Sexuality courses anything but a tease

Miami and Ohio State students find that lectures are more theories than thrills.

By John Futty
Dispatch Staff Reporter

Sex is a popular subject at Miami University — even in the classroom.
The college's human sexuality course is limited to 65 students, but sociology professors say they could easily admit 300 to 400 per class.

It's the most popular of the department's nonrequired courses, said Linda Ade-Bidder, a sociology professor who has taught human sexuality for nearly 30 years.

But those who expect to be titillated are likely to be disappointed.

"Students perceive it as a class that will be a fun way to earn credit — before they get in it," said C. Lee Harrington, an assistant professor who has taught the course at Miami in Oxford in southwestern Ohio since 1990. "It's harder than students expect and more theoretical than they expect."
The goal, she said, is to help students understand "why we have sex the way we do and why we think about sex the way that we do."

"The biggest misconception about human sexuality courses is that they're 'how-to' courses," she said. "They're not."

That approach is similar to human sexuality courses at other Ohio universities but far removed from one at the University of California, Berkeley. There, a student-led course was suspended this month amid allegations that students took field trips to a strip club and attended an off-campus party that turned into an orgy.

Ohio State University professor Jereh Schutka read a news account of the Berkeley controversy to students in her Human Sexuality and Relationship class last week, generating laughter and looks of disbelief.

"I focus on relationships and promote responsible sexual behavior," Schutka said.

The discussion last week included adult sexuality and touched on single living, cohabitation and marriage.

"It's mostly theory and some of what you'd get in a health class," said Amber Thomson, a 21-year-old senior from Columbus. "It's nothing like what happened at Berkeley."

Brandyn Rice, a 22-year-old senior from Cleveland, said she was attracted to the class because "It deals with topics that you usually don't discuss in a university setting."

Nella Van Dyke, an assistant professor of sociology at Ohio State, said she takes a cautious approach to teaching a class titled Sociology of Sexuality.

"I would never take students to a strip club," she said. "That’s inappropriate."

Van Dyke's class reviews such issues as how sexual identities are formed and sexual violence against women and lesbians.

The syllabus carries a warning: "This course includes reading and discussion of sensitive and sometimes sexually explicit material. If you feel that you would be uncomfortable with these topics, you should not take the class."

Ohio State's Sociology Department is offering the human sexuality course this semester for the first time, prompted by plans to establish a minor in sexuality studies at OSU.

The minor will be available in the fall if approved by the office of academic affairs.

OSU English professor Debra Modellmog, a coordinator for the program, thinks the sexuality-studies minor would be the first of its kind at an Ohio university.

"It's a legitimate academic field with links from the humanities to the social sciences," Modellmog said. "It's important for students to understand their own sexuality and understand people whose sexual identity is different than theirs."

She said the sexuality-studies minor will help prepare students for work in fields such as health services, law and social work.

Although Miami has been offering sexuality courses for at least 25 years, the content has become less provocative.

"Professors rely less and less — if at all — on the sexually explicit videos they showed students in the late 70s and 80s. The idea is to engage their minds rather than be provocative," said Ade-Bidder, who never shows explicit videos.

Professors said most students have seen sexually explicit material on cable television or in adult videos, making it less necessary in class.

Harrington said she may show one or two explicit, but also very clinical, videos in her class at Miami. Students are not required to attend class when the videos are shown and are warned about other aspects of the course that might offend them.

In more than a decade of teaching the class, Harrington said, she has heard just one complaint from a parent, who wrote to the university president after flipping through a student's reading packet.

Still, professors are mindful that some people are offended by the mere thought of classes devoted to human sexuality. That's true even at Indiana University in Bloomington, home to the Kinsey Institute founded by Alfred Kinsey, one of America's most famous sex researchers.

Martin Weinberg, a sociology professor who began teaching human sexuality at Indiana in 1966, said he realizes that some people question the appropriateness of offering the class to college students.

"These students are sexuality nature. Most of my students are 20 or 21. They aren't kids," Weinberg said.

"To me, it's really a shame that we have to be afraid that some people feel we shouldn't be educating people about sexuality."