

Marriage 101: An Integrated Academic and Experiential Undergraduate Marriage Education Course*

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We describe "Marriage 101: Building Loving and Lasting Partnerships," an innovative, for-credit undergraduate course at a large, religiously unaffiliated research university. Marriage 101 engages students in the scientific literature and discourse in the psychology and sociology of marriage and marital success. The course has the additional explicitly practical goals of preparing students to choose compatible partners, to face inevitable challenges, and to experience greater marital and relationship satisfaction. To achieve these goals, Marriage 101 integrates traditional academic methods with experiential and self-discovery assignments. Four years of experience with 150 students has found students eager to learn and able to do so, gaining considerable insight about themselves and the challenges of intimate relationships.

The vast majority of marriage preparation courses are designed either for high school students or for couples who have already decided to marry. Little work has targeted college students, a group old enough to have had substantial dating experience but not yet committed to a particular partner. Most college-level courses concerning marriage and intimate relationships are purely academic and lack "marriage preparation" goals (Lowe, 2003). The course described here aims to fill this gap—to be simultaneously a rigorous academic course and a state-of-the-art marriage preparation program. In this article, we address the rationale, development, objectives, content, administration, evaluation, and future directions of the course: "Marriage 101: Building Loving and Lasting Partnerships."

Marriage 101 is taught at Northwestern University, a large, private, nonsectarian research university, by faculty of the Family Institute at Northwestern University (an independent not-for-profit institution affiliated with the university). All faculty members are practicing couples therapists who hold clinical faculty appointments at the university. Marriage 101 meets once weekly for 2.5 hours during an 11-week academic quarter.

Each week, students explore an important topic through assigned readings, a large lecture, experiential exercises and discussion in small groups, and self-inquiry questions in a private, ungraded journal. Additional outside class assignments include interviewing two couples about their marriages (a married "mentor couple" from the community and the student's parents) and three other exercises that promote understanding of marital challenges. A final term paper is required.

We have taught four separate quarters to a total of 150 students, with a current class size of 50. Student enthusiasm and

involvement have been strong, and a variety of measures of educational success show favorable changes.

Rationale and Development of the Course

Desirability and Importance of Marital Success Versus High Failure Rates

About 90% of Americans will marry at some point during their lives (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2002), a number consistent with the high value that Americans place on marriage. Waite and Gallagher (2000) noted that "Ninety-three percent of Americans rate 'having a happy marriage' as either one of the most important, or a very important objective" (pp. 3–4). Regarding college students, Levine and Cureton (1998) summarized recent attitudinal research and concluded, "They are desperate to have only one marriage, and they want it to be happy. They don't know whether this is possible anymore" (p. 95, quoted in Waite & Gallagher, p. 3). Such doubts are understandable, because the current divorce rate for first marriages ranges from 40% to 50%, whereas overall divorce rates in the United States and Europe in the last half of the 20th century climbed steeply to close to 50% (Pinsof, 2002b).

Research on the effects of marriage and divorce consistently shows that for those couples who achieve it, marital success is beneficial (Nock, 1998; Waite & Gallagher, 2002), whereas high-conflict married life or divorce and its aftermath can be hurtful, though not always permanently harmful (Hetherington, 2003; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). Almost every dimension of human happiness or suffering is influenced by marital experience, including emotional well-being, physical health, and economic success. These effects pertain to children and their parents and show positive or adverse effects on the next generation of marriages (e.g., Booth & Amato 2001; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Hetherington). Such intergenerational effects offer hope that successful interventions aimed at improving marital success (e.g., marital happiness, resiliency, longevity) will have their impact magnified by positively influencing future generations. Because Americans both seek and dread marriage, we can ask what can be done to improve their chances of marital success?

Prevention

There are two broad approaches to the problem of divorce and unhappy marriages. The first approach treats problems after they occur through psychotherapy. Reviews of the marital

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therapy literature show that approximately two thirds of people who seek marital therapy are substantially improved afterward (Jacobson & Addis, 1993). However, in addition to the one third who do not respond, many who need treatment never seek it, and almost half of the people who are initially helped return to their troubled status within 2–4 years (Jacobson & Addis).

The second broad approach is prevention, where services are offered to people before their marriages are failing (Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002). Two preventive strategies have emerged in the last 20 years, with one focusing on younger adolescents and the other focusing on engaged and married couples. All such programs teach relationship skills through combinations of didactic lectures and experiential exercises. Many programs are sponsored and operated by religious institutions, and after high school, the majority of participants probably do so just prior to their weddings (see Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Stanley, 2001, for reviews.)

Our approach targets college students. There are four principal advantages of this group: (a) they have more dating experience than high school students and are developmentally closer to the tasks of selecting a life partner and building a committed relationship; (b) open discussions of sexuality are more appropriate and not burdened by parental concerns; (c) marital partner selection has only rarely occurred, so discussions can have practical effects; and (d) weddings are not impending, so discussions can be more searching.

Development Phase and Educational Priorities

The first two authors began formal discussions about the course in the fall of 1998. After long clinical and academic careers, we were impressed with the need to reach couples earlier and with the hunger of undergraduates for information about marriage. Our experiences as therapists and educators also suggested that a successful intervention would integrate didactic material with opportunities for personal learning and experiential growth. We obtained assistance from 10 undergraduate students who took an independent study class aimed at developing a marriage education course for their peers. Together with the students, we reviewed existing premarital and marital education programs and the research literature on success and failure in marriage (for review articles on this topic, see Larson & Holman, 1994 and Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Simultaneously, the students interviewed a sample of 50 undergraduate peers about what they wanted to know about intimate relationships. They also interviewed 15 experienced marital therapists (minimum of 10 years of experience) about what they believed should go into an undergraduate course on marriage. Following the independent study course, we engaged in extensive discussions aimed at integrating data from our clinical work, other programs, students, and the scientific literature that culminated in a framework for the class.

Although some details of the course have changed since its debut in the spring of 2001, the underlying structure still derives from this intensive developmental project and prioritizes cognitive learning and personal development in seven domains.

1. Love is not enough. The course disputes the common myth that romantic attraction, good intentions, and happiness in courtship are sufficient foundations for marriage.
2. Personal maturity and self-understanding. The marital therapists we interviewed unanimously asserted that “know thyself” was the foremost key to marital success, and various studies show a positive correlation between

emotional health and marital satisfaction (Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Holman, 2001).

3. Capacity to assess compatibility with prospective partners. The course stresses the importance of compatible partner selection (Becker, 1991; Pines, 1999) and explores how lovers are frequently misled by sexual pleasure, excessive idealization, and hopes to solve unconscious problems.
4. Intimacy and personal barriers to achieving it. Because happiness in marriage often hinges on the quantity and quality of intimate contact (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2003), the course examines intimacy and its specific challenges.
5. Sexual satisfaction and compatibility. The course emphasizes the special importance of sexual satisfaction and compatibility in marriage, and discusses some common sexual problems.
6. Conflict resolution and communication skills. The capacity to manage conflict well is currently the most robust predictor of marital happiness and stability (Gottman, 1994; Gottman, Coan, Carrera, & Swanson, 1998; Stanley et al., 2003) and is an important mediator of their intergenerational transmission (Hetherington, 2003).
7. Specific challenges that can undermine or overwhelm marriages. Many life problems impinge on marriages and can overtax otherwise adequate capacities to handle marital conflict (Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Hetherington, 2003). The course discusses some expectable marital challenges (e.g., managing children, in-laws, time, finances) and some more serious problems (e.g., alcoholism, physical abuse, extramarital affairs). We encourage students to seek social and professional help and information as needed later in life.

Across these seven dimensions, we expose students to various theoretical approaches to understanding personality, marriage, and divorce (e.g., psychoanalytic, attachment, family systems). Our approach is multifactorial, consistent with Larson and Holman’s (1994) “ecosystemic” and Karney and Bradbury’s (1995) “vulnerability-stress-adaptation” research-based models of marital success. However, Marriage 101 is intentionally eclectic and necessarily selective, assuming that new data and theories will require ongoing course revision.

Details of the Curriculum

The following description of the curriculum is necessarily circumscribed and omits many details concerning lectures, readings, breakout exercises, journal questions, and interview questions. More detailed current descriptions of these components are available on request from the first author. Specific readings, questions, and exercises have been added, discarded, and modified over the years; here we present those that have been the most useful to date.

Weekly Lectures, Readings, Journaling, and Experiential Exercises

Each class begins with a brief multiple-choice quiz on the assigned readings. This increases the odds that the readings are done and that students are present at the start of the lecture. The quiz is followed by a 75-minute lecture, which intersperses didactic material with video clips (see Appendix) and audience

participation. Following a break, the class divides into small groups of 6–10 students, each with a faculty facilitator, to discuss the day's topic and engage in relevant experiential exercises. Although a few of the exercises used come from other programs (e.g., the Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills or PAIRS program, <http://www.pairs.com>), we have authored and refined the vast majority. To facilitate openness in the breakout groups, facilitators emphasize that sensitive personal revelations must remain confidential and have no impact on grades. The breakout groups become increasingly cohesive and self-revelatory as the course progresses.

Because the course is intended to promote personal learning and challenges students to examine their intimate relationships, some students might be expected to experience emotional distress. In fact, serious personal distress has been almost nonexistent. The most common situation of stress has occurred when students interview their parents, especially if the parents have been unhappily married. In such situations, and at the opening of the class, we now emphasize that should the course cause emotional duress, students should seek consultative help from either their breakout group leader or from the course coordinator.

Students read about 100 pages per week, including almost the entirety of several texts: *Reconcilable Differences* (Christensen & Jacobson, 2000), which covers the “anatomy” of marital problems, serious problems, and forgiveness; *Mapping the Terrain of the Heart* (Goldbart & Wallin, 1994), which is a psychoanalytically based book on the capacities required for loving; *Fighting for Your Marriage* (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001), which presents the basics of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) approach, a practical guide to marital problems and possible solutions; *Falling in Love* (Pines, 1999) covers partner selection; and *The Good Marriage* (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1995), a guide to the challenges of marriage that offers hope that happiness is possible, while exposing excessively idealized expectations. Students also read some additional articles that have varied from year to year and cover specific topics in more detail than is possible in the lectures.

Throughout the course, we attempt to integrate weekly reading assignments with weekly experiential assignments. Assigned readings offer a theoretical and practical map of the relevant conceptual content. Experiential exercises, including journaling, challenge students to apply these concepts to the specifics of their own personalities and lives. In addition to the practical benefits achieved, applying course concepts to real situations brings them to life, demonstrates their utility, and renders them more memorable.

Class #1: Introduction and roundtable on marital success. The course opens by noting that most young adults lack a map for dealing with the highly predictable difficulties associated with marriage. We show clips from the film *The Story of Us* (2000), which poignantly portrays an attractive couple caught in marital disillusionment and near divorce despite initial romantic hopes and good intentions. The lecture emphasizes that although it is commonplace to study what makes for success in other risky life activities (e.g., starting a business, performing surgery, or climbing mountains), people are singularly naïve and passive when it comes to learning what makes a marriage work well. This introduction is followed by a roundtable discussion by the three senior faculty members (the first three authors) who comment briefly on their own views of what makes for marital success and then answer student questions.

Reading for the first class includes an overview on the status of marriage and marital research in the 20th century (Pinsof,

2002a) and research articles concerning what promotes marital success or failure (Gottman et al., 1998; Stanley et al., 2003; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995).

Experiential exercises for the first class begin by asking students to describe their ideal couple from movies or literature. This leads to discussions of each student's hopes and fears about marriage and intimate relationships. In groups of two, students discuss actual experiences bearing on the topic and the question, “Why is having a roommate more challenging than having a friend?”

Class #2: Getting to know yourself in intimate relationships. In keeping with our belief that self-understanding is critical to marital success, the second class begins explaining this proposition, as we argue,

If you are blind to your own issues, hot buttons, and values, you will tend to see the problems and discomfort you will inevitably experience in life as caused mostly by external circumstances, including by the insensitive, frustrating, and generally poor behavior of others, including your spouse. You will give in too easily to blaming others and to oversimplifying situations and will experience yourself as more of a victim than is fair or realistic. Blaming, oversimplifying and seeing oneself as victimized are all common characteristics of unhappy and unsuccessful marriages, as found by Christensen and Jacobson (2000), Markman et al. (2001), and Gottman (1994).

We show clips from *Annie Hall* (1977) and *The Story of Us* (2000) to illustrate how differing subjective realities can lead to marital pain and isolation. We then argue that to succeed in marriage, students need to know their hopes, wishes, fears, and sensitive issues concerning relationships, their gender role expectations, and their characteristic defense mechanisms. Readings for this class include selections from Goldbart and Wallin (1994) on specific capacities essential for loving relationships, and from Markman et al. (2001) on the concepts of “filters,” underlying issues, and typical disillusionments, which all require self-awareness and can imperil relationships. In the breakout groups, students practice empathic listening and facilitating as they take turns discussing actual good and bad relationship experiences, with an eye to uncovering the impact of their expectations, gender role assumptions, sensitive issues, and defenses.

Self-inquiry journal. After making the case for self-understanding, we introduce the journaling assignments. Students are required to keep a “self-inquiry journal” in which they respond to questions concerning each week's topic and outside class exercises. To ensure that this task is done thoughtfully and honestly, we require students to submit their completed journals at the end of the course, and we promise to cursorily examine but not read them. Journal questions for each class carry forward the inquiry begun in breakout groups with questions that are more detailed, challenging, and personal. Instructions associated with the second class include, “Write 10 words that describe yourself, and follow these with a paragraph about what you know about yourself in relationships;” questions probe their reactions to certain important emotional states (e.g., anger) in themselves and others.

Outside class exercise #1: Interview with a friend. We ask students to “interview someone who knows you well about how you are in relationships” and ask them, “What is it usually like to be with me? What are my greatest assets, strengths? What are my greatest challenges, blindspots?” They then reflect on this feedback in their journals. As with the parental interviews described

later, a latent goal of this exercise is to highlight the value of feedback and support from friends, an important correlate of marital satisfaction (Holman, 2001).

Class #3: Intimacy, friendship, and romantic love. Students often are puzzled by the differences and overlap between these concepts. We start with Sternberg's (1988) triangular model of love and discuss how romantic love can be both invigorating and problematic (Person, 1988). In deconstructing the concept of romantic love, we discuss the components of idealization, sexuality, and intimacy. Video clips from *As Good As It Gets* (1997; "You make me want to be a better man") and *Good Will Hunting* (1997; "Here's the newsflash, champ: she's not perfect and neither are you . . .") help to illustrate some distinctions and point to some positive aspects of love. Consistent with the previous class, we note that intimacy requires courage, self-differentiation, and self-validation (Schnarch, 1997). We discuss Weingarten's (1991) thesis that intimacy consists of the co-construction of meaning that leads to coordinated action, and we contrast this with the conventional view that intimacy consists of personal self-exposure and the sharing of confidences. Weingarten's conception dovetails with research demonstrating the importance of experiences of togetherness, or "we-ness" (Gottman, 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995). We use film clips to illustrate how excessive fears of exposing strong feelings can rob marriages of their vitality and sense of shared purpose. Breakout group exercises begin with dyads to discuss each person's "greatest internal obstacle to intimacy," including its possible historical origins and how the person has tried to overcome it. Students then discuss an actual current problem or concern, after which the group convenes to consider what made these discussions rewarding or difficult.

Outside class exercise #2: "The 24 Hours Task." This exercise offers students an opportunity to experience the daily—even hourly—attentiveness and involvement required in long-term committed relationships. Students select someone to whom they are close, and for 24 hours are only supportive, thinking often about him or her and what he or she is doing, making frequent contact, and, at day's end, asking how the day went—all done without letting him or her know the objective until the task is finished. Students generally discover that their friends warm to the increased attentiveness and discover feeling moderately stressed by the emotional effort involved.

Class #4: Partner selection and breaking up. Because partner selection has only rarely occurred for our students, and numerous premarital variables have been shown to predict later marital satisfaction (Larson & Holman, 1994), the goal of this class is to help students make sensible, compatible choices relatively free of unconscious, neurotic needs. The informational part of this class relies heavily on Pines (1999), including her discussion of neurotic "fatal attractions" (p. 223). We emphasize the increased odds of success for couples who know each other well and have more, rather than less, in common (Becker, 1991; Kurdek, 1993). We suggest that prior to marriage, students avail themselves of one of several reliable premarital compatibility questionnaires. (See Larson, Newell, Topham, & Nichols, 2002, for a review that suggests that couples lacking a therapist to assist them may do best with the RELATIONSHIP Evaluation [RELATE] questionnaire as described in Holman, Busby, Doxey, Klein, & Loyer-Carlson, 1997.) Because ending relationships with a minimum of emotional suffering also is important for unmarried people, we discuss some indications, psychological challenges, and optimal methods for ending intimate relationships. A scene from *You've Got Mail* (1998) nicely illustrates a couple breaking up in a mature manner.

The first breakout group exercise asks student dyads to "Describe to your partner three people you have been attracted to in the past. Look for common patterns of behavior or personality traits. Judging from these three people, what can you speculate about your unconscious agenda in intimate relationships?" Students then reconvene as a group to discuss and compare their most important criteria for good partners, where their preferences come from, and how difficult it is to detect these desired traits in prospective partners.

Class #5: Sexuality in committed relationships. Undergraduates want to know how important sex is in marriage. We answer that it is quite important and examine some reasons. The object of sexual desire is not a sensation, but a person (sex is not just about sex); good sex depends on good communication, trust, empathy, and concern for the partner, and consequently is an important instance of and commentary on these foundational relational issues; extramarital sex is unethical and destructive; and lovemaking can serve as a powerful means of repair countering the inevitable frustrations and disagreements of daily life inside and outside marriage. The lecture then discusses the psychology of sexual excitement and satisfaction; the frequent difficulty people have discussing sex; the reciprocal nature of sexual and nonsexual marital problems; and some sexual problems in marriage and what can be done about them (Markman et al., 2001; Schnarch, 1997). We cover the question of whether sex inevitably declines as marriage progresses, the common problem of a discrepancy in sexual desire (Laumann, Paik & Rosen, 1999; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995) and its possible cures (Flanagan, 2003; Schnarch), and some sexual fantasy and activity incompatibilities. To illustrate these issues, we show an erotic scene from the film *9 ½ Weeks* (1986), which most (but not all) students find arousing; women friends in *The Story of Us* (2000) discussing how the wear and tear of daily life erodes their sexual desire; and a character (Silent Bob) in *Chasing Amy* (1997) describing his sexual insecurity. Breakout group exercises ask students to discuss messages they have received from others about sex, whether they found the erotic scene sexually exciting, and their difficulties talking about sex (with partners and in this breakout group). In dyads, they discuss past sexual experiences (if any) and whether (and why) they were "pleasurable, rewarding, anxiety-producing, disappointing, disturbing, etc."

Class #6: Cohabitation, commitment, and same-sex relationships. College students want to know whether it is a good idea to cohabit before marriage. This class presents arguments and research for and against cohabitation (e.g., Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Popenoe & Whitehead, 2001). The lecture discusses problems specific to cohabiting couples, especially the greater than average need to clarify boundaries, commitment, sexual monogamy, finances, and diverse other expectations (Bepko & Johnson, 2000). Additionally, the topic of commitment and its connection to marital success is discussed (Markman et al., 2001; Stanley et al., 2003). Movie clips from *About Last Night* (1986) show how uncertainty about personal commitment almost destroys the relationship of a cohabiting couple.

We next explore the topic of same-sex committed relationships. We group this topic with cohabitation because some of the challenges that same-sex couples encounter derive from an absence of social and legal institutional support for their commitment. Our goals are to destigmatize and raise awareness about such relationships and also to help gay and lesbian students examine some challenges that they may face. The lecture reviews the history of gay and lesbian relationships in the United States and considers the

unique challenges to these couples attributable to social stigma, gender stereotypes, and internalized homophobia. To illustrate how the problems of same-sex couples are both universal and particularly challenging, we show a taped interview of a cohabiting lesbian couple in which they discuss problems they have faced over the course of an 8-year relationship. In their breakout groups and journals, students discuss their thoughts, feelings, and experiences concerning cohabitation and same-sex relationships.

Classes #7 and 8: Marital conflict. In the first lecture, we explain that conflict is inevitable, that managing it well is the best predictor of marital success, that people avoid conflict because they are not good at it, that it is challenging to think and act when emotionally distressed, and that effective conflict management skills can be learned. Perhaps more than some programs, we stress that the exercise of such skills depends on self-awareness and personal maturity. We also note the limits of conflict management and communication skills, such that it is best to avoid marrying someone when areas of conflict are large, troubling, and unlikely to change. We describe the origins and anatomy of regressive marital conflicts, relying heavily on Gottman's research (1994; Gottman et al., 1998) and Christensen and Jacobson's text (2000). We detail specific means to combat pathological processes, recommend monitoring and managing the intensity of the process (Gottman et al., 1998), and conclude by teaching the "Speaker-Listener Technique" (Markman et al., 2001) with the help of tapes available from the authors (<http://www.prepinc.com>). These concepts are illustrated by clips from *The Story of Us* (2000), *Dinner with Friends* (2001), and *About Last Night* that show couples handling conflicts poorly and well. Breakout exercises for this session ask students to (a) describe their behavior in actual conflicts, (b) engage a conflict with their partner (real is better than imagined), then cycle between fighting dirty and fighting fair, and (c) create "X, Y, Z statements" for various hypothetical situations that we supply (e.g., You and your boyfriend/girlfriend go out of town one weekend for a formal dance. He forgot the map. He starts blaming you for not reminding him about the map.) "X, Y, Z statements" take the form, "When you do or don't do X, I feel Y, because of Z," and provide a formula for tactful self-assertion in potentially inflammatory situations (Markman et al.).

The second lecture on marital conflict discusses time-outs, the emotional challenges of pursuer-pursued dyads, problem solving, and the overlapping topics of acceptance, forgiveness, and apologies. The problem-solving discussion relies heavily on Markman et al. (2001) and illustrates these ideas using a PREP videoclip (a couple arguing about when their daughter should get her driver's license). We illustrate some aspects of acceptance and forgiveness with the final scene from *The Story of Us* (2000). Breakout exercises include exploring personal barriers to using time-outs, asking whether students can identify pursuer-distancer dynamics in their key relationships, and discussing real incidents calling for forgiveness or apologies.

Class #9: Unanticipated challenges of marriage-depression, addiction, infidelity, and violence. This class covers some serious situations that may arise in marriage. The previous exploration of forgiveness and apologies is highly relevant to managing these problems, even though it may not always be possible to restore trust, confidence, and safety. For instance, in situations of domestic violence, we counsel setting firm limits and or ending relationships rather than accepting cycles of false apologies and repeated abuse. To illustrate the emotional intensity and some specifics of these problems, we show clips from *When a Man Loves a Woman*

(1994) for alcoholism; *The Burning Bed* (1984) for spouse abuse; and *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989) for infidelity. Breakout exercises include dyadic and group discussions about the causes of infidelity and how to prevent it and discussions about the meaning and consequences of a spouse's use of pornography. In their journals, students reflect on personal experiences with depression, alcohol or drug abuse, infidelity, and physical violence, and consider what they might do to prevent and manage such problems.

Outside class exercise #3: Family matters. In anticipation of the class on "ordinary challenges," students go to a public setting to unobtrusively observe parents interacting with their children. They record their observations and personal reactions in their journals.

Class #10: Ordinary challenges of early marriage. To end the course on a positive note, we place this less distressing class after the one on more serious problems. In this session, we also review the overall course experience and the couple interviews. The lecture covers some developmental tasks encountered early in most marriages, such as setting boundaries and managing time with in-laws, friends, and work; agreeing on an equitable division of labor; managing finances; and raising children. The goal is to immunize students against the romantic, pathological belief that everything will proceed "happily ever after." We outline the full developmental course of married life, from engagement through the postchildrearing phase, while emphasizing early marital issues, because they are easier for students to imagine, and because more than 50% of divorces occur in the first 7 years (Pinsof, 2002b). We re-emphasize that being married is a process requiring ongoing communication, negotiation, and collaboration. To illustrate one common form of avoiding communication (triangulation), we show a father (Jerry in *Jerry McGuire*, 1996) using his child to avoid a needed conversation with his wife. The lecture concludes by stressing the importance of togetherness and mutual commitment, recalling Weingarten's (1991) definition of intimacy.

In breakout groups, students practice hard startups, then soft startups, together with repairs after the hard startups (Gottman et al., 1998) in a variety of common marital situations. Journal questions relate to early marital challenges (e.g., how they plan to distribute their time, manage their money, and discipline their children). In their final entries, they reflect on their interviews with their parents, identify the most important things that they have learned in the course, and write a paragraph "Letter to Myself" in which they make specific promises to themselves concerning their future relationships. Typical promises involve not allowing others to mistreat them in relationships and heeding the advice of friends and families about personal relationship blindspots.

Mentor Couple Interviews

"Mentor couples" are volunteer couples, friends, or friends of friends of the core faculty, chosen because they have relatively happy, long-lasting marriages, and because they are willing to talk openly and honestly about their marriages in interviews with student pairs. The couples almost universally enjoy participating. The main purpose of these interviews is to help students attain a more realistic understanding of marriage and to compare and contrast conclusions about these couples with generalizations that they have made from the marriage(s) of their own parents. For some of our students, these are the first happily married people they have talked to in any depth. Interviews take place in the couples' homes, last approximately 90 minutes, and occur about

halfway through the course. This timing allows students to use some course concepts when conducting the interviews and provides them with data for later course discussion. Questions and suggestions about how to conduct the interviews follow a detailed protocol and explore the premarital and marital history of the couple. We mail these questions to the couples (and to the students' parents) ahead of time to diminish their anxiety and to get them started thinking about their answers.

Couples are asked to reflect on good and bad times, how they managed conflict, and on challenges they have faced. They are not required to answer questions they deem too personal, but the majority speak quite openly, including about their sexual lives. Toward the end of the interview, students ask the mentor couples, "How would you say your actual married lives compare with the expectations you had about marriage?" "What is your philosophy about marriage and what makes it work?" "In the context of our course for undergraduates, what information or ideas about marriage would you have liked to have known before you married?" Students write about the interviews, with their grades depending on descriptive quality, use of course concepts, and application to their own lives.

Parent Interviews

Whereas students often experience the mentor couple interviews as their favorite part of the course, the subsequent analogous interviews with their parents are the most challenging and frequently the most rewarding. These occur almost immediately after the mentor couple interviews. Almost invariably, students report learning new things about their families and their histories through these interviews. As with the mentor couple interviews, the parental interviews aim to expand student understanding of real-life marriages. In addition, the parental interviews allow students to reflect on the forces that have shaped their specific views of intimate relationships. Our hope is that improved awareness of problematic family-of-origin patterns may help arrest the frequent intergenerational transmission of marital dysfunction. A final, indirect aim is to facilitate communication about relationships between parents and their children, an aim consistent with studies showing a correlation between parental support and marital success (Holman, 2001). Several questions ask parents to discuss their concerns about their child's future relationships ("Given what you know about me and my relationships so far, what do you think I should watch out for in selecting a partner? In being a marriage partner?"). Other questions open the subject of whether parents might be allowed to discuss reservations about future relationships. Many students report that these are the most meaningful conversations they have ever had with their parents about intimate relationships.

The interviews cover the same ground as that with the mentor couple interviews, but they are done individually with each parent and add questions specific to the parent-child history: "How do you think your parents' (my grandparents') marriages influenced how you entered into and conducted your marriage?" "How do you think your marriage affected my growing up?" We grade the student write-ups as we did those regarding mentor couples, and we require that students examine the data for personal relevance.

Term Papers

Students choose whether to write a traditional research paper, 8 to 10 pages in length, on a topic of their choosing, or to analyze

a marriage (fictional or biographical, from film or literature) using constructs learned in the course. Which ever format they choose, students are again required to discuss personal relevance. The term paper allows students the opportunity to explore a topic of special interest in greater depth. Examples of these papers include "The relationship between career commitment and marital satisfaction," "Christian marriage," "Why is it hard to find a good African American man?" "Sex in different stages of courtship and marriage," "Love: What is it?" "Public policy and marriage," and "Gender roles in marriage." To improve the quality of these papers, we require students to submit paper proposals to their group leaders midway through the course.

Administrative Issues

Recruitment and Student Characteristics

The course is open to all undergraduates and has no prerequisite requirements. Because courses like this tend to draw far more women than men, and because we anticipated that our small group discussions and exercises would benefit if both sexes were equally represented, we looked for a way to achieve gender balance. We solved this problem by requiring that students enroll as male-female pairs. Students need not be romantic partners, and for the rare students who could not come up with a partner, we have matched them with other singletons. Pairs are assigned to the same breakout group and mentor couple. This tactic produced the desired 50–50 sex ratio and also a more diverse student body than is common in social science courses (viz., psychology and human services majors were balanced by students in engineering, premed, and economics).

After we taught our first two classes, we asked students to tell us more about themselves on a standard questionnaire. Data for last year's class (winter of 2003; $N = 32$) show the even sex ratio and distribution of majors just mentioned, an even distribution of sophomores through seniors (freshmen were underrepresented), and wide ethnic diversity (43% White, 25% Asian, 16% Hispanic, 9% African American, and 6% other), which was somewhat more diverse than Northwestern's overall undergraduate demographics (61% White). We asked students their "levels of religious involvement" and learned that for this class, 31% were *very involved*, 50% were *somewhat involved*, and 19% were *not at all involved*. All classes have had 1–3 self-identified gay or lesbian students. Forty-one percent were in a current "serious romantic relationship" (mean duration of 16.7 months, $SD = 15.1$), whereas an additional 53% had been in one in the past (mean duration of longest 14.9 months, $SD = 12.1$), bringing the total to 94%, consonant with our aim of reaching unmarried young adults with substantial experience in intimate relationships. Students had enrolled for the course for the following reasons (categories are not exclusive): 100% *wished to have happy marriages/relationships*, 59% *feared divorce*, 59% *wanted formal premarital education*, and 47% because they were *having actual trouble in relationship(s) past or present*. In keeping with the students' fears about divorce, 19% had experienced their parents' divorces and 47% had siblings or close relatives who had divorced, so a total of 53% had experienced divorce in either parents, siblings, or close relatives. In summary, we succeeded in recruiting a diverse student body who wanted to make their relationships and marriages work, who had had troubles in the past, who had frequently witnessed the divorces of family members,

and who had considerable doubts about their ability to succeed in the future—just the group we were hoping to reach.

Sponsorship by the University

The sponsorship of our course by The Family Institute (TFI) at Northwestern University has been invaluable. Because TFI's mission combines research, clinical service, and education, we had no trouble situating our course within the Institute. TFI's president, one of the founders of the course, has assured that we have access to high-quality instructors, support staff, and classrooms.

As have other college programs, we encountered some initial university resistance to authorizing us to teach our class. The principal question has been whether a course with such a practical aim and clinical feel has a place within a research university. We responded that (a) empirical research in the fields of marriage and personal relationships (Gottman & Nortarius, 2002; Pinsof, 2002a) puts us on a par with other academic disciplines, (b) colleges are not merely trade schools with career-oriented aims, (c) labs and practica are commonplace in academic subjects, and (d) health and safety are legitimate university concerns. Despite its misgivings, the university sponsored and continues to sponsor the course.

A specific worry that emerged in conversations with university officials from our sponsoring school (the School of Education and Social Policy) was that parents might object to the class because it was not sufficiently academic to merit their tuition payments. So far, none has, and some have been extremely positive, in keeping with a large survey of 12 industrialized nations (Galper, 1998) that found that the teaching of socialization skills in schools was more important to the public in the United States and many European countries than were all other academic subjects except mathematics. A related fear was that we would receive unflattering attention in the press. Actually, reports of our class in Chicago newspapers and on local and national television have been extremely favorable and specifically supportive of the university's sponsorship.

Breakout Group Size, Leaders, and Coordination

Because of the varying numbers of students and teaching staff over the 4 years, breakout groups of students have been as large as 22 and as small as 6. Although many of our exercises can be done in dyads, making it feasible to work with larger groups, our experience is that group sharing, cohesiveness, and personal learning proceed best in groups of 8–10 students. Since the course has become established and popular, course size is now determined by the number of breakout group leaders available. Our support within TFI makes it possible to recruit and financially compensate a group of high-quality breakout group facilitators, all with graduate degrees and considerable experience as couples therapists. Although the sophistication and experience of our breakout group leaders seems likely to have augmented student learning, institutions with fewer resources might well use less experienced staff, including graduate students or outstanding undergraduate students from previous classes. The most important qualification for group leaders is the ability to help students share intimate experiences, because exercises and discussions then have greater personal relevance. As we have added faculty new to the course and not present from its creation, we have learned that it is vital to work at team building and sharing of ideas within the instructor group. This is important for instructors

to fully grasp the details of exercises and discussions conceived by others, and so new instructors feel fully empowered and enthusiastically involved in the work of their groups.

Assessment

Instructor Impressions

The course requires students to apply what they were learning to their discussions, exercises, and written assignments and to comment explicitly on personal learning in their interviews, term papers, and journals. In an unsystematic way, we feel confident that important learning has occurred, consistent with the anonymous student evaluations reported in the next section. We observed students growing week by week in their relationship skills in our breakout groups. Empathic listening, comfort with various emotions, and depth of understanding showed improvement. Students reported using course concepts to benefit their relationships outside class. Students' interviews with their parents frequently resulted in new insights. Although we were not allowed to read their self-inquiry journals, judging from the number of pages and the value reported to us, considerable learning goes on and is documented there as well. What is impossible to say from these observations is how prevalent and significant such learning was or how long lasting it will be.

University-Conducted Student Evaluations

Each quarter Marriage 101 is evaluated and each time it has received outstanding student reviews. On standard university-conducted confidential postcourse assessments, students rate a series of variables on a scale from 1 (*lowest*) to 6 (*highest*). Marriage 101 has consistently been rated about 5 (sometimes higher, sometimes slightly lower) on each of the following global measures: "overall instruction," "overall course," "how much you learned," "effectiveness in challenging you intellectually," and "quality of the instructors." For the first three classes (data are not yet available for the fourth), the average rating for the "overall course" was 5.29, and an average of 88% of students ranked the course either a 5 or a 6. On university questions assessing our specific goals of "integrating theory with practice" and "providing students with 'tools' for engaging in future learning," averages for the three classes were 5.42 and 5.12, respectively.

Students also write confidential free-form evaluations aimed at their peers, advising them whether to take a course and what to expect if they do. Again, these have been overwhelmingly favorable and frequently humorous ("Recommended for everyone who doesn't want to go into his/her future marriage blind as a bat," "An incredibly important class—you learn life skills now that most people don't learn until they're in marital therapy"). Many students report that this was the best course they had taken in college ("This was one of the most practical, useful, fascinating and inspiring classes at Northwestern. I actually looked forward to class each week!"), and many said everyone should take it ("I refuse to date anyone who hasn't taken Marriage 101"). Students felt that the course was both academically challenging and practically useful ("Unlike many academic courses, this one has many—repeat, many—practical lessons to take out into the real world;" "Very realistic view on relationships that will be helpful in the future. I'm ready to get hitched tomorrow"). They noted the special benefits of the video illustrations, the couples

interviews, and the self-inquiry journals, and many thought that they came to know themselves better (“Be prepared to have fun and get to know yourself;” “Fun course. Some uncomfortable material but necessary”). Such student affirmations fit with what students told us privately. Taken together with the growing popularity of the course (last time it was enrolled fully on the first day of registration), these positive reviews strengthened our impression that college students were eager to learn about marriage and believed that the course helped them do so.

Formal and informal criticism from students has resulted in some course improvements. The most important constructive criticism has been that we assigned too much work for the time allotted and that some of it was redundant.

Before and After Vignettes: Toward Systematic Evaluation

To determine the impact of the course, we sought a more objective method of assessment—one that resembled real people in action more than a multiple-choice test. We arrived at a series of three one-page written vignettes, each describing a couple and an interaction between them. We asked students to tell us, in one-page narratives, what they thought was going on. The vignettes were constructed to allow us to assess sophistication about specific educational objectives before and after the course. For instance, the first vignette describes a young cohabiting couple, Nate and Beth, who are talking about becoming engaged. Their dating and family histories offer clues about problems to come. We relate how they begin to fight over differing needs for closeness and affirmation and describe a specific disagreement they get into over a movie, which ends with Nate sleeping on the couch and Beth crying herself to sleep. In this vignette, we want to see how well students can discuss partner selection, underlying issues that precipitate conflict, and problematic ways of managing conflict.

Work is under way to validate the vignettes, to develop a systematic scoring system for use by blinded raters, and to create other evaluation instruments. In the meantime, an impressionistic review by the first author of before and after changes led to a few notable conclusions:

1. Students did not give us what they might have thought we wanted—simplistic answers the first time, and detailed, sophisticated ones after taking the course. It seems that their competitive spirits were actually more engaged in the precourse vignettes when they spent considerable time explicating their thoughts.
2. Before and after differences, when present, were subtle. Almost all students saw the most glaring issues, but they saw these almost as clearly before taking the course as afterward. A central research problem, then, is that our students start at a rather high level of relationship sophistication. Another potential problem is that such sophistication in merely discussing vignettes may not be an adequate test of real-life skill in managing relationships.
3. Sophistication appeared to improve in the following competencies: (a) capacity to name elements of pathological process (contempt, stonewalling, other varieties of defense); (b) capacity to think of positive things to do (use softer startups, time-outs, or the speaker-listener technique; look for underlying issues; or seek couples therapy); (c) capacity to make use of historical and situational data in analyses of problems; (d) more balanced, less moralistic descriptions of

arguments seen as having merit on both sides, as opposed to when students saw one side as right (often that of the same-sex person) before taking the course; and (e) awareness that the couples would do better if they were more conscious of their own and their partner’s issues.

Discussion

We have described the rationale, development, educational objectives, curriculum, administration, and evaluation of Marriage 101. Noting the theoretical advantages of reaching college students for marriage education, we have shown how it was possible to recruit a diverse group of enthusiastic undergraduate students, 50% male and female, actually experienced in intimate relationships, and often fearful of divorce or relationship trouble. These students were eager to learn about marriage, to apply themselves to a rigorous academic course, and to pursue personal learning relevant to the subject.

The course grew out of clinical and research findings concerning what students should know, as well as results of a consumer study about what they wanted to learn. In keeping with the academic focus, the course uses traditional methods of instruction to engage students intellectually with scientific questions concerning marriage and intimate relationships. In keeping with the recommendations of the 15 couples therapists we interviewed, the class emphasizes self-inquiry through intimate small group discussions and exercises, journaling, parent interviews, an interview to gain a friend’s perspective, and a traditional term paper in which reflection on personal applicability is required. This focus on self-inquiry facilitates our parallel work on skills training. This is because many so-called communication skills either amount to the practical exercise of emotional maturity and self-awareness or depend on them for execution (e.g., the ability to be empathic with another depends critically on the ability to empathize with oneself). The importance of integrating didactic and experiential learning is consistent with work by Sharp and Ganong (2000), which showed the superiority of an (admittedly weak) experiential component over a purely didactic class in altering unrealistically romantic student attitudes about marriage and with a similar study (Laner & Russell, 1994) that found no impact from a purely didactic course.

Evaluation by the limited means employed so far shows favorable results. The course has succeeded in providing students with intellectual fundamentals and vocabulary, together with personal experiences relevant to the content. It achieves face validity as preparation for married life. Anecdotal evidence shows students doing better in relationships outside class, while joking that they should “only date people who have taken Marriage 101.” Whatever the ultimate power of the course to improve the future relationships and marriages of our students, one can argue that engaging students in these subjects in college is a worthwhile beginning. As with sex education (Irvine, 2003), marriage education is an important, value-laden, emotionally-charged subject that is not well taught at home, but that should not be neglected by educators solely because it is value-laden, emotionally-charged, or otherwise difficult to teach.

Future Directions: Research and Dissemination

Evaluating the effectiveness of Marriage 101 is a growing priority. Study of control groups of students not taking the course

References

- would be a better test of the course's impact. However, even after adding control groups, research in this area is impeded by the length of time until students are married and until marital problems surface, and the absence of measures applicable to uncoupled individuals. We anticipate that it will be hard to show long-term benefits of a one-quarter college course. Additionally, most studies of marriage education programs have been done with couples, with marital satisfaction or divorce rates being the accepted outcome measures (e.g., Gottman et al., 1998). However, when marital coupling is far in the future, these measures make no sense, so more proximal measures are needed to assess skill in handling interpersonal challenges analogous to those to be met in the future. Our vignettes of marital scenarios are a start in this direction. What is unclear is whether these are valid measures. Our suspicion is that we need measures that are better at simulating real-life "hot" situations. Perhaps such situations can be simulated with computers, actors, or videos.
- By documenting effectiveness, research may foster dissemination to other universities. Better educational packaging also may help. Faculty at other universities (Lowe, Scott-Lowe & Markman, 2003; Parrott & Parrott, 2000) have produced printed materials, videos, and useful teacher manuals that make these courses easier to disseminate.
- Dissemination also could be speeded, if teachers of the numerous purely academic courses on marriage and relationships could be convinced to add experiential and practical components. Dissemination of such integrated marriage education programs also will depend on greater acceptance by faculty and administrators outside the disciplines of marriage, communication, and human relationships. What will probably be most convincing is what we and others have observed so far: that parents are pleased, that students are overwhelmingly satisfied, and that the media are enthusiastic. It also may help to argue that marriage is a valid academic discipline, that colleges are not merely trade schools, that labs and practica are commonplace in academic subjects, and that health and safety are legitimate university concerns.
- Although our recruitment strategies have brought a diverse student body, it is possible that we are only reaching a select group of students. Perhaps students at greatest risk avoid the course, as Gardner (2001) found in the high school programs that he evaluated. On the other hand, some of our students have come precisely because they sense greater than average danger ahead. Whatever the characteristics of our students, we know that we are not currently reaching everyone. Our challenge is how to reach a larger number of young adults. We can envision a self-help book based on the course, a computer simulation self-education course (likely to be more entertaining and realistic than a book), and a community program similar to Marriage 101 for young, unmarried adults.
- Dissemination also is assisted by participation in what has become a national promarriage movement centered on the Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education, its listserv (see <http://www.smartmarriages.com>), and the annual Smart Marriages Conferences. Many like-minded groups, including the National Council on Family Relations, are needed to bring greater support to young adult premarital education. Courses on marriage are clearly just a start and are limited in their power to improve lives. As its title connotes, Marriage 101 is at best an introduction. Nonetheless, for marriage education to take hold and for marriage to be viewed more hopefully within our society, we will need a large group of advocates. Some may come from college marriage education classes like Marriage 101.
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Appendix

Titles, Production Dates, and Producers of Videos Used in the Course

Film	Production Date	Producer/Distributor
<i>9½ Weeks</i>	1986	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, MGM/UA Home Entertainment Inc.
<i>About Last Night</i>	1986	TriStar Pictures, Columbia TriStar Home Video
<i>Annie Hall</i>	1977	United Artists, MGM Home Entertainment Inc.
<i>As Good As It Gets</i>	1997	TriStar Pictures, Columbia TriStar Home Video
<i>Chasing Amy</i>	1997	Miramax, Buena Vista Home Entertainment Inc.
<i>Dinner with Friends</i>	2001	Home Box Office Films, Home Box Office Video
<i>Good Will Hunting</i>	1997	Miramax, Buena Vista Home Entertainment Inc.
<i>Jerry McGuire</i>	1996	TriStar Pictures, Columbia TriStar Home Video
<i>Sex, Lies and Videotape</i>	1989	Outlaw Productions, Miramax Films
<i>The Story of Us</i>	2000	Universal Studios, Castlerock Entertainment
<i>The Burning Bed</i>	1984	Tisch/Avnet Productions Inc., California Home Video
<i>When a Man Loves a Woman</i>	1994	Touchstone Pictures, Buena Vista Home Entertainment Inc.
<i>You've Got Mail</i>	1998	Warner Brothers, Warner Brothers Home Video