

Catholics and Condoms:
Sexual Health Resources and Policies at Boston College

By Erin Dromgoole

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), roughly 79.5% of college students are sexually active (The Daily Barometer Staff). With the majority of college students engaging in sexual behavior, it seems clear that sexual education and resources are necessary items on a college campus. Declining to provide sexual health resources to college students is akin to allowing a new driver to steer a two ton automobile down the highway without any prior instructions. The majority of teenagers would jump at the chance to speed down the freeway if the opportunity presented itself; however, their initial excitement might soon fade to sheer panic once they realize that they are at a loss for what to do once they get behind the wheel. The speeding, inexperienced driver, much like the unprotected sexually active college student, would not only be a serious danger to themselves, but to everyone else on the road. Lack of access to information about sexual decisions as well as contraception can leave the college student and his or her sexual partners at risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies, and a plethora of emotional damage. Why, then, doesn't Boston College meet all the health needs of its sexually active students?

In keeping with the Jesuit, Catholic tradition, Boston College prides itself on educating "the whole person," challenging its students not only intellectually, but morally and spiritually as well. As Father William P. Leahy, President of Boston College, explains in the *Message from the President*, "Boston College endeavors to educate a new generation of leaders for the new millennium – men and women who will be capable of shaping a new century with vision, justice,

and charity – with a sense of calling, with concern for all of the human family” (Leahy, S.J.). Given the university’s commitment to higher education, leadership, and consideration for others, providing sexual health resources to interested students, might seem to be a natural initiative on campus. However, Boston College is a Jesuit university and, as such, adheres to Catholic policies and practices. According to Catholic moral theologian Richard Sparks, C.S.P., the United States Bishops’ document *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning* dictates that “sexuality is a fundamental component of personality in and through which [humans], as male or female, experience our relatedness to self, others, the world, and even God” (Sparks, C.S.P). The document goes on to explain that, because sexuality is a thought of as a gift from God, it must be nurtured and respected as such. Though they acknowledge the importance of sexuality in relationships with others and with oneself, the U.S. Bishops reiterate that “marital commitment and fidelity provide the only stable environment in which genital sexual expressions find their true meaning as acts of loving union potentially open to procreation” (Sparks, C.S.P). Therefore, sexual union is only supported by the Catholic church within the confines of marriage and in the absence of any type of birth control that could inhibit reproduction, such as condoms, hormonal birth control, etc. Furthermore, the Catholic church urges all individuals teaching adolescents about sex and sexuality to instruct only on abstinence from sexual relations prior to a committed marriage (Sparks, C.S.P).

The CDC’s national survey on teens and sexual behaviors reports that only about 67% of eighteen-year-olds (that is, the age of students entering college) have received instruction on methods of birth control, and only 84% of sexually active teens used some form of contraception on their first sexual encounter (“Centers for Disease Control and Prevention”). Therefore, many college students engaging in sexual behavior are doing so with either a lack of education on or a

lack of interest in practicing safe sex. This leaves the unprotected individual at risk for serious lifestyle challenges and poses a dire health risk to sexually active students and the university community. According to the Guttmacher Institute, an organization dedicated to advancing sexual and reproductive health worldwide, an unprotected, sexually active teen has a 90% chance of becoming pregnant within one year. In addition, 15- to 24-year-olds constitute one half of all new sexually transmitted infections every year, even though they make up only 25% of the sexually active population ("Guttmacher Institute"). Unprotected sex leaves the individual exposed to consequences such as pregnancy and STIs that could affect the individual the rest of their lives. As made apparent by these recent statistics, teenagers, and specifically college students are at greatest risk for these damaging consequences.

Although Boston College Health Services provides STI testing (at a steep cost of upwards of \$170 in some instances), they do not provide any sort of contraception to prevent a sexually active student from becoming infected in the first place ("BC Students for Sexual Health"). Furthermore, once a student is treated for an STI at health services, the health care providers there have nothing to offer the student to prevent them from becoming infected again. As Donna Freitas, professor at Saint Michael's College and author of the novel, *Sex and the Soul*, explains, if a Catholic university sponsors resources or programs that address the sexual habits of their students, "they are admitting that students have sex before marriage, which goes against the Catholic teaching" (Freitas). Rather than acknowledge that the majority of their students, regardless of religious affiliation, are not adhering to traditional Catholic practices and beliefs, Boston College instead chooses to ignore the growing needs of its students, denying them on-campus services and resources that are essential to their health and well being. In February of 2009, the Undergraduate Government of Boston College conducted a survey of its

students on whether or not Boston College should expand its sexual health resources and information for its students. With the largest voter turnout on record for a UGBC vote, an overwhelming 89.47% of the student body agreed that Boston College needs to offer greater sexual health resources to its students, including but not limited to, access to condoms on campus, more affordable testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and the availability of prescription birth control at health services on campus (Sweas). The overwhelmingly-supported UGBC vote for expanded sexual resources was a cry for help from the students of Boston College for the administration to do more for the sexual health and safety of its students – a referendum that is evidence of students’ priorities.

Unfortunately, this call for action was quickly shut down by the Boston College administration. Within a few days after the results of the vote were published, spokesperson for Boston College Jack Dunn explained that “Boston College will not be changing its policy on birth control prescription or the distribution of condoms [on campus]” (Sweas). The decision remained even after the students themselves came together and voiced their concerns over the state of sexual resources on campus, speaking directly to the administration about their opinions and concerns through UGBC.

In response to the outright refusal of Boston College to attend to the sexual health needs of its students, as well as the UGBC vote that catapulted the school’s sexual health policies into the spotlight, a group of concerned Boston College students decided to take action and form the Boston College Students for Sexual Health (BCSSH). BCSSTH was founded with the goal of “foster[ing] dialogue on campus and provid[ing] comprehensive information about sexual health, as well as [campaigning] for policy reform” (“BC Students for Sexual Health”). Though they have had a few encounters with the administration, the underground organization continues to

distribute condoms and information on sexual health outside of McElroy Commons for the second year in a row (Hennawi). Every Friday, students gather at the College Road crosswalk, an area of campus that is designated public space and not under the jurisdiction of Boston College, to distribute condoms as well as flyers encouraging passing students to “have a ‘safer’ weekend”. It may seem trivial and fairly insignificant, but this condom distribution is the sole source and supplier of sexual health information and resources for BC students; it means that practically all access to contraception or sexual health resources for Boston College students must be obtained on Friday afternoons, in a very public square outside of McElroy.

This is a problem that the Boston College Students for Sexual Health organization acknowledges, as they express plans to further diversify sexual health resources. On their website, BCSSH express a desire to follow the footsteps of other Jesuit Universities by creating a change in sexual health policies. They explain: “we seek to implement a distribution method similar to Georgetown, where an unrecognized student organization has appointed captains in each dorm where it is widely known that condoms are available; the administration at Georgetown has chosen neither to condemn the group and its actions nor support it. At Boston College we believe we could implement a similar program successfully, utilizing community resources to secure condoms, without any cost to the university” (“BC Students for Sexual Health”). In order for such a program to be effective at Boston College, the state of sexual health affairs at the school must be more widespread and publicized, and change advocated for. In addition, though this plan of action might help provide greater sexual health resources to Boston College students, it would never be 100% effective; only a change within the University policy could generate a significant effect on the sexual health of Boston College students.

Other Jesuit Universities could serve as models for how Boston College could approach providing sexual health resources to its students. Marquette University in Wisconsin provides its students with voluntary peer health mentors, who can aid interested students in healthy decision-making and can provide them with information and resources on any topic, including sexual health ("Center for Health Education and Promotion"). Villanova University, another Roman Catholic university, advocates for abstinence before marriage, however does encourage its sexually active students to use barrier methods to help prevent STIs as well as pregnancy if they do engage in sexual relations ("Health Promotion"). On the University of San Francisco's website, the Jesuit university provides a comprehensive list of methods of birth control and their effectiveness as well as signs and symptoms of common STIs, such as Gonorrhea, Chlamydia, and Syphilis ("Health Promotion Services"). Loyola University Chicago even goes so far as to provide free HIV, STI, and pregnancy testing on campus for its students ("Wellness Center"). Jesuit universities have adopted a number of different policies in order to accommodate the needs of their students, from providing mentors to help with decision-making to providing contraception and more. Adopting any of these initiatives would be a great step in the direction of acknowledging the sexual health needs of Boston College students and helping them to make better, safer, and more informed decisions regarding their sexual health. Catholics for a Free Choice, an organization in support of contraception and abortion rights, addressed the conflict that Catholic universities such as Boston College encounter in the face of sexual health practices in a recent report. As the organization explained, "Catholic universities are at a difficult moment ... caught between the desire to be a part of the educational mainstream and the Vatican's attempts to tighten its grip" (Crary). The Catholic Church, and by extension, Boston College, upholds a very rigid policy when it comes to sex and sexuality – a policy that is impractical and

insensitive to the needs of college students in the twenty-first century. Known for its progressiveness, leadership, and concern for others, Boston College should assume its spot at the height of forward thinking and adapt its sexual health policies to meet the needs of its sexually active students. In a time when the vast majority of college students are having sex, whether they are Catholic or not, Boston College must take back the wheel from the unprotected, sexually active driver and steer the automobile into the twenty-first century – condoms and all.

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