

The Daily Cardinal

Est. 1892

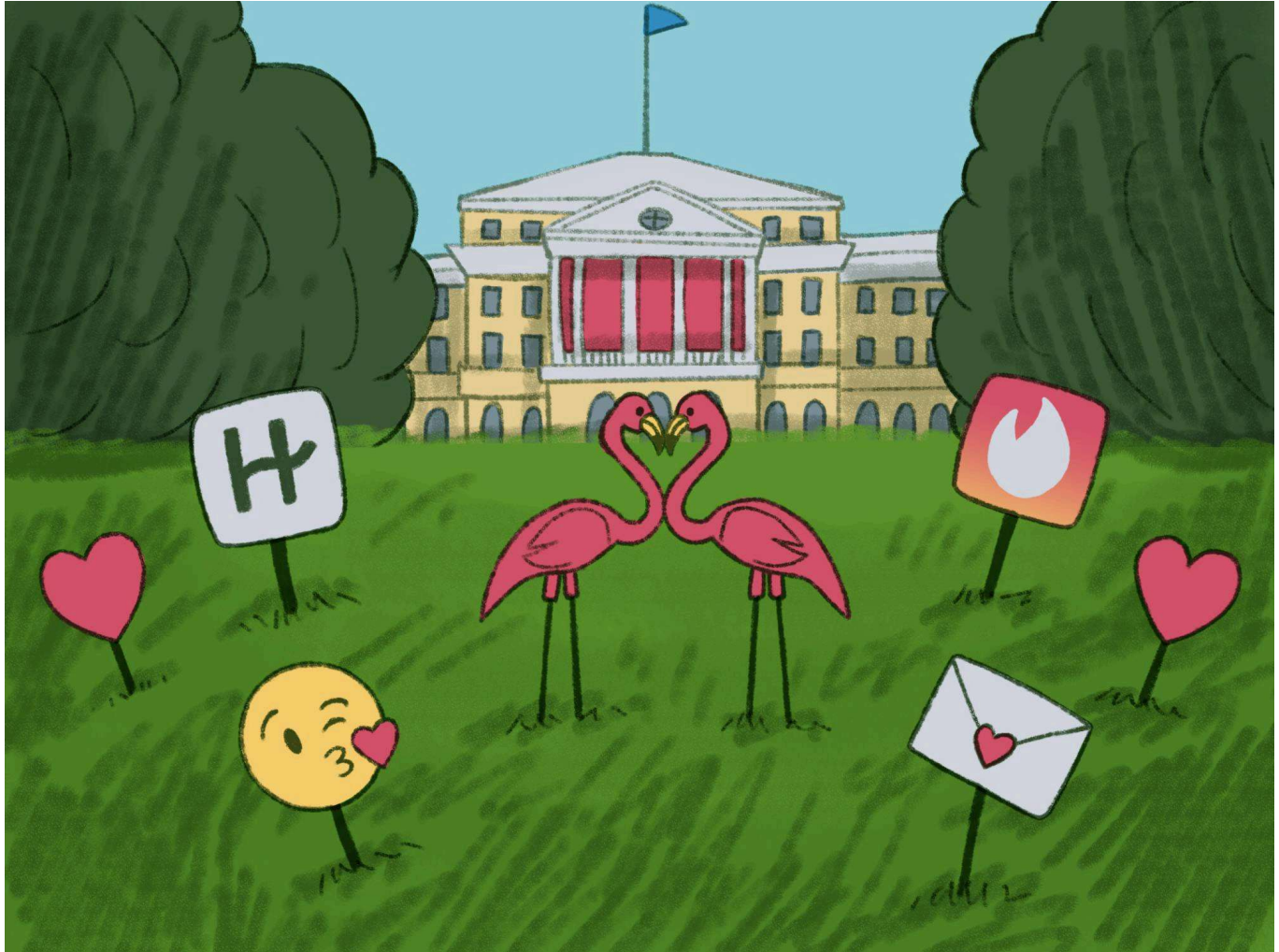


Photo by [Isabella Barajas](#) | The Daily Cardinal

CAMPUS NEWS

College is difficult. Students say dating shouldn't be

In a sea of situationships, meet-cutes and wild date stories, dating in college can feel like an uphill battle. University of Wisconsin–Madison students share their dating experiences with The Daily Cardinal.

By [Olivia Ruetten](#)

November 19, 2025 | 2:00am CST

Editor's note: Pseudonyms are used to protect student identity in discussion of private topics.

College is notoriously a time of exploration and experimentation. At a school like the University of Wisconsin–Madison — one of the [top party schools](#) in the country — many students say they see that reflected in the campus dating scene.

"I think a big thing is that college is many people's first taste of freedom," Ethan, a junior at UW-Madison, told The Daily Cardinal. "No [parents](#) telling you what to do, no one looking over your shoulder, very very little of that. So some of the things that maybe their parents wouldn't approve of they can now do with less repercussions."

Relationships in college take many forms, from serious commitments to casual hookups or unlabeled "[situationships](#)."

"I think dating culture in college can always be healthier, but that being said, I do think exploration is an exciting part of life. Whether that's sexual exploration or not, I think people figure out their limits and what they like and dislike through meeting people in college," Jenna, a UW-Madison junior, told the Cardinal.

Still, many students say dating culture can always be healthier. In a study from the [American Psychological Association](#), 82% of men and 57% of women were generally glad they had participated in a casual hookup, showing a stark contrast between how men and women feel the morning after.

The complexities of modern relationships have also drawn the attention of some researchers at UW-Madison.

[Dr. Lauren Papp](#) has been a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) at UW's School of Human Ecology since 2006. She started the UW Couples Lab in 2007 to 2014 and currently leads its research efforts.

"We know that how relationships are going holds important consequences, especially for young adults. It influences friendships, academic success, financial stress, substance abuse and many other areas of our lives," Papp [said](#). "Our relationships make a huge impact not only on our mental health but our physical health as well."

"I think people have been getting more vocal about all the different types of relationships instead of just dating for marriage," Sofia, a UW-Madison junior, said. "But there's still a part of everyone that disagrees with 'playing the field,' and that hate is definitely more prevalent in shaming women."

Debates continue over whether hookup culture [empowers or degrades](#) women, especially as conversations about "[slut-shaming](#)" and [victim-blaming](#) become more mainstream.

A [study](#) conducted by the American College Health Association and shared by UW-Madison found the median number of sexual partners among college students in the past year falls between 0 and 1. Yet, 56.8% of students report engaging in oral sex, 51.9% in vaginal sex and 13.6% engage in anal sex. Despite perceptions, not "everyone is doing it." Many students choose not to engage in sexual activity.

The media's influence on dating expectations

Popular [television shows](#) for young adults like "Love Island," "Euphoria," "The Summer I Turned Pretty" and "Outer Banks" often portray relationships [filled](#) with cheating, neglect and emotional, sexual or physical abuse.

Such depictions can [skew](#) students' perceptions of what a relationship should look like.

"A vast majority [of shows] do not [promote healthy relationships]," said Max, a UW-Madison junior. "But I think many quality shows and movies portray unhealthy relationships as a lesson, not as encouragement."

Jenna agreed. "Relationships can be very complicated or hard at times, and I think TV and movies portray that pretty well, but I believe there is always room for improvement such as having more representation of all kinds of relationships," she said.

Many students turn to dating apps like Tinder, Hinge, Bumble and OkCupid, whether for casual hookups or genuine romantic connections.

"I also think a lot of people are just scared of the idea of a relationship, so they settle with the easier option of a situationship," Ethan said. "I think there's a lot of people on dating apps who have no business being there because they aren't actually ready for a relationship."

Students interviewed by the Cardinal largely agreed that dishonesty is common on dating apps, which is one significant fault with finding a partner or a hookup from an app.

[Wiscochicks](#), a popular Instagram account geared toward UW-Madison students, frequently posts screenshots of crude or sexual pickup lines sent on dating apps called "Tinder Tuesday."

"I would say you're beautiful but beauty is on the inside and I haven't been inside you yet," one [message](#) read in an Aug. 12 post.

Another student, Sofia, shared that a man once messaged her, "do u wanna ride the stache," on Tinder, a euphemism for oral sex. These examples, students say, reflect a larger issue: many students report feeling objectified or unsafe on dating apps.

Safety and self-awareness

"If you are in a healthy headspace and have a good sense of what you want and don't want in a partner, and are communicating those wants, dating, even on apps, can be a good experience at Madison," Max said.

He added that the worst dating experiences he's heard of involved rebounds, dating within dorm floors or ignoring clear red flags.

Safety remains a [priority](#) for many students. "Safety is so important in the end, so just making sure people feel comfortable and safe on and offline is my biggest concern about dating culture," Jenna said.

Finding balance

Papp has three pieces of [advice](#) for students interested in dating.

"Be an agreeable and engaged person most of the time; be kind, good-natured, and forgiving," she said. "Minimize your negativity.. When conflicts arise, handle them directly and constructively. No need to bring up every other annoyance or dwell on past mistakes."

Lastly, she advised students to "devote energy to keeping the emotional and physical affection in your relationship high."

These pieces of advice will allow people to improve their romantic relationships by fostering understanding and mutual respect. Papp emphasized that some issues might need more time to resolve, but said that ensuring communication remains open will allow for a happier, healthier relationship.

In 2014, Papp said research showed that people interested in dating or starting a relationship should be less picky about what they're looking for in a partner. Usually, a person should have no more than three non-negotiable traits in mind for an ideal partner.

"If you're looking for too many specific qualities in a potential partner, then your chance of finding that person becomes nearly impossible," Papp [explained](#).

Dating in college is [not supposed to be stressful](#). It should be a positive interaction between consenting adults, no matter what form it takes.

Support your local paper

 DONATE TODAY

The Daily Cardinal has been covering the University and Madison community since 1892. Please consider giving today.

The Daily Cardinal

608-262-8000 · 2142 Vilas Communication Hall
821 University Avenue · Madison, Wis. 53706-1497

Powered by  WORKS Solutions by The State News
All Content © 2026 The Daily Cardinal