decisions. Sexuality can be a controversial topic, and when most or all session presenters promote just one limited point of view—say, multiple-partner sex—it violates principles of intellectual diversity.

Those students who may be seeking advice on abstinence, how to engage in safe sex, what it means to get or receive consent for sexual activity, or how to have meaningful monogamous relationships could be excluded from the program entirely, or find themselves having to sit through pornography screenings to try to get information that will help them make healthy decisions. True diversity means developing programs that foster inclusion and respect for all.

- **Who will teach them?** Ideally, sex education should be taught entirely by the university’s permanent faculty or staff. Current employees have already gone through a credential assessment and reference checks as part of the hiring process. They are familiar with the university’s resources, policies, and personnel. They have offices on the campus in case students want to follow up later with questions. The sex education curriculum can be evaluated in accordance with the university’s own governance processes. If circumstances require guest speakers to be brought in to supplement the program, administrators should carefully review their credentials before hiring them to see if the applicants’ qualifications are a good match for the program’s needs. Many people claim to be “sex educators” nowadays, including pornstars, sex workers, and sex-toy representatives. They may not have sufficient training to present students with accurate information or be capable of leading sensitive discussions about sex in a respectful, safe, and inclusive manner. Administrators must conduct simple background checks on outside speakers, including a review of their professional Websites, before they are hired. Anonymous post-event assessments can also be done to ask students for feedback on the speakers’ ability to present topics and interact appropriately with the audience.
Who can attend? University-hosted sex education events should be open to enrolled students only. Prohibiting outsiders from attending provides students with a safer learning environment in which they can feel comfortable sharing their ideas and questions. In fact, universities should even consider setting up same-sex sessions to afford students a further measure of comfort when viewing presentations that some students may find embarrassing in mixed company, or when seeking answers to sensitive questions. In addition, sex education conferences or open events for the general community should require participants to register and provide identification. That simple act will discourage sex offenders from attending the event and provide a measure of safety to student participants. Minors should not be admitted to university sex events under any circumstances. The university should provide strict enforcement of that policy, as there can be criminal liability for exposing children to sexually explicit materials. Even with a parent’s permission, children cannot legally be admitted to X-rated events.

Who pays and who sponsors? If a university is committed to providing sex education programming to students, it should provide sufficient financial support. Otherwise, student organizers may feel compelled to seek commercial sponsorship. If external sponsors are needed, then administrators should do the asking. Only they have the knowledge and authority to negotiate contractual terms regarding the use of the university’s name and facilities. Only they should decide which products are appropriate—or not—for raffles and giveaways.

Who sets the policies about what types of programs are allowed on campus? Universities must always be sure that their policies are followed at campus events and that all related activities are in compliance with state and federal laws. That responsibility cannot and should not be passed to anyone else. Students are transitory members of the university community, and outside speakers are independent consultants who are literally here today and gone tomorrow. Important liability issues are at stake. Universities should adopt policies that prohibit presenters from using images that benefit their own publicity purposes but that could potentially harm students’ futures. In addition, to prevent sexual-harassment violations or physical-injury claims, universities should always prohibit presenters from making physical contact with or humiliating audience members. They must be vigilant about preventing nonphysical forms of sexual harassment as well, such as presenters calling women sluts or creating a sexually hostile atmosphere by showing degrading pornographic films.

On a national level, immediate legislative reform is needed to prohibit the use of federal and state taxpayer monies for campus events and promotions run by pornographers and adult products company representatives. Many people and organizations are claiming to be experts in the field of sex education and are eager to gain access to the hearts, minds, and, yes, perhaps even the bodies of our university students. Strong measures are needed to preserve students’ sexual health and safety, as well as universities’ integrity and reputations.

Fortunately, Bridgewater State University has a strong history of providing educational programs that inform and protect students’ sexual health. The Division of Student Affairs has always put students’ safety and well-being first. Bridgewater’s exemplary leadership should serve as a national model for other universities seeking to offer quality sex education programs to their students.

Margaret Brooks is a Professor in the Department of Economics. This article is adapted from “Sex Week Should Arouse Caution Most of All,” by Margaret Brooks, Chronicle of Higher Education, August 29, 2010 http://chronicle.com/article/Sex-Week-Should-Arouse/124152/.