

A RING BY SPRING?

Research examines how pressure to get married before graduation at Whitworth and other Christian colleges can burden students

BY WILSON CRISCIONE

When Stacy Keogh George came to Whitworth University in 2013, she noticed something familiar. As spring neared, George's students approached her and expressed a common fear: They were ready to graduate, but they still had no engagement ring on their finger.

George remembers feeling the same pressure when she was a student at a Christian college, George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. The idea was that women, by the time they graduated, should find a man to marry — that they should get a “ring by spring.” At Whitworth, some students thought their success in college was tied to their marital status.

“They were clearly intelligent students pursuing a degree,” George says. “Yet they feel like they have to be married in order to be successful college students.”

So George, an assistant professor of sociology, wanted to find out where the “ring by spring” culture was coming from and how it impacts students. Since 2014, she has studied the topic, conducting surveys and analyzing the results. What she's found may provide some direction for Christian universities and students on how to navigate dating culture in a generation that seems to be getting married later and later in life.

One thing her research has shown, she says, is that the “ring by spring” culture can negatively impact the dating culture for both men and women, particularly women.

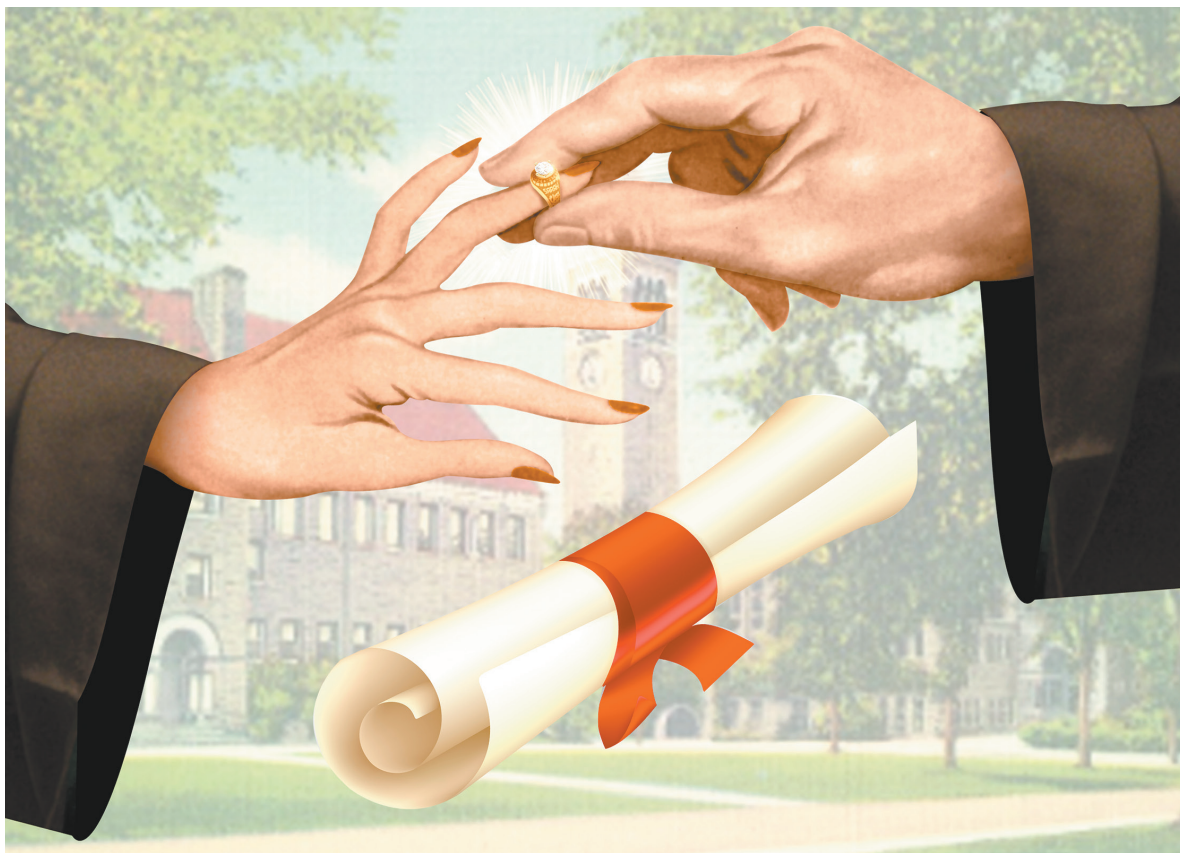
“I have yet to find a comment in any of my surveys that has said that ‘ring by spring’ promotes positive relationships on campus,” she says. “I think marriage is a great thing — I'm married — but in terms of dating culture and getting to know somebody, there's so much pressure that it deters people potentially away from engaging in what I would say are healthy relationships.”

The “ring by spring” culture is not always taken seriously, George says. In her surveys, George found that students thought the pressure to get engaged before they graduate was “ridiculous,” or a joke. And very few people who graduate, George says, are actually getting married to somebody by spring of their senior year.

But even if it is a joke, it can still have an impact. Emily Moline, who graduated from Whitworth in December, remembers hearing about getting a “ring by spring”



Stacy Keogh George
WHITWORTH UNIVERSITY



during her freshman orientation.

“It was still mentioned and given air space at freshman orientation,” Moline says. “It's still real.”

From personal experience, Moline, who became George's research assistant, noticed relationships failing because a guy or a girl, at age 19, wasn't sure if it would result in marriage. Casually dating, she says, was not encouraged.

“People don't go out to coffee with somebody just because they don't think they could marry them, which takes away the purpose of dating,” George says.

But George's research does suggest that women feel more pressure than men. In George's first survey of students in 2014, nearly two-thirds of women reported some pressure to be married, or were already married. Only 22 percent of men felt any pressure at all.

George acknowledges that for many Christians, taking relationships seriously, with an eye toward marriage, is not a bad thing. It's a contrast from the “hookup culture” pervading other college campuses in the country. And a college campus, where young Christians are surrounded by like-minded people of their age, is a great place to find a partner. But she says many students think that if it doesn't happen in college, then it never will.

“And that's just unrealistic,” she says.

For Moline, it felt like a “ticking clock” as she neared spring of her senior year.

“When you're nearing the end of your four years, it's like, what are you gonna do next year?” Moline says. “A lot of people see that as an opportunity to get engaged, and I think that having that religious affiliation puts pressure on people not to cohabitate — so if you don't want to move in together, the best thing is to get engaged.”

In a paper published in Baylor University's *The Christian Reflection Project*, George wonders where this expectation comes from. Her findings, which may not be surprising, suggest “a correlation between students who go to church frequently and the amount of pressure they feel to marry.”

It also has to do with a student's upbringing, she says.

“If that's the message they've been hearing their entire childhood and young adulthood, that's certainly going to create pressure for kids,” she says.

In George's second wave of surveys, conducted last year, she found that many students who did choose to get married young may not be prepared for what they were getting into. Less

than half of students were enrolled in premarital counseling, and only one in five had bought any marital books or materials.

George writes that with high divorce rates among Christian marriages, it's important for Christian colleges and the church to help students discern whether they should marry in college.

In her next round of research, George says she will study how marriages of Whitworth alumni who got married in college worked out, and how the pressure to marry at Whitworth compares to other colleges, since the idea of finding a partner in college is not exclusive to Whitworth.

“I'm not saying that getting a ‘ring by spring’ and getting engaged by the time you leave Whitworth is a bad thing, necessarily,” George says. “I just want to make sure students know there are other options.” ■

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