Marriage is an ancient institution, the old joke goes, but who wants to live in an institution? Lots of people, apparently.

Surveys show that most young adults expect to marry a "soul mate." Some 86 percent of young adults questioned for a 2001 report also acknowledged that marriage is "hard work and a full-time job."

Marriage is recognized by the state and grounded in religious institutions. It is celebrated in elaborate ceremonies.

But in today's society, it seems to be losing ground. Americans are less likely to marry than in the past, and less likely to stay married if they do.

Concern about trends affecting marriage has caused some people to call for stricter support of traditional, lifelong, monogamous relationships. Some states have adopted "covenant marriages," which are more difficult to end than ordinary civil marriages.

Dozens of leading scholars from the United States and Canada are exploring questions about marriage at Emory University this weekend at a conference titled "Sex, Marriage and Family and the Religions of the Book: Modern Problems, Enduring Solutions." It is presented by Emory's Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Religion.

Some of those scholars have very different views about the shape those "enduring solutions" should take.

GRAPHIC: Photo: Photo illustration of a bride and groom on one side of a pair of scales./ KRIS JENSEN / Staff; Graphic: WHY MARRIAGE WORKS

1. Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers have good relationships with their children. One national study showed that 65 percent of young adults whose
parents had divorced reported a poor relationship with their fathers, compared with 29 percent whose parents' marriage was intact.

2. Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and mothers. The majority of children who grow up outside intact two-parent families experience at least a year of dire poverty.

3. Parental divorce or failure to marry appears to increase children's risk of school failure. Children of divorced or unwed parents have lower grades, are more likely to be held back, and are more likely to drop out of high school than children who live with both parents.

4. Marriage is associated with reduced rates of alcohol and substance abuse for both adults and teens. Married men and women consume less alcohol than singles, and children whose parents stay married have lower rates of substance abuse.

5. Married people have better health and lower rates of injury, illness and disability than singles. A recent study of the health effects of marriage on almost 10,000 Americans ages 51 to 61 showed married people had lower rates of morbidity and disability than unmarried men and women.

Sources: "Why Marriage Matters" by the Center of the American Experiment, Institute for American Values, and Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education.

WHY MARRIAGE NO LONGER MAKES SENSE

1. The "traditional" household of husband, wife and children is no longer the norm. Recent census data show that fewer than one-quarter of U.S. households fit this configuration.

2. Acts of harassment or sexual assault that would be considered criminal between strangers may be overlooked when they occur between married couples.

3. Marriage gives preferred status to one kind of sexual relationship --- monogamous, heterosexual --- over all others.

4. State recognition of marriage endorses religious conventions not shared by all members of society.

5. The advent of no-fault divorce has altered societal attitudes about the permanence of the marital union.

Source: Martha Albertson Fineman, Dorothea S. Clarke professor of feminist jurisprudence, Cornell University

--- Gayle White

LOAD-DATE: March 29, 2003