

Students

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From the issue dated July 29, 2005

Getting Schooled in Student Life

An anthropology professor goes under cover to experience the mysterious life of undergraduates

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Professors often complain about their students, and Rebekah Nathan used to grumble with the best of them. During lunches with colleagues, the anthropology professor would lament the intellectual malaise she saw among her pupils: how they refused to participate in class discussions, rarely read assigned texts, and seldom came to her during office hours.

Sometimes Ms. Nathan wondered if the generation gap explained why she could not understand students' behavior. After all, the fiftysomething professor had graduated from college during the Nixon administration. "Every year I get older and the students are the same age," says Ms. Nathan. "That's partially why I didn't trust my complaints."

So the cultural anthropologist decided to step outside the classroom and do some fieldwork. In the fall of 2002 Ms. Nathan enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student at the large public university where she teaches, an experience she chronicles in her new book, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (Cornell University Press). Rebekah Nathan is a pseudonym; in the book, the professor did not identify the students she interviewed, to protect the privacy of her subjects. Nor did she name her university (which she describes as "non-elite").

Ms. Nathan learned that being a student in the 21st century is tougher than she had imagined. After two semesters of scrambling from class to class, juggling assignments, and cramming for examinations, she had more compassion for time-crunched students, many of whom worked part-time jobs to help pay for their education.

As many in higher education might have predicted, most of the students Ms. Nathan met valued their future careers more than their course work. Ms. Nathan does not so much blame them as attempt to place them in the context of her large, commercialized campus.

Scholars may cringe to see confirmation of their complaints that students are career-obsessed and uninterested in learning. But the author says that educators would better serve students by accepting who they are -- and why.

"A lot of the assumptions that professors and administrators make about student life," Ms. Nathan says, "are just wrong."

Going Native

Students and instructors may share the same campus, but they do not experience it in the same way. That is why Ms. Nathan decided she had to live among students, to work, play, and stand in line for the shower as they did. Approaching them as a professor, with a clipboard and a tape recorder, would not do.

After her university's institutional research board granted her permission to do the project, Ms. Nathan went on sabbatical and applied for admission, using only her high-school transcript. Months later, she paid her tuition, registered for classes, and moved into a dorm.

Ms. Nathan decided she would not volunteer that she was a professor, but also that she would not lie if anyone pressed her (just one student did so). In formal interviews with subjects, she said that she was doing research on student life and that she intended to publish her findings. Several times she revealed her identity to students with whom she had developed close friendships.

Otherwise, she roamed the campus as an anonymous participant-observer in the culture she studied. Most nights she slept in her room, a single, and she went home only occasionally.

The professor had spent many years as a resident and ethnographer of a remote village overseas. Although her own campus was hardly exotic, becoming a student made her feel as if she had arrived in a foreign country. Accustomed as a professor to driving up to university buildings, she got lost traversing the campus on foot. She struggled to understand the dialect of students, who spoke fast, lacing their conversations with the words "like" and "totally."

Ms. Nathan also had to learn a new set of rules. On her second night in the dorm, she opened a beer in the lounge. Before she could finish it, the head resident assistant wrote her up for violating the dorm rules, which allowed of-age residents to drink alcohol, but only behind closed doors. At the time she hoped the incident would win her credibility among her neighbors.

After all, fitting in with younger students was difficult. Several times she was mistaken for someone's mother. Only after proving her football and volleyball skills did she make a few acquaintances.

At night, Ms. Nathan listened for clues that might help her understand her neighbors. Amid the thump of speakers and beeping of video games, the sounds of skateboards zipping down hallways and drunk students vomiting in bathrooms, she discovered the most ubiquitous word in student life: fun.

Students in her dorm cherished nothing as much as the concept of fun, which, she writes in *My Freshman Year*, "is associated with spontaneity, sociability, laughter, and behavior (including sexuality) that is unconstrained."

'A Question of Circumstance'

That fun is a fundamental law of college life is no revelation to administrators who work closely with students, many of whom expect their college to entertain as well as educate them.

More surprising are Ms. Nathan's observations of the way students' demand for choice complicated the elusive ideal of community. Although students claimed to like the notion of a close-knit campus, their own particular interests led them in too many different directions to make such a campus possible.

At the "over-optional" university, she writes, the sheer number of extracurricular activities ensured that students were rarely in the same place at once, despite campus efforts to bring them together.

Students moved in small packs. Few events organized by resident assistants drew a crowd. The one exception was a workshop on how to make edible underwear, timed for Valentine's Day.

Even the cozy communal spaces in dorms often went unused. "Hall mates," Ms. Nathan writes in her book, "were like ships that passed in the night."

But where were they going?

Usually not to the library. Instead, many were reporting for work. In a survey of students in her dorm, Ms. Nathan found that more than half worked part-time jobs, with most of them putting in at least 15 hours per week.

The costs of attending college weighed on students, and debt shaped how they thought about their education. Intellectual life, and even hobbies, seemed to matter far less than landing lucrative jobs. Students tended to participate in résumé-enhancing professional clubs and volunteer activities far more often than in organizations that interested them personally.

Not once in the dorms did Ms. Nathan overhear a political or philosophical conversation. Discussions of their bodies, relationships, and experiences with alcohol and drugs were constant; chats about academic work were not.

Most students dined and partied with those from similar backgrounds. Many said they had a close friend from a different racial or ethnic group; but when asked to list their closest friends, they rarely named students from a different group.

Ms. Nathan concluded that the university's efforts to promote diversity failed, in part, because communal activities ran counter to students' free exercise of their individualism. Furthermore, branching out socially required too much time. And nothing was more crucial than time management to students, who tended to guard their hours like pit bulls.

Pragmatism governed many of their decisions. The selection of courses, for instance, often hinged not on their content, but on the convenience of their hours. Asking professors about their weekend was part of an acceptable tactic for securing a good grade. Students sought to limit their workload, not to master their majors.

Cheating, too, was a way to deal with the demands of college for many students. Although Ms. Nathan does not condone the practice, she came to see it as one of many time-saving strategies students use to manage their assignments. It was not, she gleaned, always as simple as a question of morality.

"When you're in a student's shoes," she says, "you realize a lot of their behaviors are more of a question of circumstance than character."

Lessons Learned

Ms. Nathan was surprised by how circumstance changed her own behavior as a student. Struggling to keep up with five classes, she started cutting corners. She ignored all but the most essential reading assignments and studied only the material she would need to know on examinations. She stopped writing multiple drafts of papers -- a sin for a veteran scholar.

Even with the aid of an erasable calendar, she became disorganized. Her classes, including French and

introductory business, challenged her.

Her most humbling experience was her computer-science course. When she began to fall behind, she fought the temptation to skip the class. "I thought, 'Why go when I can't understand what they're talking about anyway?'" She managed only a C.

Although some personal friends who knew about her project predicted that Ms. Nathan would earn all A's, she finished the year with a 3.1 grade-point average. She even failed one class because she forgot to complete the necessary form in order to drop it.

After weathering life as a student, Ms. Nathan decided to make some changes as a professor. Since returning to the classroom, she has assigned less reading. It was a practical decision: She knows firsthand that students will not read assignments that are not tied closely to classroom discussions of major themes -- especially when they have four other classes to worry about.

Having learned that students avoid speaking up in classes because they do not want to disturb the norm of "equality" among their peers, Ms. Nathan now asks questions that might elicit responses from the entire group.

While living in the dorm, the professor saw how much students had to scramble to catch up after missing even a few days of classes. So she decided to do more to help students who fall behind for legitimate reasons. Now Ms. Nathan sends e-mail messages to those who flounder, offering them help instead of just threatening to lower their grades. So far, she says, many students have been receptive to her outreach.

"If you give them an opportunity to come forward, and work with them, it can make the difference between them failing or not," says Ms. Nathan.

She also accepts students' excuses for missed classes or late assignments at face value, unless she has reason to suspect they are lies. Once she was offended by students who snoozed in her classes. Having tried to sleep through the night in a noisy dorm, she now knows not to take such behavior personally.

Some professors are likely to wonder whether Ms. Nathan has given in to student sloth. Yet several administrators and professors at other universities who have read advance copies of *My Freshman Year* found her observations provocative.

The book contains findings college officials "may not want to hear, but should hear," says Deborah A. Freund, the vice chancellor and provost for academic affairs at Syracuse University. The book, she said, helped her "get closer" to the experience of students.

Ms. Nathan does not offer specific recommendations for how universities might build stronger connections among students. But she shows how colleges promote careerism over communal experiences. At a freshman orientation event she attended at her university, for instance, students learned that college was a time to "test- drive" their careers and to build their résumés.

Although the project gave Ms. Nathan more compassion for her pupils, she does not let them off the hook completely. "I wish students knew how tough it is to get up there in front of a class and lecture," she says. "When students don't seem to care, it can make the job seem thankless."

If only a student could become a professor for a year, she muses, and write a book about that.

THE ETHICS OF UNDERCOVER RESEARCH

Ethnographies, or detailed descriptions of a culture, require anthropologists to immerse themselves in the day-to-day lives of their subjects. But what if immersion involves a researcher not revealing his or her identity?

The question was important for Rebekah Nathan, who determined that she could not have made a meaningful study of students unless she blended in with them-- by not fully explaining who she was. That, the professor writes in *My Freshman Year*, required "a delicate balancing act between truth and fiction." (Rebekah Nathan is a pseudonym, and her university is not identified in her book.)

Ms. Nathan says she followed the ethical protocol of "informed consent" when conducting formal interviews with students. She identified herself as a researcher (though not as a professor at the university), explained her study, and obtained written permission to publish the subject's words.

But in day-to-day interactions, Ms. Nathan let students assume she was one of them.

Lois Weis, a professor of sociology of education at the State University at Buffalo who read the book, does not think Ms. Nathan compromised her ethical obligations as a researcher. "It seems to me that she made wise decisions," says Ms. Weis, who has conducted numerous ethnographical studies and is the co-author of *Speed Bumps: A Student-Friendly Guide to Qualitative Research* (Teachers College Press, 2000).

"Certainly in this kind of research there can be a lot of misunderstandings, miscommunications, and certainly research subjects could end up feeling hurt or used," Ms. Weis says. "But that could happen whether they knew that she was a researcher or not."

But Margaret A. Eisenhart, a professor of educational anthropology and research methodology at the University of Colorado at Boulder, who also read *My Freshman Year*, disagreed with Ms. Nathan's undercover approach.

Protecting the Subject

"My job as an ethnographer is to protect the people I'm working with in the same way I'd want to be protected if I were in the subject's shoes," says Ms. Eisenhart. "It is just simply unethical to do something which is primarily for your own benefit, to advance your own career."

She rejects the idea that Ms. Nathan would have jeopardized her research if she had been upfront with her subjects. Ms. Eisenhart says that in one of her own studies she was able to gain the trust of students and accompany them on social excursions, even dates, without concealing her identity. That research was the source for the book *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), which she wrote with Dorothy C. Holland.

"I don't think it was hard to get people to open up once they relaxed about who we were," Ms. Eisenhart says of their study.

The American Anthropological Association's code of ethics does not explicitly advise against undercover research, though it once did. Some anthropologists believe the practice is unethical in all cases, while others say it depends on the context, says Stacy Lathrop, staff liaison to the association's ethics committee.

"We all play multiple roles in our life, and you have to navigate between those," Ms. Lathrop says.
"Participant-observation is like life, dynamic and changing. As in human relationships, sometimes you do keep secrets."

-- Eric Hoover

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Volume 51, Issue 47, Page A36

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