

Epilogue

The Swinging Pendulum of Sex Education

“We cannot deny that proponents of a strict abstinence-only-until-marriage approach have had a very good decade,” a SIECUS leader admitted in 2003. She attributed their success to a shrewd ability to change strategies and reformulate messages. For example,

early drafts of fear-based abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula were clearly religious in nature and made outrageous and dangerous suggestions like washing one’s genitals with Lysol after sexuality activity. In today’s drafts, overt religious statements have been replaced with subtle references to spirituality and morality while blatantly false information has been replaced with mild exaggerations based on legitimate sources. Today, their message is savvy and unified.¹

Scholars have also noted that the “existence of secular and religious versions of the same abstinence-only curricula provides another example of the religious roots of abstinence-only education.”² Ironically, evangelicals had employed the same strategy as liberal religious sex educators, translating their sexual values into broader nonsectarian or nonreligious terms to reach beyond their immediate constituents and impact secular spheres.

Despite the trend of many abstinence-only programs in omitting overt religious messages, especially in curricula geared toward public schools, the separation of church and state continued to be an issue in the distribution of federal grants. In 2002, the American Civil Liberties Union charged the state of Louisiana with inappropriately using Title V federal funds within its Governor’s Program on Abstinence. It claimed that groups sponsored by the program promoted prayer, pro-life activism, and overt references to the Bible and Christian figures. A US district judge ordered that the program cease its practice of partnering with abstinence-only organizations that promoted religious messages.³ The final settlement forbade the state from advancing

religion or religious messages in any way through the Governor's Program on Abstinence, but the issue was far from settled.⁴ The American Civil Liberties Union continued to raise concerns about the program's website, which it claimed violated the settlement by including links that promoted religious content.⁵ The case demonstrated that not all abstinence-only proponents were willing to translate their religious values into secular language and that such resistance posed challenges to the First Amendment's disestablishment of religion.

Questioning the Dominance of Abstinence-Only

The early years of the twenty-first century hinted at a potential degeneration of the dominance that abstinence-only had enjoyed since the 1996 creation of Title V. In 2001, Surgeon General David Satcher proclaimed sexuality to be one of the most pressing public health concerns in the United States. He shared statistics showing that almost one-half of pregnancies in the country were unintended, and sexually transmitted diseases were among the most commonly reported infectious diseases. Some of the diseases increased risks of infertility, cervical cancer, and, in the case of HIV/AIDS, death. Other reported crises included sexual abuse of women and children, anti-gay violence, and high rates of abortion.⁶ Satcher's report called for expanded national conversations on these issues and an increase in sexuality education. While he did not denounce abstinence-only education, he noted that there was not yet enough evidence about its effectiveness for delaying the initiation of sex, changing sexual attitudes, or increasing the use of contraceptives among those already sexually active.⁷

Studies investigating the effectiveness of abstinence-only programs became more prevalent, including research sponsored by the government. Within early studies, those who investigated the impact of programs on initial attitude changes and intentions often found them to be effective, while those who studied the longer-term impact on attitudes and a range of sexual behaviors found little to no evidence of success.⁸ This was a telling sign that effectiveness was being measured and claimed in different ways and that actual behaviors did not necessarily correlate to attitudes or intentions, especially over time. Abstinence-only proponents and opponents, as a result, cited the

very same studies to each proclaim victory—a problem that continues into the present, contributing to the confusion of sex education debates.

Along with growing accusations about the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only programs, critics also noted problematic content. A 2004 report released on behalf of Henry A. Waxman, a US Representative for California who served as minority leader of the House Committee on Government Reform, found that most of the federally funded abstinence-only programs it surveyed contained inaccuracies, including “misinformation about condoms, abortion, and basic scientific facts. They also blur religion and science and present gender stereotypes as fact.”⁹ An abstinence-only proponent responded by saying that the Waxman report itself was “riddled with errors.” Among other things, she claimed Waxman ignored studies that proved the effectiveness of abstinence-only for impacting sexual behavior, although many of those evaluations had not been published in peer-reviewed scientific journals and some were misrepresented.¹⁰ For example, one of the programs touted as abstinence-only was taught as part of a comprehensive program that included instruction on contraception and offered contraceptive counseling, making it more appropriate to cite as evidence supporting a comprehensive approach than an abstinence-only one.¹¹ Concerns voiced by the Waxman report continued to be noted in other studies and by comprehensive sexuality educators, including charges of medical distortions and inaccuracies, omission of essential health information, endorsement of conservative religious and cultural ideology, reinforcement of stark gender differences, sexism, discrimination against people of nonnormative sexual orientations, and the shaming of teen parents and other sexually active teens.¹² Furthermore, abstinence-only *evaluation methods* sponsored by the government have been shown to perpetuate heterosexism and the false assumptions that premarital sex is always risky and marital sex is always safe, indicating how unquestioned these frameworks have been. The result is that such evaluations can legitimate and perpetuate rather than critically evaluate the content of these programs.¹³

In 2007, Mathematica Policy Research released the long-awaited results of a government-sponsored scientific study of four major Title V-funded abstinence-only programs. The study, authorized by Congress a decade earlier, concluded that the programs had no significant impact on sexual behavior, either positively or negatively. Although these findings have largely benefited critics of abstinence-only, it undercut their argument about the harm of such programs since it found that the curricula did not increase

the likeliness of students having unprotected sex.¹⁴ A 2012 meta-analysis sponsored by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention examined twenty-three studies of abstinence programs and determined that “no conclusions could be drawn” about their effectiveness based on the paucity of studies available and their “inconsistent findings.”¹⁵ As a result of uncertainties and growing criticisms, more states opted out of federal abstinence-only funding, many of them choosing instead to fund their own more comprehensive programs. By 2008, sixteen states had rejected Title V abstinence-only funding.¹⁶

Unlike earlier versions of sex education, abstinence-only curricula have generally not prioritized medical frameworks. One reason for this difference is that liberal religious sex educators enthusiastically embraced the findings of scientific authorities while conservative Protestant abstinence-only proponents and the groups to which they belong have had a more challenging relationship with mainstream scientific authority on specific issues.¹⁷ In light of critiques like the Waxman report, certain states have mandated that their sex education courses be medically accurate and at least one major legal challenge has been won over the errors and biases found in an abstinence-only curriculum. The outcome of that case suggests that opposition to abstinence-only programs based on inaccuracies could be more effective than cases over the separation of church and state given the more fixed nature of scientific standards compared to the ease in which religious content could be altered for public schools.¹⁸

Responding to criticisms and negative evaluations, President Barack Obama’s administration attempted to end the major sources of federal support for abstinence-only programs. Congress allowed Title V funds to expire in June 2009, by which time twenty-two states had already stopped participating in the program. By the close of that year, Congress eliminated the remaining two funding streams, the Community-Based Abstinence Education program and the Adolescent Family Life Act, when it passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2010. For a brief period, the government had no funds dedicated specifically to abstinence-only programs, leaving the future of federal funding in this area uncertain. Conservative lobbyists and members of Congress took immediate action to reverse the trend. By March 2010, they succeeded in reviving Title V provisions of \$50 million per year as part of health care reform within the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.¹⁹ Their success was assisted by the publication one month earlier of a study that is now frequently cited by abstinence promoters. It demonstrated

that one abstinence program was more effective than a safer-sex program at reducing sexual initiation among African American public-school students, even though it stated that the program “would not meet federal criteria for abstinence programs” and that its conclusions “should not be taken to mean that all abstinence-only interventions are efficacious.”²⁰

In the meantime, evidence accumulated of comprehensive sexuality education’s ability to reduce sexual risk behaviors, teen pregnancy, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections.²¹ A 2017 review of the studies prompted the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine to issue a position paper stating that federally funded abstinence-only programs “are ethically flawed, are not evidence-based, and interfere with fundamental human rights to complete and accurate health information.” In their place, they recommended comprehensive sexuality education.²²

Along with attempts to eliminate abstinence-only grants, Obama and Congress created two new streams of funding that could be applied toward comprehensive sexuality education: the president’s Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative (TPP) and the Personal Responsibility Education Program. The former dedicated \$114.5 million in 2010 to support and evaluate evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs.²³ The latter allocated \$75 million each year for programs that taught about a range of effective methods for the prevention of pregnancy and diseases, including contraceptives and abstinence. The Personal Responsibility Education Program also incorporated a series of adult preparation topics, such as healthy life skills, relationships, finances, and career success.²⁴ Funds for comprehensive sexuality education were also available through the Division of Adolescent and School Health of the Center for Disease Control as part of its initiatives to reduce sexually transmitted infections.

The twenty-first century has seen a series of pendulum swings for proponents of comprehensive sexuality and abstinence-only programs, revealing the power of federal budgets to influence the direction of education. A March 2014 announcement that President Obama would not be extending abstinence-only funding for the next fiscal year generated protests, and within one month it was back in the budget alongside continued funding for comprehensive programs. Amid charges of ineffectiveness and in response to comprehensive sexuality educators’ framing of sexuality as a public health issue, abstinence-only proponents started to relabel their programs as “sexual risk avoidance education.” The change echoed the emphasis on risk avoidance within other youth-oriented public health programs, such

as those aimed at avoiding the risk behaviors of drugs, smoking, and underage drinking.²⁵ At the forefront of this shift was the National Abstinence Education Association, which renamed itself Ascend in 2012 and now claims to be “the nation’s leader in the Sexual Risk Avoidance field.”²⁶ The new label strategically contrasted the classification of comprehensive sexuality education as “sexual risk reduction education.” By recasting programs in this way, abstinence-only advocates hoped people would support *avoidance* of disease and teenage pregnancy over *reduction*. Alongside the focus on teenage sexuality as an inherent risk were phrases adopted directly from comprehensive sexuality educators, including a focus on healthy relationships, evidence-based approaches, and medical accuracy.²⁷ Conservative Protestant organizations like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council have, for the most part, followed suit in adopting the language of sexual risk avoidance, although they maintained references to abstinence-only to reassure their constituents that the fundamental approach had not changed.²⁸

Lawmakers supporting abstinence-only adopted the language of sexual risk avoidance in 2015 to extend Title V funding for two more years and increase it from \$50 million to \$75 million.²⁹ The funding stream has since been renamed Title V Sexual Risk Avoidance Education, and its guidelines for abstinence-only programs have been reconfigured, but with similar goals. Thereafter, funded programs must deliver a clear and central “message to youth that normalizes the optimal health behavior of avoiding non-marital sexual activity.” The amended Title V specified information that must be withheld from students, including demonstrations involving condoms or other contraceptives.³⁰ The revised definition conveyed the idea that premarital sex has a negative impact on the participants’ futures, including a greater risk of poverty and physical and emotional problems, and that “even with consent teen sex remains a youth risk behavior.” In addition to Title V funding, a new funding stream was created in 2016, also called Sexual Risk Avoidance Education. Both funding sources required that the programs teach students to refrain from sexual activity until marriage.

Along with emphasizing how teen sex can lead to poverty, sexual risk avoidance education has promoted the “success sequence” as a way for students to pursue financial stability. This approach encourages millennials to follow the sequence of graduating, gaining full-time employment, and marrying before having children if they want a significantly decreased chance of poverty.³¹ The link between teen sex and poverty echoes Title V’s earlier connection with welfare. However, critics have rejected the success sequence for failing

to account for “systemic inequities—such as racism, inequality, discrimination and trauma—that contribute to poverty and also influence adolescent sexual and reproductive health.”³² Critics reference findings that “even when black Americans do follow all three norms [of the success sequence], their economic prospects are worse than whites.”³³ Because a decreased risk of poverty does occur for participants across races, even though in different proportions, sexual risk avoidance groups like Ascend insist that the success sequence works “regardless of race and socioeconomic privilege.”³⁴

President Trump’s Promotion of Sexual Risk Avoidance

The election of President Donald J. Trump marked another swing of the pendulum for sex education. In June 2017, he appointed Valerie Huber, the former president and CEO of Ascend, as a chief of staff within the US Department of Health and Human Services. This meant that the leading advocate for abstinence-only and sexual risk avoidance education was now in a position of power within the office that administers federal funding for sex education. Just one month before her appointment, she criticized comprehensive sexuality education for normalizing teen sex and proclaimed sexual risk avoidance as a triumph of “common sense, science and health.” Using language that originated within comprehensive sexuality education, Huber described sexual risk avoidance as “holistic,” “medically accurate” education that provides youth with the “choice” to remain abstinent. By contrast, she believed comprehensive programs pressured teens to have sex. She insisted that risk-avoidance programs benefit all youth “regardless of sexual experience or orientation” in an effort to counter criticisms that such programs denigrate youth who are LGBTQ or already sexually active. Comparing teen sex with smoking, drinking alcohol, and using drugs, she concluded that the “the healthiest message for youth is one that gives youth the skills and information to avoid the risks of teen sex, not merely reduce them.”³⁵

Huber’s appointment initiated a series of attempts to transfer funding from comprehensive sexuality education to sexual risk avoidance education. One month after her appointment, Health and Human Services notified grantees of the Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) program that their five-year grants would end two years early. To justify this action after the fact, it issued a press release entitled “False Claims vs. The Facts.” The announcement

insisted that the TPP program was not working and was wasting taxpayer money in its current form, citing recently released data based on the first round of grants.³⁶

Conclusions from the first-round TPP evaluation studies have been used to pursue radically different agendas, another example of how scientific data have been portrayed to produce divergent claims about effectiveness. Forty-one programs in the 2010–2015 funding cycle were evaluated. Of the nineteen evidence-based programs, referring to those that had proven effective in a previous context, results indicated that four had impacted sexual behavior when applied in a new setting. Of the twenty-two evaluations of new approaches, eight were shown to affect behavior.³⁷ Health and Human Services under the Trump administration chose to interpret these results as a failure of the TPP program, emphasizing the message that of the funded programs “73% either had no impact or had a negative impact on teen behavior, with some teens more likely to begin having sex, to engage in unprotected sex, or to become pregnant.”³⁸ This, however, exaggerated the findings, as the negative impact was explained by the original researchers as the result of a control group within one evaluation unexpectedly receiving pregnancy prevention lessons when they, for the sake of the study, were supposed to receive none.³⁹ The 73 percent failure rate cited also includes the almost one-third of programs with inconclusive results based on factors like low attendance or low rates of sexual activity given the young age of participants. On the other hand, the original researchers of the TPP evaluations lauded the studies for providing ample data that will be used to improve programs and evaluation methods, for identifying eight new programs with evidence for effectiveness, and for showing different contexts where four evidence-based programs were effectively replicated. While acknowledging that certain programs that were once effective may no longer be relevant given the changing nature of student needs, they also contextualized the findings by the fact that large-scale replication studies have notoriously low percentages of positive results. So rather than a dismal failure, the four successful replications out of nineteen had exceeded their expectations.⁴⁰

After receiving notification that TPP grants would conclude two years early, grantees swiftly filed lawsuits. Federal courts for each case ruled in their favor, concluding that Health and Human Services could not prematurely withdraw the promised funding. In response to one charge that the actions resulted from an inappropriate mixing of the government with religion, however, a court in Washington found that a First Amendment violation

could only be determined based on how future TPP grants are managed and disbursed. It also clarified that Valerie Huber's personal religious beliefs or actions could not be considered in this determination, citing Supreme Court precedent from a 1990 case that declared that only the purpose of the law itself mattered, not the religious intent of those who sponsored it.⁴¹ The fact that this issue was raised by grantees shows a continual concern that conservative Christian beliefs have influenced abstinence-only political agendas.

Forbidden from revoking grants already made to comprehensive programs, Health and Human Services created an updated call for TPP funding that would support more abstinence-only or sexual risk avoidance programs.⁴² Courts soon struck down this strategy based on the fact that it did not meet the program's originally stated goal of replicating evidence-based programs.⁴³ Abstinence-only programs that wish to receive TPP funding must show effectiveness on at least one behavioral outcome through a scientific, peer-reviewed study that meets the TPP evaluation criteria. Several so far have succeeded in meeting this standard, beginning with the Heritage Keepers Abstinence-only Curriculum that was added to the list in 2012. Other programs that do not meet these criteria can still find funding through Title V Sexual Risk Avoidance Education or the separate but eponymous Sexual Risk Avoidance Education.

While courts have halted efforts to defund comprehensive sexuality education, advocates of abstinence-only have had success using federal funding to export their message to other countries. The US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) began in 2003 under President George W. Bush and initially dedicated one-third of its prevention funds to abstinence-only education and advertising. After a report was issued by the Government Accountability Office indicating that the one-third mandate hindered HIV prevention efforts, the mandate was challenged and eventually eliminated.⁴⁴ A later study found no evidence that PEPFAR funding for abstinence-until-marriage and corresponding faithfulness-within-marriage programs in sub-Saharan Africa resulted in population-level reductions in high-risk sexual behaviors.⁴⁵ Even after the one-third requirement was dropped, however, lingering influences of the abstinence-only-until marriage message remained, and many voiced concern that it would regain prominence within PEPFAR under Trump's presidency.⁴⁶ In line with these suspicions, in early 2019 President Trump appointed Valerie Huber to a new role as senior policy advisor for the Office of Global Affairs at Health and Human Services, the office that administers PEPFAR. The effects of this appointment remain to

be seen, although comprehensive sexuality advocates expect an increase of sexual risk avoidance strategies and a decrease of contraceptive initiatives within this international program.⁴⁷

Beyond the Present State of Sex Education

The policy debate is far from settled, although it is clear that future presidential elections will greatly influence which types of sex education receive federal funding and that trends supporting evidence-based programs will continue. Perhaps the biggest irony is that beneath intense conflicts, proponents of each form of sex education have learned immensely from the other. Abstinence-only advocates adapted many strategies from comprehensive sexuality education to their Christian moral vision, including medical and health-oriented frameworks, positive rhetoric about sexuality, and the language of individual choice and rights. SIECUS initiated the move to situate sexuality within the field of public health, but abstinence-only advocates have turned this to their advantage by aligning abstinence-only with the risk avoidance strategies promoted for the public health topics of smoking, underage drinking, and drug use. As legal restrictions required abstinence-only educators to eliminate explicit religious references, they borrowed another tactic from SIECUS and accepted the position that many of their values about sexuality could be taught without the name of God or the Bible. For SIECUS and AIDS education, abstinence became a more prominent feature, especially as liberal sex educators tried to correct accusations that their new morality encouraged permissiveness. The politicized nature of the word “abstinence” came to invoke the culture wars that waged around it, obscuring the fact that almost everyone steering the conversations still agreed on the importance of controlling the sexual lives of young people.

Recent trends indicate a significant decline in teen birth rates in the United States: a 67 percent decrease from 1991 to 2016, although this rate is still greater than in many other developed countries.⁴⁸ At the same time, rates of sexually transmitted infections have increased dramatically, especially among teens.⁴⁹ Both sides interpret these data as supporting their causes. Abstinence-only proponents take credit for more teens waiting to have sex and therefore avoiding teenage pregnancies. They alternately attribute the high rates of sexually transmitted infections to the failure of contraceptives

to protect sexually active teens and the corresponding ineffectiveness of comprehensive sexuality education. For their part, comprehensive sexuality educators imply that the decrease in teenage pregnancies aligns with their combined instruction on both contraceptives and abstinence, and that the lack of instruction on contraceptives within abstinence-only education is at least partly responsible for the rise in unprotected sex among teens.⁵⁰

Although comprehensive sexuality educators have been leading voices in the trend for scientific evidence-based initiatives, abstinence-only advocates have also enthusiastically accepted these terms of engagement and amassed their own set of evidence.⁵¹ As both sides become further entrenched in this trend to prove behavioral changes, it is important to note the limitations of the current model. Comprehensive sexuality advocates caution that much is dangerously absent from the evidence-based federal guidelines, including requirements that sexual health education teach tools to combat the sexism, heterosexism, and racial and class-based ideologies that have been proven to negatively impact sexual health.⁵² This warning hints at the socially constructed nature of interpretations and experiences of sexuality, suggesting the additional need to go beyond the sciences to explore the wealth of evidence that history and other academic disciplines in the humanities have to offer sex education. Education about sexuality at the college level has long taken advantage of interdisciplinary perspectives. Within K–12 education, students may similarly benefit from learning that conceptions and experiences of sexuality and marriage have differed widely across time, space, and culture. While scientific studies and their replications can make it seem as if aspects of sexuality are objective, eternal truths, further attention to humanities' evidence reveals the culturally and historically contingent nature of sexuality and the need to assess the value of education beyond its translation into individual behaviors.

It is unlikely that either side will emerge fully victorious so long as the debate is waged within the limited framework that values sex education only for its impact on the sexual actions of teens. The push for evidence-based sex education programs is relatively recent, but it emerged from a long history of similar intentions to reform behavior grounded in the idea that students will do as they are taught. As leading historian of sex education Jeffrey P. Moran warned us almost two decades ago, “The inadequacy of an instrumentalist approach should compel sex educators to stop ‘selling’ their programs as solutions to teenage pregnancy, sexuality transmitted diseases, and other real or imagined crises of adolescent sexual behavior.”⁵³

Though obscured by recent frameworks and events, earlier religious involvement forged core values that now shape both sides of sex education debates. A century of liberal Protestant sex education efforts within the mainstream movement developed progressive and conservative foundations, unintentionally resulting in two opposing inheritors of the tradition. Combinations of expansive and restrictive sexual frameworks within this history reflected strategic efforts of religious people to interact with cultural trends of their time, to infuse the teaching of sexuality with religious values and concerns, and to help sex education—however they defined it—achieve wider acceptance in the United States.

Liberal religious trends that laid the groundwork for comprehensive sexuality education included the transformation of the concept of sexuality to include the total personality and social relationships, reliance upon scientific information about sexuality, a focus on the positive dimensions and diversity of sexuality, and a desire to adapt sexual norms to modern situations. As we have seen, many of these trends emerged from interactions between liberal Protestant sex educators, scientific professionals, and educators, as well as the corresponding desire of religious leaders to address this important dimension of human life. Advancing sex education became one way in which liberal religions, especially Protestantism, adapted traditions to contemporary culture.

On the other hand, the foundations of abstinence-only education (and now sexual risk avoidance education) can be traced to conservative trends of these same historical actors. These include the continued insistence on teaching morals about sexuality, a focus on sexually immoral behavior, and emphases on ideals of sexual purity before marriage; monogamous, heterosexual marriages; and complementary gender roles. Abstinence-only education particularly reflects themes from two previous phases in which religion inspired and molded sex education: social purity education and family life education. From the social purity framework, abstinence-only echoes the emphasis on protection from sexual behaviors, focusing on what not to do in order to maintain personal moral character and the larger moral order. From family life education, abstinence-only education adopts the framework of “traditional family values.” This is a positive discussion of sexuality tied to the home and heterosexual marriage that reinforces a connection between women’s sexuality and domestic responsibilities. Thus, abstinence-only education has combined multiple strategies for discussing sexuality in order to

promote itself as a morally pure, family-friendly alternative to comprehensive sexuality education.

In most parts of this history, therefore, sex educators selectively challenged cultural boundaries while maintaining a familiar set of values. The limited scope of their progressive agenda was particularly evident in the area of gender roles and sexual orientation. Leaders of the mainstream movement considered themselves to be in the vanguard of inculcating sexual awareness, but they remained conspicuously silent regarding progressive developments in female sexuality and same-sex sexual relationships. Instead, they perpetuated the larger culture's denial of the sexual agency of heterosexual, lesbian, and transgender women and gay and transgender men. Distancing itself from the feminism of the birth control movement, the American Social Hygiene Association and its partners—the Young Men's Christian Association, the military, and the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America—focused most of their efforts on educating white males about heterosexual sexuality. Female sexuality was invoked only indirectly through the narrow tropes of the virgin, the prostitute, or the mother. The shift toward family life education, which was initiated by liberal Protestant sex educators like Anna Garlin Spencer, brought women more into focus, but through a relatively narrow lens. It was not until the creation of SIECUS that sex educators began to listen to progressive voices agitating for recognition of the sexual agency of women, and even then, some kept their distance from the feminist movement. The cultural tides shifted so dramatically during the perceived “sexual revolution” that some of the trends were embraced by conservative Christians, who celebrated and instructed about women's sexual pleasure within their growing genre of marriage manuals.

Liberal religious strategies devised for influencing American understandings of sexuality were responding to the challenges of teaching a religiously plural public. Over time, liberal Protestants recognized that their religious audience was increasingly diverse, so they emphasized broad themes of morality and shifted frameworks to reach more people. The gradual embrace of religious pluralism in many ways produced a wider discussion of sexual pluralism and moral pluralism. It was this progressive impulse to expand boundaries and include everyone that led to the alienation of those committed to fixed boundaries. Thus, the pluralist approach to religious values of sexuality backfired, with its failure to encompass all perspectives leading to unintended consequences. In reaction, an approach that closed the door to religiously varied approaches to sexuality—and, by consequence, the discussion of diverse sexualities—won the

day in arenas of pluralism. Conservative Christian proponents of abstinence-only education advanced education about “no sex” as the most satisfying answer for the public school classroom.

Popular and scholarly accounts have tended to accept the narrative promoted by the Christian Right as well as some comprehensive sexuality educators that “religion” is aligned with abstinence-only education and “secularism” with comprehensive sexuality education. This oversimplification distorts the complex historical and contemporary relationships between religion and public efforts to educate about sexuality. It also obscures the fact that views deemed restrictive today motivated and facilitated progressive reforms in earlier decades. Pioneering religious efforts to increase sexual understanding through moral frameworks have, ironically, opened doors for programs that actively suppress knowledge about sexuality.