

## The Kinsey Institute: A Beacon That Beckons

“Universities must be maintained as watch towers of human progress, from which men and women may gain a view of life in its entirety, and in which there will be maintained the calm and quiet necessary for objectivity and comprehension.”

—Herman B Wells, inaugural address, 1938

Few research centers in the world have been as consequential as the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University. Started in 1947 to ensure the administrative autonomy of research on human sexual behavior, it grew into an incomparable academic resource known the world over. Now, on its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we can look back on its evolution as an institution and parse its legacy as a beacon of knowledge.

I first became acquainted with the Kinsey Reports in the late 1970s, when I was an undergraduate serving a two-year apprenticeship with Herman Wells, the University Chancellor and former IU president. Wells was my first and best teacher of institutional history. As a psychology major, I became interested in how the discipline developed at the university. My research uncovered the role of William Lowe Bryan, who started the laboratory in the 1880s before becoming IU president. Wells was Bryan’s successor, and I was enthralled by the chancellor’s recollections about Bryan, whom he knew well. That launched me on a life-long quest to understand the historical evolution of my *alma mater*.

The historical links began in 1920, when Alfred C. Kinsey was hired as a professor of zoology during president Bryan’s long tenure. Kinsey proved to be an excellent teacher and even better researcher, as he became a scientific authority on the genus *Cynips*, tiny wasps that lay eggs on oak leaves, inducing a characteristic swelling known as galls. In 1938, he earned a star in the *American Men of Science* directory. Soon after Wells lost the “acting” before his title as president that same year, Kinsey initiated the famous “marriage course” that led directly into his new field of study—human sexuality. His research program burgeoned over the next decade, and he hired additional staff to collect sexual history interviews as well as to process related print materials, art works, and artifacts. In 1947, Kinsey, with the assistance of Wells, incorporated the Institute for Sex Research.

In 1948, the Kinsey team published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, based on interviews of 5,000 American men. Supported by an unprecedented survey, the project released an avalanche of empirical data that questioned the dominant discourse about American sexual habits, instead emphasizing wide variation in practices, frequencies, and partners. Five years later, Kinsey’s team published a companion volume, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, with nearly 6,000 subjects, which renewed awareness to the disjunction between expressed norms and actual behavior. The Kinsey Reports beckoned readers into a capacious statistical pool, offering a wide spectrum of others for comparison.

In 1956, Kinsey died, and leadership shifted to other members of Kinsey's inner circle, anthropologist Paul Gebhard as executive director and psychologist Wardell Pomeroy as field research director. After the paradigm-shifting Kinsey Reports, the institute settled down to a quarter-century of normal science. The institute published interview-based volumes on reproduction, sex offenders, and homosexuality, as well as analyses of nomenclature and methodology.

The early 1980s brought many changes to the institute. In 1981, after a third of a century of existence and 25 years after its founder's death, it was renamed the Alfred C. Kinsey Institute for Sex Research. The following year psychologist June M. Reinisch became director, bringing a different sensibility to its work, telegraphed by another name change, to the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Reinisch led public education efforts through an internationally syndicated newspaper column, "The Kinsey Report," starting in 1984 for a decade. Researchers were brought together in multidisciplinary seminars sponsored by the institute; one result was an edited book in 1987, *Masculinity/Femininity: Basic Perspectives*. Continuing the public education initiative, *The Kinsey Institute New Report on Sex: What You Must Know to be Sexually Literate* was published in 1990, the first institute book intended for a general audience. Another facet of the institute's programming was catalyzed by the first art exhibit the same year, *Selections from the Collections of the Kinsey Institute*, which showcased the impressive art collection. That led to further exhibitions as well as a detailed inventory of the extensive art and artifact collections gathered over decades.

Following Reinisch's departure in 1993, staff researcher Stephanie Sanders stepped in as interim director for two years. An international search yielded John Bancroft, a British physician, as the fourth director, from 1995 to 2004. Early in his tenure, he led efforts to establish clinics for sexual health and menstrual cycle problems, extending clinical research into therapeutic interventions. Kinsey's life and work were scrutinized by two scholarly biographies, from James H. Jones and from Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, who took contrasting approaches. Bancroft also edited several books in the Kinsey Institute series, on fundamental topics in sex research, including methodological issues, theoretical perspectives, and childhood development. A series of gallery exhibitions on campus resulted in catalogs—*The Art of Desire* (1997), *The Kiss* (1998), and *Sex and Humor* (2002)—displayed themes drawn from the rich art collections. In 1998, the institute celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and the 45<sup>th</sup> of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* by reprinting both volumes with Indiana University Press. In 2003, another exhibition was produced for golden anniversary of the female volume: *Feminine Persuasion: Art and Essays on Sexuality*. A public information site directed toward college-age student was also started, in 1998, that evolved into the syndicated *Kinsey Confidential*.

The Kinsey Institute's next director was psychologist Julia Heiman, who served from 2004 to 2013. During her decade at the helm, she oversaw an expansion of research, on both topics new and old, and the collections, both art and archival documents. Her first year was marked by the release of the feature film, *Kinsey*, starring Liam Neeson and Laura Linney, which renewed

public interest. In 2005, the first juried Erotic Art Show debuted, continuing on an annual basis to explore themes of sexuality, gender, romance, reproduction, gender and sexual politics, the human figure, and the relation between illness and sexuality. In 2007, the Kinsey Institute hosted the inaugural conference on the University Consortium for Sexuality Research and Training. The papers of noted sex researchers Virginia Johnson and William Masters were deposited at the institute's archive in 2011.

Another arena of human sexuality—the neurobiology of love and relationships—was brought into focus by mammalian endocrinologist C. Sue Carter, the next director, from 2014-2019. The Kinsey Institute revamped its website along with a refreshed logo and a new tagline—to explore love, sexuality, and well-being. On the eve of the institute's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in 2016 its board of directors voted to dissolve its separate legal status and merge with Indiana University. Because research materials, including sex histories, were now protected adequately by state statutes, the original impetus for an independent corporation had vanished, and the merger facilitated infrastructure support and integration of the collections. IU historian Judith Allen supervised the writing of an institutional history, *The Kinsey Institute: The First Seventy Years*, released in 2017, which chronicled its activities leading up to the merger. The Kinsey Institute Traumatic Stress Research Consortium, launched in 2018, sought to assemble a worldwide network of sex trauma researchers. In 2019, a major exhibition, *Sensual/Sexual/Social: The Photography of George Platt Lynes*, opened at Newfields museum in Indianapolis, highlighting the institute's rich image archive.

The institute's current director, evolutionary biologist Justin Garcia, supervised the relocation of institute offices and collections on the Bloomington campus. Pivoting in response to the global pandemic, the institute launched new initiatives related to the public health emergency, including a suite of research studies on the effects of the coronavirus on sexual health and wellbeing. In addition to existing media channels, the Kinsey Institute has a growing presence on social media to augment its research, outreach, and education missions.

Throughout its serious and colorful history, the Kinsey Institute has served as a beacon of trustworthy knowledge—a “social observatory” in today's parlance. Conceived in biological science, it has grown bridges to other disciplines that study sexual behavior and the human condition. From the pioneering Kinsey Reports to current research and public education efforts, it has balanced its responsibility to advance science as well as to inform the public. As the Kinsey Institute passes a significant milestone, the bright beacon beckons still.

James H. Capshew  
Professor, History and Philosophy of Science and Medicine & University Historian  
Indiana University