

## **From Hookups to Relationships: The Problem with Dating in Boarding School**

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What boarding school is like to outsiders: a school that vaguely resembles Hogwarts, where parents send their rebellious children that they hate to go. Here's a reality check, my school does not feel like Hogwarts in the least and I'm almost a hundred percent sure that my parents don't hate me.

When I first packed my suitcases and boxes to head off to Deerfield, I didn't know what to expect. I was thirteen going on fourteen; my mind was racing with all the possibilities that could happen. I would meet people from all around the world, have top notch athletic facilities, live in a dormitory, go out to town on weekends with my friends. Most of these dreams did come true. I was able to grow up over the last three years into a knowledgeable and more mature person with the tremendous support of the Deerfield community. However, one thing that did not fit in my vision of boarding school was how uncomfortable the gender dynamic would be here.

At Deerfield, I was introduced to the term: "hooking up". It was used loosely to describe people who had just started seeing one another to those who had been meeting for weekly parietals for months. A synonym to "hooking up" would be "we're together". Usually, you would meet the person that you were hooking up with through a mutual friend who would ask "What do you think of (fill in the blank)?"

Dating with the nominal status of boyfriend and girlfriend was a larger step to take. You'd post a picture with your significant other with a very subtle caption and your friends would comment "instagram official" and "so cute" and "this makes me so happy" as if one picture in itself was a revolutionary and mind-blowing act. Relationships seemed to be so novel and interesting rather than a normal way of life.

In past years, when we've tried to address Deerfield relationships, people have always been ready to take the defense. The response from both genders is usually "I have a lot of girl and guy friends". Having a lot of friends from the opposite gender does not mean that gender divide isn't real. In the dining hall, if you had a choice to sit anywhere, you'd usually sit with a bunch of your girlfriends rather than guy friends. This isn't anything to be ashamed of or criticized, they're simply subconscious decisions that are a result of our time at Deerfield.

While Deerfield has made strides to improve dating life here with Date Nights including romantic dinners, movies to Greenfield, bowling, and more, this shouldn't be necessary at all. These are forced activities that make dating seem even stranger and at times comical. Changing words such as parietals to visitations, to take away the romantic connotations and make visitations more normal and friendly is a great idea in theory. However, words cannot change

internalized beliefs. When I see a guy and a girl walking down Albany Road late night, it never crosses my mind that they could just be friends; I immediately think that they're "together".

Even when writing this, when I think of the word relationship, I don't think of platonic friendships; my mind jumps to romantic relationships. This highlights the problematic nature of relationships at boarding school; we're constantly with one another, comparing ourselves in every way possible, trying to impress everyone else, even if we don't like them. In academic settings, there's always a pressure to have the highest grades possible; grades inevitably determine who is viewed as "smart". So, in a social setting, there is a pressure for people to hook up with those who considered as the most attractive, the most athletic, the funniest.

These types of relationships are based upon superficialities such as appearance and perceived social status. I am not writing this to shame all "hooking up". Although meeting someone through a friend does work sometimes, it is not always guaranteed. In the real world, your first "date" won't happen walking down a secluded pathway or in the basement of an academic building.

This problem reflects on the behalf of the administration and the students. Perhaps, romantic relationships would be more mundane on campus if the student handbook did not conflict with the Date Nights that we advertise so frequently. On the other hand, students who are comfortable with the "hooking up" nature and who are content with the amount of friends they have from the opposite gender are not always inclined to listen to students who believe that they are impacted by the gender divide. The gender divide may also be apparent in other contexts such as academic classrooms and athletic events.

Now, I don't believe that everyone should just jump into a serious two-year relationships for kicks. It is difficult to keep relationships going in atmospheres such as Deerfield where we are constantly trying to stay on top of academics, athletics, social life, and standardized testing. Students need to understand that we are still teenagers boarding school is a monumental part of helping students find their identities.

"Hooking up" can be a first step for many. Each year that I have arrived back at the Academy, it seems more evident to me that it doesn't matter what the rest of the school is doing or what your friends are doing. What is most important is for us, as students, to determine whether we are the "hooking up" type or the relationship type. These two terms are not contradictory and certainly do not have to be set in stone. Boarding school is truly what you make of it. Experimentation can foster the appropriate dialogue that can help break down the gender divide that we seem to talk about every year. We do not want to be having this same conversation in ten years.