

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

By Rebekah Nathan
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Reviewed by Sharon Pocock

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The title of this book alone is sufficiently compelling to attract a large audience among university teachers. After a number of years as a teacher and after a variety of experiences with students, any teacher—and certainly any legal writing teacher—wants to know whether college students of today really are different from students of decades ago and what causes such differences. *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* provides some of the insights that we all are seeking.

Rebekah Nathan is the pseudonym of a cultural anthropology professor at a large state university. In her beginning years in her field, she investigated an isolated culture in a far-off spot of the world—a typical activity of an anthropologist. As she approached a sabbatical year after a number of years of teaching, Professor Nathan decided to explore today's college student culture. Her experiences as a professor drove her, in part, to undertake this study. Why didn't students meet professors' expectations? Why were they so frequently unprepared for classes? Why didn't they come to office hours?

Applying to her own university based only on her high school transcript, Professor Nathan matriculated as a freshman in fall 2002 and spent one year living in a student dormitory, taking classes, and participating in student activities, as any freshman student would. In addition, she observed the student environment and student

activities and behavior, making copious notes, as any anthropologist would.

The book includes chapters on student residential life, the issues of community and diversity on campus, and the views of international students at an American university. The most interesting chapters, however, are those Professor Nathan devotes to her findings about student academic behavior and to an explanation of how her year as a student has now influenced her behavior as a professor.

Time management was an issue that dictated much of student behavior that she observed. Students chose classes and professors based on schedules and workload. In those classes, most students limited their work to what was necessary, skipping classes, not preparing readings, and turning in work that, they admitted, was not their best. During her first semester, Professor Nathan took five courses with five different teachers; two of these involved discussion or lab sessions with other teachers, and another class had an out-of-class tutor. "This meant that in a single semester there were eight different people who made rules or created structures that I had to respond to as a student."¹ While Professor Nathan did readings when assigned during her first semester, in her second semester she too adopted the practices of many students seeking to make time in their lives for work, studies, extracurricular activities, and leisure. To meet the numerous and diverse demands on her time as a student, she employed "a kind of spartan efficiency": she selected which readings to do and, on written

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¹ Nathan at 111–12.

² *Id.* at 121–122.

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assignments, reduced her number of revisions to just one. “Even so, by peer standards I was practically a drudge.”²

Professor Nathan relates how her insights into student prioritization have changed her teaching. Before her year as a student, she had tried to solve the problem of unpreparedness by reminding students what they needed to read for the next class and making the materials available online instead of on library reserve. These attempted solutions to the perceived problem (lack of awareness of the assignment, inconvenience in finding the material) were, however, largely ineffective. Her research as a student led Professor Nathan to see that her solutions were not addressing the actual problem. Her research revealed that students prepare assigned readings when they will be tested on the material, will need it to complete an assignment, or will have to publicly perform in class in relation to the reading. Realizing that student unpreparedness is a “proactive form of course management” rather than a consequence of inattention, she now hones her reading assignments to those she will actually use in class.³ She also creates new ways in the classroom to use the readings that she seriously wants students to prepare.

Professor Nathan’s observations about classroom discussion at the college level can also enlighten the law professor who finds new students unprepared for the demands of Socratic dialogue. Student-teacher interactions in college classes seemed to focus more on getting all students to speak and less on what students actually said. The result was that classroom discussion was essentially “a sequential expression of opinion” by students, with little in-depth consideration of the points raised.⁴ Armed with this knowledge about the prior discussion experience of students, a law professor teaching a first-year course can better prepare initial classes to help students realize the demands of law school dialogue.

³ *Id.* at 136, 138.

⁴ *Id.* at 95.

The issue of time management affects student life outside the classroom as well as inside. Using a variety of studies of student life as well as her own data, Professor Nathan notes that today’s students tend to be both studying and socializing less than students of 20 years ago. What today’s students are doing more is working at wage-paying jobs, on and off campus. More than one-half of the students in Professor Nathan’s study worked anywhere from six to 25 hours per week, averaging 15 hours weekly. This aspect of student life certainly further explains the academic prioritization that students perform.

Aspects of Professor Nathan’s study offer insights to university administrators, as well as to teachers. Demands on student time, in conjunction with the value accorded to individualism and choice, gave rise to difficulties she observed in creating a sense of community. While orientation activities seemed designed to create a sense of community among students living in the same dorms and the same houses of those dorms, that sense of community proved difficult to sustain and develop. Professor Nathan noted that students tended to form their social groups based on interests rather than on where they lived. As a result, the numerous efforts of dorm advisors to get residents together for various social activities often ended in low participation.

Professor Nathan recounts that on Super Bowl Sunday, the large lobby in her dorm was set up with two big-screen TVs, free pizza, and other items meant to draw in the residents. By game time, only she and five other people were in the room (and one of them had turned one of the TVs to a different program). Yet she discovered that many students were in their rooms with others, eating, talking, and watching the game on their own TV sets. “[T]he university for an undergraduate was more accurately a world of self-selected people and events. The university community was experienced by most students as a relatively small, personal network of people who did things together.”⁵

⁵ *Id.* at 54.

As part of her study, Professor Nathan conducted formal interviews with a number of international students to obtain a view of American student life as seen by outsiders. These students quickly recognized “that being a student, being a dorm mate, being a classmate—none of it automatically qualifies you as a ‘member of the community,’ that is, someone whom others will seek out for activities,” as it would in their own countries.⁶ The friendly openness of college and American life is accompanied by “a closed attachment to a small set of relationships.”⁷ International students found that it was much easier to make friends on the basis of common elective interests and hobbies. In addition to the different dynamics of making friends, international students also were surprised by both student ignorance about other cultures and the lack of interest on the part of students in learning about these cultures. These observations can certainly help university administrators and faculty to plan better programs for international students—and a curriculum for American students that may make them more aware of the “global village.”

While *My Freshman Year* is a relatively short book, this work offers many thought-provoking observations that can be useful to law school as well as undergraduate faculty. These observations should help guide both faculty and administrators as they create the American university of today and tomorrow.

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Another Perspective

“My father used to say: ‘If you steal from one book, you are condemned as a plagiarist, but if you steal from ten books, you are considered a scholar, and if you steal from thirty or forty books, a distinguished scholar.’”

—Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* 129 (Nicholas de Lange trans., 2005).

⁶ *Id.* at 69.

⁷ *Id.* at 71.