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MARRIAGE STUDY BRINGS STUDENTS TO ALTAR OF RESEARCH

UNDERGRADUATES TO PARTNER WITH PROFESSOR TO EXAMINE COUPLES' RELATIONSHIPS

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | March 21, 2025*Read time: about 2 min*

Dr. Lindsey Hicks and a team of student co-researchers are preparing to seek answers to a question that is almost as old as love: What makes a marriage work?

Hicks, an assistant professor of [Psychology](#), has focused much of her academic research on love and relationships. She has spent years examining the benefits of a robust sex life and the length of the resulting afterglow.

Now Hicks is getting ready to say 'I do' to a deep dive into marriage research. Hicks, who revels in data sets and is intrigued by outcomes, is about to launch a two-year-study on marriage. Captains will play a large role in making it happen.

The study will follow 150 couples from throughout Hampton Roads for two years and take note of different aspects of their relationships over time, examining how they problem solve and communicate, why their marriages work and what creates friction. The process of recruiting the couples is expected to begin this summer.

As students collect and analyze data, they will get an inside look at both the research process and the dynamics of marriage and relationships. Hicks predicts the study will create "a rich source of data for years to come."

"These types of longitudinal studies are the gold standard in the field of relationship studies," she said.

Hicks is eager to offer students the chance to participate in a large-scale research project – an experience typically reserved for graduate students at larger institutions.

“It’s very rare to get to do something like this,” she said. “That’s part of the reason I love CNU. It gives us the chance to involve undergraduates in research.”

She hopes the project will build in her students a passion for the study of relationships and, as a result, stack their resumes with valuable research experiences and knowledge that will likely propel their career paths after graduation.

The study is funded in part by a faculty development grant. Hicks anticipates the project will attract undergraduates with many different majors. Being involved with the research from beginning to end, she said, will be “an incredible opportunity for students interested in careers in counseling, specifically marriage counseling.”

Relationship research has been a key component in Hicks’ academic life. Most recently, she has focused on the importance of sex and how the boost in sexual satisfaction that partners experience after engaging in sex impacts their feelings about their relationship.

Her research involved more than 500 people, and was conducted while earning her doctorate at Florida State University. That project inspired her to pursue the study of marriage and the influences and actions that can either strengthen or weaken a union.

When she became a professor at Christopher Newport, her ultimate goal was to launch a study from her new university.

“Fast forward to CNU,” she said. “I wanted to continue with sex as one of my areas of interest, in addition to looking at people’s evaluations of their partners from a social and cognitive standpoint. For example, I am really interested in implicit attitudes toward people’s partners and whether they can predict a change in relationship satisfaction or even a breakup.”

Hicks describes implicit attitudes as the gut-level, automatic feelings that people experience when they encounter their romantic partners.

The students will help Hicks determine just how important a role those attitudes play in a marriage. To help figure that out, the research will focus on three areas: investigating the change of implicit attitudes, how sex influences change in relationship dynamics, and how couples problem solve.

The study will not only shed light on marriage dynamics, but also will give students the chance to contribute to advances in the field of psychology and relationship science.

“This is incredible for our students,” Hicks said. “It’s an opportunity for them to not only assist with study, but to present this really important data at conferences and to be able to publish.”
