

Free Love: College-Aged Students Turn to Dating Sites for Help

By Veronica Kawka, *Her Campus-Carnegie Mellon University*

More students nowadays appear to be wondering, “Maybe I really can find someone special at the click of a mouse.” The general population adopted online dating a long time ago; in fact an estimated 40% of all singles, a staggering 40 million people, visit online dating sites to find that special someone. Increasingly, though, those 40 million people are comprised of college-aged and graduate students who are turning to online dating sites to fulfill their romantic needs.

“It’s like one of those things that everybody is doing, but no one really talks about,” says Joy Nelson, a young online dater and recent Carnegie Mellon graduate. “I think people don’t talk about it because it’s embarrassing. No one wants to admit that they resorted to it. But I know of a good 10 or so of my friends who are doing it, including myself.”

The arrival of college-aged users is fueling growth in an already enormous industry. Today, the dating service industry is projected to be worth almost \$2.1 billion. An estimated 1,500 dating sites exist in the United States alone. Online dating was rated the third most popular way for singles to meet, coming behind just school/work and friend/family member in a recent Match.com study.

Some of the most popular sites like OkCupid, Casual Kiss and PlentyofFish tend to appeal to younger users whose numbers are quickly growing. While sites like Match.com report that only 8% of their users are under 30, free sites like OkCupid report that the majority of their 8 million members are under 30; in fact, the average age of their users is 24.

David Evans, a consultant who authors the website Online Dating Insider, told Oregon Live that he estimates one-fifth of users today are under 30. With sites like PlentyofFish reporting a quarter of million user log-ins each day, the number of online dating users under 30 is surely growing. These free dating sites combine multiple features such as chatting, winking, smiling, commenting and rating to make these cyber-dating circles as interactive as possible. But what makes these online sites more appealing and useful than the regular meet-and-greet of local bars and coffee shops?

“I joined to meet people outside my given network of existing friends,” says Carnegie Mellon student Terry Boyd. “Usually people appear too busy for dating and when they’re not it’s hard to tell who is available or interested. With online dating you know upfront that the person is also single and looking. I also think it’s interesting that there’s a backend algorithm.”

The world of relationships has always been a perplexing one, and now with divorce rates rising people have chosen to search elsewhere for successful matchmaking assistance: the Internet. Lately, however, younger generations are also looking toward the Internet to find that special someone. While many search for something more serious to avoid the “hook-up” culture of mutual friends and peers, others are reaching for an easier way to find that “hook-up” buddy.

Typically online dating websites have asked for membership fees in exchange for precise algorithmically arranged love matches. But more and more sites are operating on the basis that love shouldn’t have to come at a high cost—in fact, it should be free. This option has expanded the dating market to the lower-income student population who are digitally inclined. With the combination of capabilities of social networking websites like Facebook, paired with a dissection of one’s personality based on systematic questioning, online dating sites are functioning as cost effective match makers for the under-30 population. Unfortunately for us, though, these sites

have top-secret algorithms for their match making processes so no one can truly know the formula to love. Some online daters are skeptical of these formulas.

“These days, people play video games that encompass entire worlds and they have a character that represents them better than they see themselves in life. They chose to stay in the game instead of life,” says student and online dater, Nick Ferrell.

“Online dating seemed like another way for this generation to hide from the real world and never develop the skills that come with meeting someone in person,” says Ferrell.

Despite the skeptics, college students are continue to expand their match options beyond their current social circles.

“Even though my last boyfriend and I met online and we had mutual friends and went to the same school I would have never met him had it not been for online dating. It’s funny how that works.” says Kent State student Stephanie Churchill.

It could be that online dating is making the game of love even more fun and exciting for the younger crowds. In fact author of *Love, Internet Style* David Brooks told the *New York Times* that “online dating puts structure back into courtship.” But structure these days involves more online interaction than actual face-to-face time. The more successful sites among the younger population are fully aware of the needs of the social networking generation, not to mention the idea that these types of users may not necessarily be looking for something serious.

The “hookup” culture is being embraced and facilitated on these websites as well. The basic formula would mean users get paired with fellow users searching for the same thing, be it long-term, short-term or even friendship. This short-term need is exactly what a study that the Institute for American Values conducted on college found to be true.

“The culture of courtship, a set of social norms and expectations that once helped young people find the pathway to marriage, has largely become a hook-up culture with almost no shared norms or expectations.” say Institute for American Values researchers.

Another site targeted specifically to college students, Date My School, has developed a market audience of specifically college-aged students with similar educational goals that are looking for a more serious relationship. Every user needs an active university email account to register on the site, making. Even though it seems like common sense that students have perhaps the best access to people while on campus community or out on the town, these haven’t proven key locations to look for a match. This is Date My School’s niche: helping these students look for compatible partners that go unnoticed even if they’re seemingly right under their nose. Users can also narrow their partner search to specific schools, and with about 100,000 users there are plenty of fish in Date My School’s sea. The site is growing but it is not nearly as popular as its competitor OkCupid, which boasts 8 million users.

An interesting facet of the under-30 population is that not all of us are necessarily looking for that special someone. Some people are just searching for new connections, be that in the form of a friendship, fling or something serious.

“I started [on online dating sites] because I was looking to meet new people where I was moving. Not necessarily for romance, just for new people,” says Joy Nelson, recent college graduate. She’s even come up with some savvy advice for fellow first-timers in the online dating scene.

“1. Safety first. If you are uncomfortable, block the person. 2. Friend the person on Facebook and/or Skype them before meeting in person just to make sure they are who they claim to be. 3. Meet in a public place preferably

The Woman Behind the Curtain: Anne Witchner, Carnegie Mellon's Master Event Puppeteer

By Veronica Kawka, *Her Campus Online Magazine*

Anne Witchner is like your second mother, even if your own did just as good of a job of packing your lunch and making sure you got to school on time. She is the unsuspecting doctorate, the one who runs a marathon just because, and the one who seems to hold the entire university of Carnegie Mellon in a balance in the palm of her hand.

Witchner has been working at Carnegie Mellon for over 22 years, currently holding the position as the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs. If you were an Orientation counselor you know her as the sassy boss lady. But, Witchner has been a part of so many other unsuspecting Carnegie Mellon events and traditions—most of the time working behind the scenes of campus events like Homecoming Weekend, as the master puppeteer pulling strings behind the curtain.

In fact, it's hard to imagine a Carnegie Mellon occasion that Anne Witchner hasn't touched. The truth is that Witchner has helped create tons of programs like Orientation, Family Weekend, the Madrigal Dinner, Homecoming Weekend, Carnival, the Christmas Concert, and many more. When you walk into her office in Morewood Gardens you can instantly see all the Carnegie Mellon history that comes with Mrs. Witchner's presence. The walls are flanked with collaged frames from the years and years of Head Orientation Counselors that have worked with her since she started Orientation at Carnegie Mellon in 1991. There are pictures of buggy cars, booths from Carnival back when it was held in the University Center parking lot, all surrounding some photos of her family. For Witchner, Carnegie Mellon has been and will always be such a big part of her life. She even thinks, and perhaps hopes, that her 13 year old son would be a good fit for the Tartan atmosphere.

"I think I always wanted to be in the planning of things," said Witchner. "I liked being involved, but not overtly involved. I liked being behind the scenes." Even in high school when Witchner was President of the Thespian club and landed a role in the play her senior year she was discovering out what she was truly passionate about.

"I wasn't as keen on being in the play. I liked being behind the scenes. I thought it was fascinating. I wasn't somebody who needed to be in the limelight but I liked being part of a team," said Witchner.

But that's just the amazing humbling ability of Anne Witchner to be such a big part of something like the award-winning Orientation program, and let her student leaders take all the credit. Witchner seems to have an acute awareness for Student Affairs that allows her students to flourish in their work as student leaders.

"Working with Anne is an experience. She is always nine steps ahead of you. She has already thought about what you are thinking about, finished what you started to work on, and knows how everything will turn out. She does this all behind the scenes, and only after working with her for 7 months, did I realize how truly magical she really is." said Sean Chin, a former Head Orientation Counselor.

Born in another small steel-slicking town, Witchner grew up in Youngstown, Ohio about seventy miles west of Pittsburgh: "My roots are in Ohio. I went to Ohio University for two years and I transferred to Carnegie Mellon University," explained Witchner. "As a transfer it's sort of hard to get involved because you're halfway through your undergraduate career." But Witchner didn't let that stop her. She instantly became super involved in Carnegie Mellon life by joining the carnival committee and Kappa Alpha Theta her junior year.

Like lots of college graduates, when it came time to figure out her career goals Witchner was having trouble deciding the next step of her life.

"After I graduated I stayed with a cousin who lived in Pittsburgh who goes to Pitt. I was still in touch with the former Director of Student Activities, Bob McCurdy who was known in the field of Student Activities across the country. Bob convinced me to go on to graduate school and get a degree in Student Services, or it could be [now] called Higher Education Administration."

Witchner went on to graduate school at the University of South Carolina for a Master's in Counseling and Student Personal Services which would lead her into her career in Student Affairs later on. She was then offered a position as the Assistant Director of Student Activities at Allegheny Community College.

"I loved it, loved it, loved it! I got to deal with students completely different from the ones I went to Carnegie Mellon with, and students I went to grad school with," said Witchner.

In 1990, Witchner was offered the job as Assistant to the Dean of Student Affairs at Carnegie Mellon, and was excited to return to her alma mater with big ideas for the future. One of Witchner's favorite pet projects was to start an Orientation program for incoming Carnegie Mellon freshman in '91. Over the years, Carnegie Mellon's Orientation has grown into a dynamic week-long and award-winning

program with over 150 student orientation counselors who volunteer their time and effort to help the first-years have the best experience possible.

Every time Witchner speaks about her work, it's the students that really come alive in her stories. She remembers their names, their hobbies, who they dated in college and when, and even how wonderful they were when they gave that solo performance on the flute at the annual Christmas concert. Even with other job offers springing into her lap through the years, she hasn't found the heart to leave "her" students. She says that as smart as students are, they need someone behind the scenes to help them navigate the system.

"It's about the students. They're so gifted and they keep you on your toes because they're so bright. But they need support behind the scenes because they're still just students and their academics come first. It's been really rewarding. I always say it, I get to work with the cream of the cream of the crop." said Witchner.

Over the years, Witchner has worked as the primary advisor to Spring Carnival, Buggy, the Activities Board, Scotch 'N Soda, and many other student organizations, relishing her close personal relationships with students, many of which she still keeps in touch with. But one of her most touching experiences was getting to know late writer of the Last Lecture, Jeff Zaslow. Witchner remembers when Zaslow was a creative writing student at Carnegie Mellon, editor for the Tartan newspaper, and then later building her friendship with him as he gained success for his incredible writing abilities. Zaslow recently passed away in car accident while he was on his way to give a lecture in Michigan. "I knew Jeff as a student. And I always knew he'd do something with his life to make an impact. He's left a pretty amazing imprint on my heart and on my life," said Witchner.

At 60, Witchner's work is never finished as she is seemingly the embodiment of founder Andrew Carnegie's motto, "My heart is in the work." There's always something bigger or better that could be happening for Carnegie Mellon in Witchner's mind. But that doesn't mean that in all the chaos she loses sight of what's really important: the students.

"I always knew that Anne as an incredible supervisor. However, this year, when I struggled with post-graduation plans, I learned that she is also an incredibly caring mentor to her students. She did her best to connect me with possible resources and was supportive of me in all of the decisions that I made. No matter what she was doing, she always made it a priority to talk to me if I stopped by her office," said Chuck McCain a soon-to-be graduating, Head Orientation Counselor.

Anne Witchner becomes a go-to for all of life's important moments, academic or not. She finds herself invited to student's weddings and baby showers, because Anne Witchner is not just a boss or a colleague, she's family. As long as Anne Witchner is a part of Carnegie Mellon's community, great changes are bound to happen. The Beatles' song may go "We get by with a little help from our friends," but here at Carnegie Mellon it seems to be, "We get by with a little help from Anne."

- See more at: <http://www.hercampus.com/school/cmu/woman-behind-curtain-anne-witchner-carnegie-mellon-s-master-event-puppeteer#sthash.17pit59r.dpuf>