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

By Rebekah Nathan

*Reviewed by Christopher Klein*

Recently, during a meeting with a small group of sophomore students, I used the words *worldview* and *community*. Eyes glazed over and I could tell they had been there before.

I realized that these students had been overexposed to potential remedies for the problems identified by Rebekah Nathan in her new book, *My Freshman Year*. Whereas Christian Colleges can at times overexpose their students to the concept of worldview and to shared Christian values, like community, the problems identified by Nathan seem to stem from an underexposure to ideals Christian college students may take for granted. This book is worth reading to highlight the shared problems all practitioners face in caring for students on their journey toward wholeness. Nathan's research methodology seems unusual (becoming a resident college student); her identification and analysis of the problems seem accurate, but her solutions do not seem to offer quite enough hopefulness to the practitioner. Ostensibly, this is a book about giving a fresh look into the college student's experience; in the end, the book may reveal more about Nathan's research experience.

Nathan, feeling as though she and her students live in two different worlds, wants to find out what life is like as a student. She frames her research around four questions: What is the current culture of my university (AnyU)? How do contemporary American college students understand their education, and what do they want from it? How do they negotiate university life? What does college really teach?

What is the current culture at AnyU? Nathan discovers that the current culture is one of pragmatic isolation and disconnectedness. The book suggests that through all the threads of campus life, student decisions are based, unsurprisingly, on the benefit to the individual. Any attempt at getting students to attend mandatory residence hall meetings is met with passivity and disinterest, not attendance. Common rooms are rarely used for socialization and the only person with an open door policy is the resident assistant. Attempts at trying to develop a shared code of conduct in the residence hall are responded to with suggestions seeking only to protect individuals from being inconvenienced by community living. But what is worth noting is not the dismissive "they show up to college like that," but Nathan's suggestion that institutions need to be more aware of how students wrestle with remaining whole people.

The second of Nathan's research questions have related findings. Students understand their education and negotiate the culture in similar ways. Nathan shows us that students tend to understand their education as a management problem and to negotiate their lives by managing professors, friendships, community and identity. She calls this the search for the "perfect schedule." Students at AnyU, says Nathan,

are aware that the traditional college years have been set aside for them to learn and develop. But the future is so daunting, that students wrap themselves in the college culture with familiar friends (sometimes the same ones they had in high school) and miss enriching their present lives because of fears of the future. As a result, American students learn evidence an inability to relate to international students or appreciate diversity. The interviews that Nathan included reflect the international students' observations of this troubling reality. They observe that American students they have encountered are not able to build deep, committed relationships. There seems to be a constant preoccupation with the perfect future. This produces tensions for students who need to make decisions about a future they are uncertain about.

So, what does college really teach? Nathan's AnyU explicitly teaches all the traditional courses and majors, does all the usual residential student programs, but what students learn are techniques for management of time, professors, friendships, community and perceived identity. The relativism of the university's culture is not conducive to analyzing worldview patterns, appreciating diversity, or helping students develop a healthy altruism.

What may surprise the reader is how difficult it is for the author to include the stories of the students with whom she connects as a student; she prefers a more traditional research model. The research methodology begs for stories. As the afterword explains, many of the stories that could have been told to incarnate the realities she encounters are left untold to preserve privacy. Nathan's ethical scruples diminish the effect of her objective research. It is clear that her commitments to community and relationship supersede her commitment to objective research.

This research project would have been significantly more in depth if the researcher would have been forthright with students about identity and purpose. I believe that trust and care would have gone further toward allowing us to see the realities of student life through related stories. Following the model of neighbor-love rather than objective inquiry would have borne a deeper, richer and more textured product. It also would have gone a long way toward building the type of community the author claimed did not exist.

Student relationships, whether with friends or (academic work), are manifestations of commitments deeply held - manifestations of their worldview. Although my sophomores may have heard once too often about their need for a cohesive worldview, teaching students to discern and articulate fundamental assumptions with consistency seems to provide a healthy foundation for students as they journey to become whole persons. I wish it were happening at AnyU.