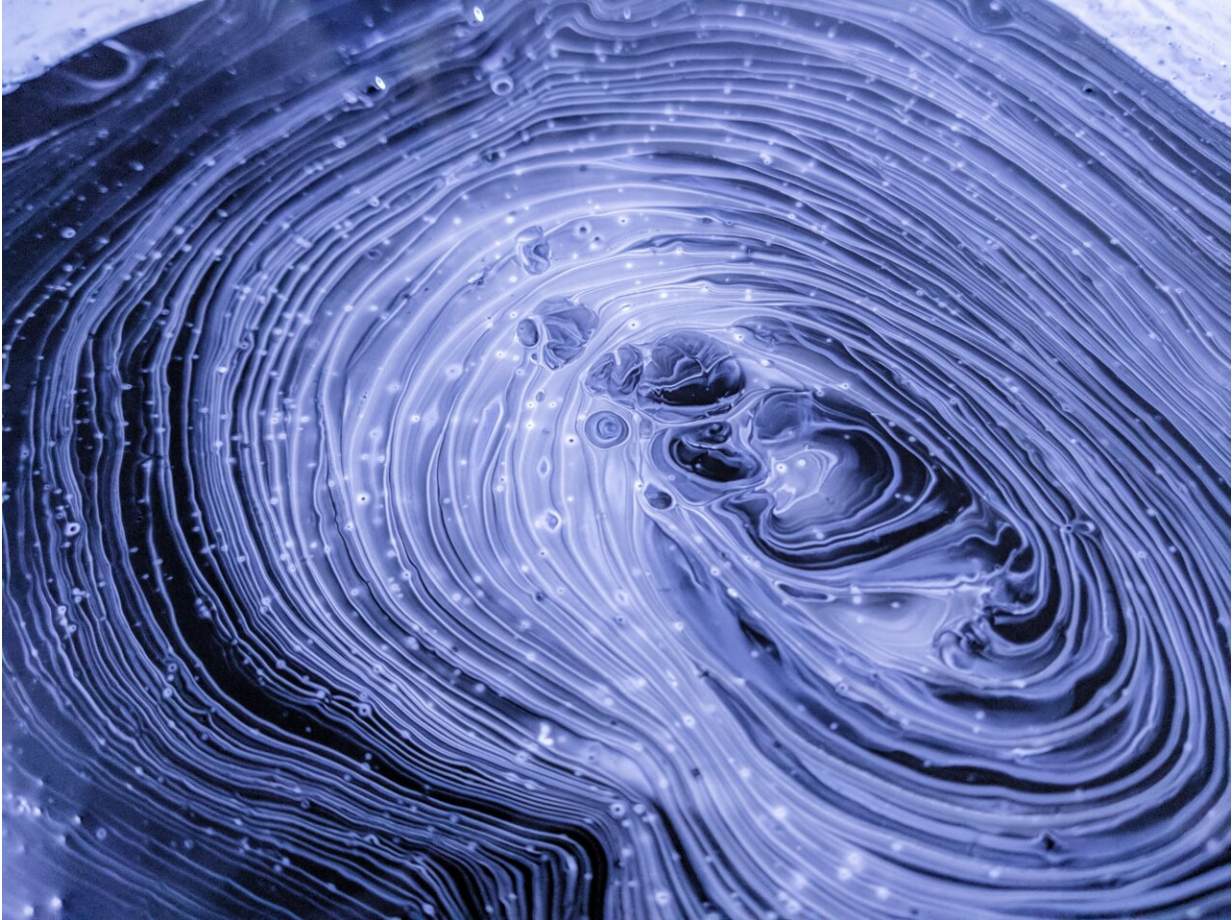


College students go online to learn about sex

November 13 2015, by Teresa Woodruff And Megan Castle



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Chances are that by the time you enter college in the United States, the closest thing you've had to reproductive education was watching an uncomfortable video in health class, maybe even before you went

through puberty. It might not have answered your questions and perhaps led to some misguided assumptions about your body. Sound familiar? You're not alone.

Many college freshmen arrive on campus with only a cursory middle- or high school "sex ed" class in their background. And some students arrive on campus having no prior school-based sexual education at all. More often than not, when students land on campus in a pivotal time in their sexual lives, they have unanswered questions about their [reproductive health](#).

They may have Googled questions about sexual and reproductive health that seemed too taboo or embarrassing to discuss in person. Or they may have tried to find answers to these questions – things like how to use contraception, how alcohol impairs sex and how changing menstrual cycles affect pregnancy risk – hidden in dated, dusty health class notebooks or between the lines in lifestyle magazines.

We might think that sex is everywhere in our society, but good information presented in a matter-of-fact way is actually hard to come by. And that's a problem because this information is really about understanding how our bodies work.

Actually, it's called reproductive education

There is currently no required standard for sex education in the nation's K-12 schools, and of the 22 states that do have mandated sex education instruction, [only 13](#) require this instruction to be medically accurate.

And when schools do provide [sex education](#), it generally doesn't focus on helping kids understand reproductive anatomy and function. Research indicates that [half of sexually active young people](#) contract sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and [95% of unintended pregnancies in the](#)

US result from inconsistent, nonexistent or incorrect contraceptive use. That's probably no coincidence. Imagine how those stats would change if every young person understood how contraceptives work.

That so many college students miss out on reproductive education as teens also means that if or when they have a reproductive health problem, they might not even know the terms to use to tell their doctor about what is going on. Or they might not feel comfortable talking about it at all. It's not easy to talk to your doctor about a yeast infection when you feel uncomfortable using the word vagina.

I've studied reproductive health for many years, and working in a reproductive biology lab in the middle of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department at Northwestern University obviously means I overhear countless questions and concerns people have about their own reproductive health – though, of course, people don't call it their "reproductive health." I hear people say things like "I have something going on down there. You know ... *down there*..." or "Did you ever experience that when it was...you know ... *your time of the month*...?"

It's as if penis and menstruation are bad words that cannot possibly be discussed with others. And if you Google the words "penis" or "fallopian tube" or "vagina," you get to places on the web that can be confusing at best or unsavory at worst, when all you are trying to find out is, "what does this mean?"

I realized there was dire need for accurate, reliable information regarding sexual and reproductive health – the kind of facts that many students rarely get in high school health classes.

So how do you get information to curious college students who might be embarrassed to look up answers to questions about their reproductive health? Easy – create a massive open online course (MOOC). I created

"[Introduction to Reproduction](#)" with a team of education and video content experts, including Megan Castle, Laura Kick, Harlan Wallach and a group of great teaching assistants. This free course is everything first-year students (and anyone else) need to know about sex and reproduction, and didn't know to ask.

Having sex ≠ sex ed

Having sex is not the same thing as knowing how it all works, and this crash course in sexual and reproductive health demystifies myths. For instance, a common misconception is that women need to have a period every month – this isn't true. Also, young men might not realize that alcohol and steroid use can have both long- and short-term ramifications in their sex lives.

Our MOOC features two- to five-minute videos covering topics like the rise and fall of hormones, fallopian tubes, STDs and how to avoid them, fertility after cancer, the workings of the penis and vagina, and more. The course can be accessed by anyone, anytime, anywhere, and delivers a biological, anatomical context to sex and reproduction. It is a safe, private place for people to go look for answers to questions that they might have trouble articulating or feel uncomfortable saying out loud.

We also designed this course so that everyone can understand it. People might be curious about their reproductive health, but might not have had the opportunity to learn crucial terms and concepts. Words like "endometrium" or "cervix" may be mysteries. Perhaps you've heard terms like "estrogen" and "testosterone," but you're not quite sure how they interact with the body. That's OK, because we've incorporated a tool called [Repropedia](#) – a free, web-based dictionary of scientific terms used in reproductive and sexual health research that defines complex terms in easy-to-understand language.

The need for accurate information about reproductive health never goes away, so making sure that college students have these facts can help them stay healthy as they age.

The goal of the course is to help students understand sexual and reproductive health as the biological functions they really are – and to understand how they relate to their overall health.

And while other universities may offer socially based sexual health information during orientation (ie, sexual violence and consent, among others), so far this is the only online course geared toward college students that addresses the biological foundations of sexual and reproductive health. It's about time we all have a candid conversation about [sex](#) and treat it as we would any other biological function.

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