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## An Evaluation of the Love Notes Curriculum Implemented as a College Class

Hailey McClain<sup>a</sup>, Jennifer McGhee<sup>a</sup>, Brandon K. Burr<sup>a</sup>, Tawni Holmes<sup>a</sup>, Jackie Mansker<sup>b</sup>, and Linsey Garlington<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Human Environmental Sciences, University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, Oklahoma, USA;

<sup>b</sup>OKC-County Health Department, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

### ABSTRACT

Many couples experience difficulty from relationship distress and/or divorce. Some research suggests that teaching relationship education (RE) to emerging adults before many enter long-term committed relationships can reduce relationship difficulty and promote healthy relationship behaviors. Yet, very little investigation has been conducted with RE and emerging adults. This study reports on the implementation of the *Love Notes* RE curriculum as the content for a college class on marriage and comparisons were made with a class who did not receive the curriculum on several relationship variables. Results showed that those in the class who did receive the curriculum showed significant gains in relationship confidence and insight compared to the control class, as well as gains in other areas. Implications for practitioners and researchers are provided based on study findings.

### KEYWORDS

Relationship education;  
emerging adulthood;  
program evaluation

The ebb and flow of romantic relationships can create challenges for many couples and families. Almost half of marriages end in divorce in the United States, and this is among the highest divorce rates in all industrialized countries (Haimi & Lerner, 2016). Estimates also show that the U.S. spends \$112 billion dollars per year on costs related to distressed family relationships, with at least \$33 billion per year spent on divorce alone (Anderson, 2013). In addition, adults who are divorced or experience prolonged relationship distress tend to experience increased physical and mental health issues, which include depression, social isolation, and negative life experiences (Amato & Anthony, 2014). Also, more than a million children experience their parents' divorce every year (Haimi & Lerner). Children who experience high degrees of parental conflict in the home, or whose parents' divorce, often exhibit adverse behavioral, emotional, social, and academic outcomes. These challenges can include problems with social skills, lower school grades, and conduct disorders (Amato & Anthony). As

**CONTACT** Brandon K. Burr  [bburr1@uco.edu](mailto:bburr1@uco.edu)  Human Environmental Sciences, University of Central Oklahoma, Box 118, 100 North University Avenue, Edmond, 73034 Oklahoma, USA.

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an effort to combat some of the deleterious effects of divorce and relationship distress, some research suggests that teaching relationship skills to emerging adults, before many enter committed, long-term relationships can have a positive impact on future relationship well-being (Futris & Adler-Baeder, 2015; Hawkins, 2018).

In response to elevated couple and family instability and high divorce rates, increased interest and support has been given to the creation and implementation of relationship education (RE) programs to combat the negative influences of relationship distress on relationship partners and children (Moore, Avellar, Patnaik, Covington, & Wu, 2018). RE programs have primarily been designed and disseminated to more established, married, or engaged couples. However, very little information exists investigating the effectiveness of RE with emerging adults, specifically within the college campus environment (Cottle, Thompson, Burr, & Hubler, 2014; Hawkins, 2018).

### **Emerging adults and romantic relationships**

Emerging adulthood (18 to mid—late 20's), is often described as the period of life between adolescence and “full-fledged” adulthood (Kopala-Sibley, Zuroff, Hermanto, & Joyal-Desmarais, 2016), and is often a time of exploration and experimentation. Some suggest that emerging adulthood represents a distinct and gradual transitional period from adolescence to adult developmental roles (i.e. career stability, marriage, and parental roles; Arnett, 2007). Emerging adulthood has been characterized by a time of ongoing individual discovery in terms of educational pursuits, career fit, romantic relationship exploration, and gradual adoption of more adult responsibilities (Arnett, 2004; Olmstead, Pasley, Meyer, Stanford, Fincham, & Delevi, 2011).

### **Relational aggression and sexual violence**

The relational aggression and sexual victimization prevalence rates among young adult populations are also alarmingly high, and women are more likely to be victimized than men (Carey, Durney, Shepardson, & Carey, 2015). Researchers have found that during the first year of college 15% of women reported an incapacitated rape incident, and 9% reported a forcible rape incident (Carey et al.). Additionally, Goldstein (2011) indicated many young adults, both males and females alike, have experienced some form of mild to moderate relational aggression or been involved in the relational aggression—this includes relational aggression in romantic relationships. Drouin, Ross, and Tobin (2015) also found that 19% of young adults had

experienced relational aggression in the form of sexting coercion. Women were found to experience increased distress over time in relation to this particular form of aggression. Furthermore, Goldstein found that individuals who choose to remain in long term relationships in which relationship aggression is present may put themselves at risk of experiencing this type of aggression for long periods of time. Despite these issues, evaluations of sexual violence prevention programs have shown that preventative-focused programs can have a positive impact on knowledge and behavioral intentions of sexual violence over time (Anderson & Whiston, 2005; Zinzow, Thompson, Goree, Fulmer, Greene, & Watts, 2018).

### ***Risk and Risk-Taking and Decision-Making in emerging adult relationships***

Emerging adulthood often represents a time period of increased engagement in risky relationships (relationships and/or relationship behaviors which threaten the well-being of the individual; Elliott, Easterling, & Knox, 2016), and behaviors and practices during emerging adulthood may have long-term implications for committed adult romantic relationships (Fincham, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2011). Some of these risky behaviors may include “friends with benefits” (relationships are characterized by a high degree of physical intimacy outside of the context of commitment and any intentions of a long-term relationship; Fincham et al.), sexting (Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014), and pornography consumption (Braithwaite, Coulson, Keddington, & Fincham, 2015; Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Poulsen, Busby, & Galovan, 2013; Wright, Tokunaga, Kraus, & Klann, 2017). These behaviors are often decisions made in the present, and thought may not be given to how these behaviors may affect the individual on a longer-term basis.

Other research literature suggests that emerging adult romantic relationships often contain a high degree of ambiguity (Sassler, 2004; Vennum & Fincham, 2011). Some researchers have documented that emerging adults often enter serious relationships such as cohabitation as a “gradual slide,” or something that “just happened” rather than making clear, conscious decisions about important relationship transitions (Lindsay, 2000; Manning & Smock, 2005; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006; Vennum & Fincham, 2011). Researchers have recently built upon these ideas by finding that those couples that experience “relationship cycling” (on-and-off relationships) have lower levels of relationship dedication and are more likely to slide into a relationship (Vennum, Hardy, Sibley, & Fincham, 2015)—and relationship cycling is often more prevalent in young adult relationships (Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013).

According to Manning (2013), cohabitation appears to be steadily increasing and does not show any indication of subsiding any time soon. As of 2017, roughly half of the 18 million cohabitators were under the age of 35 (Stepler, 2017). Furthermore, individuals who choose to cohabit often begin this process without plans of ever advancing to marriage but choose to live together to help with finances among other things (Guzzo, 2014; Sassler, 2004; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). Stanley et al.(2006) suggest that “sliding” into important relationship transitions such as cohabitation without making conscious decisions puts a relationship at greater risk for adverse outcomes, such as negative relationship constraints. Constraints, such as pregnancy, and joint financial ventures often increase the difficulty of ending or leaving a relationship that may not be healthy and/or safe (Stanley et al). Owen, Rhoades, and Stanley (2013) found that those who avoided unhealthy relationship constraints, and used more thoughtful decision making processes in their relationships reported more dedication to their partners, higher satisfaction in the relationship, and less cheating behaviors.

Considering the literature above on risk, risky behavior, and decision making in emerging adult romantic relationships, this developmental period has been identified as a particularly “teachable moment,” as emerging adults may be more open to learning about relationships during this time, and RE content may be particularly important in terms of boosting protective factors and reducing risk (Fincham et al., 2011; Holt, Mattanah, Schmidt, Daks, Brophy, Minnaar, & Rorer, 2016; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Two important areas in particular for emerging adults may be RE content on identifying potential relationship “danger signs”, and making clear and conscious decisions about transitions in relationships, both of which have been found to be improved by the implementation of RE curricula with young adults (Holt et al., 2016).

### **Gaps in literature on RE with emerging adults**

After reviewing the examples above, emerging adulthood represents an opportune time to provide RE both to combat the deleterious effects of risks and risk factors, and promote individual and relational well-being. Although still in its infancy, there is a small body of literature showing the effectiveness of RE with emerging adult samples. In one example, Kerpelman et al. (2010) found that when a sample of high school students were introduced to relationship education, false ideas about relationships were decreased, and conflict resolution skills were elevated. Additionally, Olmstead et al.(2011), found that college students who participated in a college course with a relationship education component showed gains in

relationship knowledge and skills (e.g. the “speaker listener” technique), and the participants felt they gained a stronger idea about themselves as well as any current or future relationships. With a similar sample to that of Olmstead et al. (2011), Vennum and Fincham (2011) found that RE content focused on decision making (i.e., “sliding versus deciding”) was positively related to self-control, and negatively associated with hookup behavior and alcohol consumption. Bradford et al. (2016) found that RE improved relationship knowledge across multiple domains of healthy decision-making in a young-adult sample of dating couples. Furthermore, Braithwaite et al. (2010) found that individuals who participated in the relationship education class showed a decreased amount of cheating on their current partner. Cottle et al. (2014) found that college students who received RE reported positive increases in relationship knowledge and communication skills from pre to posttest, and Burr et al. (2015) found that those students who received RE reported significant gains in reports of relationship confidence and healthy relationship decision-making over a control group.

Thus, RE when implemented with emerging adults holds the potential of increasing awareness and teaching skills associated with healthy relationships, and for many emerging adults, prior to the formation of serious relationships such as cohabitating, engaged, or marital relationships. However, there is still much to be learned about RE delivery formats with emerging adult populations. To our knowledge, there exists very little research focused on incorporating RE into the “traditional flow” of an existing college course on committed relationships. The research cited on RE on college campuses above teaches RE separate from class lectures (Olmstead et al., 2011), in addition to course textbook lecture material (Burr et al., 2016), or as a two-day seminar (Cottle et al., 2014).

In the current study an existing course on marriage was utilized to implement the *Love Notes* (LN; Pearson, 2016) RE curriculum over a semester with primarily emerging adult, college students. In the class, LN was not used to accompany other course content (e.g., textbook material), but the LN curriculum acted as the main content for the course, a new and novel approach for implementing RE with emerging adults.

Evaluation research on LN has shown that the curriculum helps boost relationship skills, decrease risky sexual behaviors, and reduce the likelihood of becoming pregnant in a large sample of adolescents and young adults (Farb & Margolis, 2016). The LN curriculum emphasizes healthy relationship-building skills such as seeking a good match/partner, improving impulse control, identifying relationship warning signs, healthy decision-making (i.e., “sliding versus deciding”), and learning and communication skills. The curriculum is designed to be generally

applicable, regardless of current relationship status, and has been developed for more specific implementation with adolescent and young adult audiences (Dibble Institute, 2019; Pearson, 2016).

Similar to other RE research with emerging adults (e.g., Olmstead et al., 2011) the content focuses *on self-awareness* (e.g., understanding one's own family background, personality, and examining relationship goals), *relationship awareness* (e.g., partner selection, making healthy relationship choices, thinking through sexual decision-making), and *relationship skills* (e.g., communication and listening skills, such as using the speaker-listener technique). Students who received the LN content in the marriage class were compared with students who did not (control class) from a community nutrition class on a number of relationship measures. It was hypothesized that students who received the LN curriculum in the marriage class would show significant gains over those who did not on the positive relationship measures (e.g., relationship confidence, relationship vision, relationship insight, sliding versus deciding knowledge) and score significantly lower from pretest to posttest on a relationship violence item.

## Method

### Procedure

Following IRB approval, students from a marriage class and a community nutrition class were invited to participate. Students self-enrolled in the classes, thus students were not randomly assigned to one class or the other, as students was free to sign up for the course of their choosing. Over the semester, the marriage class received the LN curriculum in its entirety, and the community nutrition class did not. The LN content was administered through a community—university partnership, where a university faculty member and county health department educators facilitated the curriculum in the college classroom.

Data for this project was collected over the spring 2019 semester. Following informed consent, students from the different classes were invited to complete a pretest survey the first week of the semester, and a posttest survey the final week. Student participants who were single or otherwise not in a relationship were instructed to think about a future relationship for any questions that referred to a relationship (e.g., “I now know how to identify communication danger signs”).

### Sample

The sample consisted of 37 total participants enrolled in a semester long marriage class or community nutrition class taught at a state university in



the central U.S. during the spring semester of 2019; marriage class ( $n = 20$ ), community nutrition class ( $n = 17$ ). The sample was primarily female (77%), and Caucasian (60%), with Hispanic or Latino (16%), African American (11%), and Native American or Alaska Native (8%) as the next largest groups. Participants ranged in age from 18-35 ( $M = 22.36$ ,  $SD = 3.42$ ). Within the sample, 65% reported being in a current romantic relationship, with most describing the relationship as “dating exclusively one partner” (41%;  $n = 8$  for the marriage class,  $n = 7$  for the community nutrition class), “single” (35%;  $n = 8$  for the marriage class, and  $n = 6$  for the community nutrition class), “engaged” (11%;  $n = 2$  for the marriage class,  $n = 2$  for the community nutrition class), “married” (5%;  $n = 1$  for the marriage class, and  $n = 1$  for the community nutrition class), and “living with a romantic partner” (5%;  $n = 1$  for the marriage class, and  $n = 1$  for the community nutrition class).

The two married students, as well as one student falling out of the “emerging adult age range” (one student reported an age of 35 in the community nutrition class) were retained for analysis because the *Love Notes* curriculum, although designed primarily for younger singles, takes a broad approach, containing information applicable to those in a relationship or not in a relationship, and information applicable to any life stage. Also, removing these students from the analysis would disrupt the naturally occurring setting of these classes (all students contribute to class discussions and activities). Chi-Square testing also indicated a non-statistically significant relationship between group membership (marriage class or community nutrition class) and age, and relationship status (i.e., group membership was independent of age and relationship status).

## Measures

Survey items used Likert scale formatting for both the pre and posttests, with anchors “Totally Disagree” assigned a value of 1 and “Totally Agree” a value of 7. The questionnaire was developed in consultation with the developers of PREP Inc. materials for the evaluation of a RE program entitled *Within My Reach* (Pearson, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2008) using items from their previously established scales. Marline Pearson, the primary author of the *Within My Reach* program (a RE program designed for single adults and single parents) developed *Love Notes* primarily for younger singles (adolescents and young adults). *Love Notes* uses very similar core constructs as the *Within My Reach* program, and both are based on the widely researched PREP program (Dibble Institute, 2019). The measures assessed in the current study are described below:



### **Relationship confidence**

A summation of four items from the Future Relationship Confidence Scale (e.g., *I am very confident when I think of having a stable, long term relationship*;  $\alpha$  pre-post: .72-.74 (Stanley, Rhodes, & Williams, 2007; Williams, 2007).

### **Relationship vision**

A summation of six items from the Future Relationship Confidence Scale (e.g., *I have a clear vision of what I want my marriage (or other long-term romantic relationship) to be like*);  $\alpha$  pre-post: .74-.55 (Stanley et al., 2007; Williams, 2007). While posttest internal consistency was somewhat low,  $\alpha$  values below .70 are not uncommonly published in social science research (e.g., Language and Reading Research Consortium, 2015; McIntosh & Long, 2005; Rogers, 1999). Also, some suggest that multiple statistics, such as average inter-item correlations between .15 and .80, and corrected item-total correlations above .20, are also indicative of good internal consistency (BrckaLorenz, Chiang, & Nelson Laird, 2013; Clark & Watson, 1995; Schmitt, 1996; Steyn, Labadarios, Nel, & Heidi-Lee, 2005). Additionally, others have suggested retaining scale items if internal consistency worsens once certain items are removed (e.g., Wang et al., 2017). The relationship vision scale in this study met these criteria.

### **Relationship insight**

A summation of five items from the Future Relationship Confidence Scale (e.g., *I have an excellent knowledge of specific things to look for to determine whether a romantic relationship is healthy*);  $\alpha$  pre-post: .71-.74 (Stanley et al., 2007; Williams, 2007).

### **Sliding versus deciding knowledge**

A summation of four items adapted from the Relationship Deciding Scale (e.g., *It is important to make conscious decisions about whether to take each major step in romantic relationships*);  $\alpha$  pre-post: .71-.55 (Vennum & Fincham, 2011). While posttest internal consistency was somewhat low, this scale met the additional criteria to consider when assessing internal consistency mentioned above.

### **Perceptions of speaking and listening skills**

A summation of seven items from the Communication Skills Test (e.g., *When I'm having a disagreement with my partner, I am careful to avoid acting like I know his/her thoughts or intentions*);  $\alpha$  pre-post: .79-.91 (Saiz & Jenkins, 1996).

**Table 1.** Repeated measures ANOVA results by group (Treatment, N = 20; Control, N = 17).

Variable	Treatment Time 1	Control Time 1	Treatment Time 2	Control Time 2	F	P	$\eta^2$
	M	M	M	M			
Relationship Confidence	22.10	24.71	26.10	24.12	23.20	.0001	.41
Relationship Vision	34.25	36.59	38.80	38.06	3.03	.09	.08
Relationship Insight	25.45	28.06	31.65	28.82	20.87	.0001	.39
Sliding vs. Deciding Knowledge	22.80	24.24	25.42	25.00	3.85	.06	.10
Speaking and Listening Skills	39.73	40.53	44.13	42.65	.64	.43	.02
Relationship Violence	1.20	2.20	1.35	2.12	.06	.81	.00

### **Relationship violence**

Single item: *Even in a healthy relationship, occasionally slapping, pushing or shoving during an argument is inevitable.*

## **Results**

Repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA; across the two time-points) was used to analyze the study data. Mean differences were assessed across classes (the marriage class compared to the community nutrition class) across the pre-and-posttests. These analyses were run in SPSS 24.0 (IBM Corp Released, 2016). For an overview of the repeated measures ANOVA findings please see Table 1.

### **Relationship confidence**

It was hypothesized that students in the marriage class would report significantly greater gains in relationship confidence when compared to the community nutrition class in relationship confidence. As predicted, students in the marriage class did report a significant gain in relationship confidence over the control class,  $F(1, 33) = 23.20$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .41$ . See Figure 1 below.

### **Relationship vision**

It was hypothesized that students in the marriage class would report significantly greater gains in relationship vision when compared to the community nutrition class. This hypothesis was partially confirmed. Students in the marriage class did show an approaching significance gain in relationship vision over the control class,  $F(1, 33) = 3.03$ ,  $p = .09$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$ .

### **Relationship insight**

It was hypothesized that students in the marriage class would report significantly greater gains in relationship insight when compared to the community nutrition class. As predicted, students in the marriage class did show a significant gain in relationship insight over the control class,  $F(1, 33) = 20.88$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .39$ .

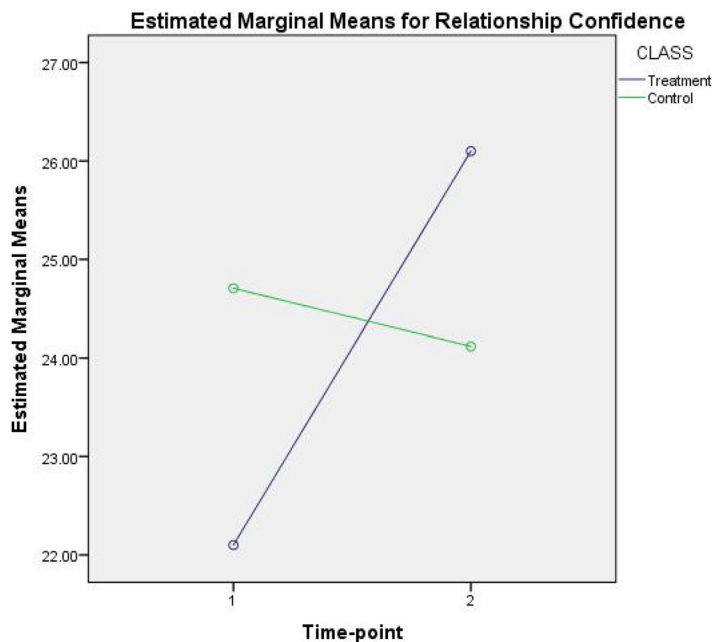


Figure 1. Means plot by group for relationship confidence.

**Sliding versus deciding knowledge**

It was hypothesized that students in the marriage class would report significantly greater gains in sliding versus deciding knowledge when compared to the community nutrition class. This hypothesis was partially supported. Students in the marriage class reported an approaching significance gain in sliding versus deciding knowledge over the control class,  $F(1, 33) = 3.85$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ .

**Perceptions of speaking and listening skills**

It was hypothesized that students in the marriage class would report significantly greater gains in speaking and listening skills when compared to the community nutrition class. Contrary to hypothesis, students in the marriage class did not report a significant gain in speaking and listening over the control class,  $F(1, 28) = .64$ ,  $p = .43$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ .

**Relationship violence**

It was hypothesized that students in the marriage class would report significantly more negative attitudes on relationship violence when compared to the community nutrition class. Contrary to hypothesis, students in the marriage class did not report a significantly more negative attitude on relationship violence over the control class,  $F(1, 33) = .06$ ,  $p = .81$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ .

## Discussion

The study results show that RE with emerging adults can increase healthy relationship knowledge and awareness over a 16-week course when a RE curriculum is offered as the content for a college course. This study also provided the first investigation, to our knowledge, investigating the utility of the *Love Notes* program with a sample of young adults. The study also utilized an innovative partnership approach between university faculty and community practitioners. Although the results are in some ways consistent with previous research using the *Within My Reach* curriculum (e.g., Burr, et al., 2016; Cottle et al., 2014; Fincham et al., 2011), these results show that positive effects can be produced through the implementation of the *Love Notes* curriculum as the focal point of the class.

The most significant changes in those who received the LN curriculum over the control class were in the areas of relationship confidence and relationship insight, and to a lesser degree, relationship vision and sliding versus deciding knowledge. Pertaining to these outcomes, students who had received the LN content reported more assuredness in their ability to identify healthy relationship characteristics, more confidence in their ability to effectively manage challenges to help a relationship last, greater capacity to identify potential relationship red flags, and more clearly see the importance of conscious decision-making in relationship development.

These findings are encouraging for a number of different reasons. First, premarital relationship knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs before often influence later marital quality (Rhoades & Stanley, 2014). Second, clear decision-making over the development of the relationship, especially more intentional decision-making through important relationship transitions is connected with marital quality later on (Owen et al., 2013; Rhoades & Stanley). And third, long-term relationships and marriages often begin with significant personal and/or relational issues (Lavner, Bradbury, & Karney, 2012). Therefore, gains in confidence and insight about healthy relationship beliefs and attitudes, as well as increased foresight on what to seek in a healthy partner/relationship, and more intentional relationship decision-making may be of particular importance to the young adults in this study as they navigate and form relationships in the future.

In terms of perceptions of speaking and listening skills, the results showed no significant differences by class. This finding is somewhat puzzling in that communication skills are a major area emphasized in the curriculum. This finding points to the need to further examine, and perhaps adjust the methods for teaching and measuring communication (and listening) skills moving forward. The implementation of observational communication measures would be something important to explore in the future. Also, contextual factors such as stress have been shown to have a profound

effect on relationship processes such as communication (Neff & Karney, 2009; Williamson, Karney, & Bradbury, 2013), and some research has shown that relationship context and risk-factors can influence the effectiveness of relationship programming (Williamson et al., 2015). Future relationship education efforts need to both carefully consider the communication skills addressed in the program, but also how other factors (contextual and otherwise) may impede or enhance someone's ability to learn and perform such skills.

The analysis for both relationship vision and sliding versus deciding showed results approaching significance, where those in the marriage class showed marginally higher scores for both scales over those in the community nutrition class. For relationship vision, this may be partly due to the items in the scale looking far into the future for some of the students in the sample, as well as looking toward a marriage/long-term relationship (i.e., *I have a clear vision of what I want my marriage (or other long-term romantic relationship) to be like*). Recent statistics show that the median age at first marriage is just under 30 for men and just under 28 for women (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Over 80% of the sample was between the ages of 18-24, with a sample mean of just over the age of 22, and it may have been somewhat difficult for this younger audience to fully look to and conceptualize the distant future in terms of a marital relationship or other long-term relationship situation. Also, the sliding versus deciding scale questions are mostly contextualized within a relationship (e.g., *It is important to make conscious decisions about whether to take each major step in romantic relationships; It is important to me to discuss with my partner each major step we take in the relationship*). For those with little relationship experience it may have been difficult to relate to these items. Conceivably, an added level of focus helping younger participants and those with little to no relationship experience understand the importance of such knowledge and skills at the present time, for use in future relationships and experiences (i.e., how the information at the present time could be used in the future) could have boosted the program impact and the results for these scales. Results for this study show greater changes in sliding versus deciding across the two time-points for those in the marriage class and not in relationship, while not significant (at .05),  $F(1, 33) = 2.82$ ,  $p = .10$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$ .

Finally, the results showed no group differences on the relationship violence item. Overall, agreement with the relationship violence item was low and remained low for both groups over the duration of the study. Yet, while these results showed no program impact, low-levels of agreement that even some level of violence is inevitable, even in a healthy relationship is positive news. Social movements such as the #MeToo and #TimesUp

movements have served to shine a light on alarming physical and sexual violence rates against women, and are encouraging discussion as well as changing college/university policies and procedures to offer more protections (e.g., Gronert, 2019). This greater level of awareness may have influenced the responses of the study participants.

### **Implications for practitioners and researchers**

There is still much to learn about effective delivery of RE with various audiences. Historically, RE has been primarily delivered through religious organizations, and audiences have been primarily white, middle-class, engaged or married couples (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008; Hawkins, 2018). Investigations such as the current study help to conceptualize ways to increase the reach of RE to emerging adults. The results show that RE, as implemented through a college class on relationships, can produce positive changes in emerging adult relationship attitudes, knowledge, and awareness. Hans (2014) noted that there are over 215 academic units in the area of child and family studies/family science. If even a modest proportion of these programs incorporated RE into their current course offerings, there is the potential to reach many emerging adults. This is also important as many of these students are studying and preparing to become future family life educators, marriage and family therapists, and other social service providers. The content and process of relationship education can offer assistance for learning program facilitation techniques and important subject areas to include, as well as assistance in effectively managing their own relationships, and examining their own biases and assumptions in terms of relationships and family life.

In addition, if family life education programs are to enjoy long-term effectiveness, partnerships and collaborations are important to consider. This study used such a collaboration by partnering with a county health department to offer RE in the classroom. The field of RE could greatly benefit from those teaching courses on healthy relationships at colleges and universities effectively partnering and sharing ideas with those who work with RE programs in social service organizations, government programs, religious organizations, middle and high schools, etc. The sharing of program facilitator perspectives and insights from those of differing educational backgrounds, and personal and professional experiences only enhances the ability of relationship education to more effectively meet the needs of diverse populations by incorporating a broader base of strategies and techniques.

The timing of measurement may also be an issue when evaluating outcomes in RE. A 16-week span can be a long evaluative period. It may be in

this study that concepts/skills taught early in the semester may have been hard to remember completely by the end of the semester. One consideration would be to provide periodic reminders of past information covered in the class throughout the semester, and providing reminders and reinforcements over the duration of a particular student's time in an undergraduate program (e.g., implementing reminders in other classes and in program communications). Future research should also explore adding measurement points over the semester.

Additionally, in general, the long-term effectiveness of RE has been under investigated, and this is even more the case with emerging adult populations. Future research should strive to understand the long-term impact of RE on emerging adults in various ways (e.g., attitudes, knowledge, skills, decisions, etc.). For instance, for this study it would be important to know how the RE content affects ongoing decisions made about relationships, and future relationship functioning (e.g., how the concepts taught affect future partner selection, communication skills used in relationships, future relationship/marital quality, etc.). Learning more about the long-term impact of RE will be crucial as the field continues to effectively strive to boost healthy relationship development in not only emerging adults, but various populations. Also, more research is needed on specific mechanisms of change in relationship education. More specifically investigating which areas of program focus (e.g., insight-oriented, skills based, etc.) and in which formats (lecture, interactive, applied-focused, online supplements, etc.) are most effective and for whom are ongoing topics in need of future exploration. This study offered the curriculum as the focal point of an established course on relationships, which is a cost effective method for public universities to offer RE—and potentially reach more students. The results of this study are promising, but more information is needed to more fully understand if offering RE as more “stand alone” content is more efficacious than other formats previously tested (e.g., RE offered in addition to other course content). Specifically, a more thorough examination of particularly effective relationship education methods with emerging adult populations is important as many are beginning to explore and establish more long-term romantic relationships.

### **Limitations and conclusion**

This study contains a number of limitations of which the reader should be aware. The most significant limitation is the overall small sample size, thus Type II error was likely heightened with small numbers. However, the effect sizes for some of the results (e.g., relationship confidence and relationship insight) were quite large, adding validity to the findings.



Additionally, the study does not qualify as a “true experiment” as students self-enrolled in the two classes and were not randomly assigned. The control group also had higher means on the study variables at time one, likely because those in the control group were significantly older than the treatment group ( $t(36) = 3.69, p < .001$ ) and may have had more relationship experience. The sample was also primarily female. Yet, the sample did have reasonable diversity, in terms of ethnicity and relationship status.

Despite the mentioned limitations, the study makes an important contribution to the field of RE with emerging adult populations by demonstrating the effectiveness of teaching a RE curriculum as the primary content for a marriage class. This study also adds to the validity of the *Love Notes* curriculum as an effective tool working with young adult audiences. Others who teach these topics may find not only the results of the study helpful, but also the method and process for conducting RE in college courses. Of course, wider-spread coordination and adoption of sound practices through which to offer RE will only increase the potential for positive outcomes. Increasing the reach of RE to emerging adult populations may help them to more fully consider healthy decision-making and other important relationship concepts to influence more healthy and positive relationship outcomes.

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