

My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student.

By *Rebekah Nathan*

Published by Cornell University Press 2005, 208 pages

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Recent discussion on the issues facing higher education have focused on a variety of topics, including the need for higher standards of assessment and accountability, the lack of funding for higher education, and the challenges of educating a new generation of students for their participation as civic and globally minded citizens. In the quest for generating solutions to increased demands on universities for accountability, enormous human and fiscal resources are being expended to create new programs, research, and results to demonstrate the viability and importance of programs and the college experience. Perhaps what is being overlooked in these discussions is an examination and more thorough understanding of the undergraduate student culture, and the implications that such a culture has on the competing demands of both universities and American society. Garnering this more precise understanding of contemporary undergraduate culture—and the effect of this culture on university programs, policies, and student practices—is the topic of Rebekah Nathan's book, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*.

Nathan's inquiry began when she grew perplexed by the interaction she had with students as a professor at a large public university. In response to their lack of interest and participation in her courses, Nathan decided to re-enroll in school as a freshman student as a means of understanding students' relationship to their education and undergraduate culture. Rebekah Nathan, a pseudonym designed by the author to maintain her and the university's anonymity, applied to school and gained acceptance using only her high school transcripts. Early in the book, Nathan is clear to discern the ethical and research issues she faced in her project, and she utilizes the epilogue to explain these issues in greater detail. Despite her efforts to remain anonymous, Nathan's book was published with some degree of controversy in 2005 after the author's real identity was unmasked prior to publication (Gravois, 2005).

Utilizing her skills as a cultural anthropologist, Nathan takes readers through her experiences as a freshman. She describes in detail her experience of attending a preview program, moving into her residence hall, negotiating Welcome Week activities, and attending classes, often noting that she did not, as a faculty member, fully understand the complexity of the undergraduate experience. The book's chapters describe in detail many

of the experiences she had, focusing specifically on life in the residence halls, community and diversity, and academics, though there is also extensive discussion regarding campus involvement and student employment.

While the text is helpful and interesting in describing the different aspects of the undergraduate experience, Nathan's inquiry leads to a larger commentary on what she refers to as the "over-optional" university and its relationship to campus community, diversity, and American society. To begin this discussion, Nathan describes a central tenet of undergraduate culture, which she refers to as the "ego-centered network," where students choose a small contingent of individuals with whom to associate, and rarely choose to overlap those circles of peers. These peer groups are often haphazardly formed by students as a result of shared circumstances or shared demographics and have a tremendous impact on the overall experience of undergraduate students.

It is in the idea of university community that Nathan is able to explain the effects of the ego-centered network and over-optional university most effectively. The American ideal of individuality has led universities to create limitless numbers of opportunities for students. Be it a choice of major, residential living environment, or extracurricular involvement, undergraduate students now have almost unlimited optional experiences during college. As a result, colleges have become places where "no one is in the same place at the same time" (Nathan, 2005, p. 38). Nathan concludes that universities' desires to create a campus community fail because everyone's university experience is different and students have the option to "move out of the dorm, drop the class, change majors, or quit the club, resulting in a social world that always seems to be in flux" (p. 39). As a result, Nathan asserts, many universities' efforts to market themselves as a "community" fail to actualize their efforts because the American ideal of individuality buttresses against the responsibility associated with a true community.

Failed programming on campuses is often a result of universities attempting to create a more coherent "campus community." As an example, Nathan points to the failed attempt of creating a First-Year Colloquium on her campus. As part of the requirements for the course, all students were required to read a common book, and the course began with a discussion of this text with other students and faculty from around campus. Nathan noted in this experience the same issue she encountered as a professor: students simply did not read the text, or prepare for class. Even required events for the university are an option for students, and according to Nathan the failure of the Colloquium experience highlights the issues facing universities "when efforts at building community compete with the demand for choice" (Nathan, 2005, pp. 43-44).

Nathan extends this discussion to include an examination of how the over-optional university affects diversity policies on campus. While universities often attempt to bridge the gaps present in society due to race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and other diversity issues, Nathan believes these efforts often fail once again as a result of the competing demands of individuality and choice versus community. The discussion of diversity focuses most closely on failures to increase racial and ethnic interaction on campus. Nathan argues that built-in bias in college programming actually discourages cross-racial interaction and encourages same-ethnicity relationships. As examples she

points to preview weekends at her college designated for particular ethnic groups, pre-college trips that cost extra money, and separate orientation activities for international students.

Noting that there is “active racism” in colleges and universities, Nathan sees “race or ethnicity. . . ignored as a topic of conversation in mainstream college culture, treated as an invisible issue and with silence” (Nathan, 2005, p. 60). Failure of diversity policy and programming, for Nathan, is not limited simply to individual college student choice. Her discussion of race relations on campus allows her to provide commentary on how societal forces, including demographics, influence who goes to college. In addition, her examination of diversity policy on campus allows Nathan to begin her discussion about the impacts that undergraduate culture has on American society. Essentially, Nathan argues that failure to address racial and ethnic barriers on campus will continue to impact cross-racial interaction in society.

As an older, nontraditional “student,” Nathan writes early in the book that she is unable to speak to the entire undergraduate culture. While she uses the ego-centered network as a theoretical examination of undergraduate culture, she notes that “youth, pop culture, and getting a degree are pretty accurately the ties that bind together a public state university community” (Nathan, 2005, p. 42). The tenets of youth and fun are tied to students’ expectations of the undergraduate experience, and these expectations guide the decisions these individuals make throughout their undergraduate career. In discussing course selection, preparation for class, and even cheating, Nathan is better able to understand that students are actually going through the process of managing their college careers, rather than managing their time. The premium of undergraduate culture is having fun and getting a “degree is seen primarily as a ticket to a better job rather than a better mind” (Nathan, p. 109) for most undergraduate students. Nathan is blatant in stating that many university “professors and administrators overestimate the role that academics plays in student culture, and as a result they magnify the impact of teachers and classes on student life and decisions” (Nathan, p. 140).

While the theoretical understanding of undergraduate culture is an important result of this book, the larger impact may be in creating discussion about how undergraduates shape society, and how policy at universities needs to be reexamined. If there is indeed a need to create a more educated citizenry, and if universities are to be held more accountable for the outcomes of their institution, Nathan calls into question the mismatch between ideal and reality. In her words, “educational policy. . . cannot afford to rely on inaccurate or idealized versions of what students are” (Nathan, 2005, p. 141) but must rather be generated with a more complete understanding of why students are coming to college.

As orientation professionals, we are ethically bound to prepare students for their experience in college. First, we must examine how our orientation programs impact the undergraduate student culture on our campus, and if the activities and programs we conduct produce the impacts we desire for students on our campuses. Additionally, we must question the messages sent to students during our programs, and more importantly how our programs reflect the actual culture of our undergraduate students and university.

By doing so, we can proactively ensure that our students are successful in their transition to college.

Rebekah Nathan's inquiry into undergraduate culture is detailed and critically important. Her findings and text may be surprising to some, and she is not entirely unconcerned with the state of undergraduate culture. Her examination led her to a deeper appreciation of the challenges facing students in college. For student affairs professionals and faculty, garnering this appreciation for students is a critical outcome of the book. As part of a larger discussion, this book could be used to generate a greater understanding of how educational policy influences undergraduate culture, how society shapes universities, and how universities ultimately impact the future of the country. In an era where there is abundant debate about the future of American society and accountability in higher education, such discussions are necessary and could be vitally informed by Nathan's book.

References

Gravois, J. (2005, September 2). Anthropologist who posed as a student is unmasked [Electronic version]. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved December 22, 2006, from <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v52/i02/02a01601.htm>