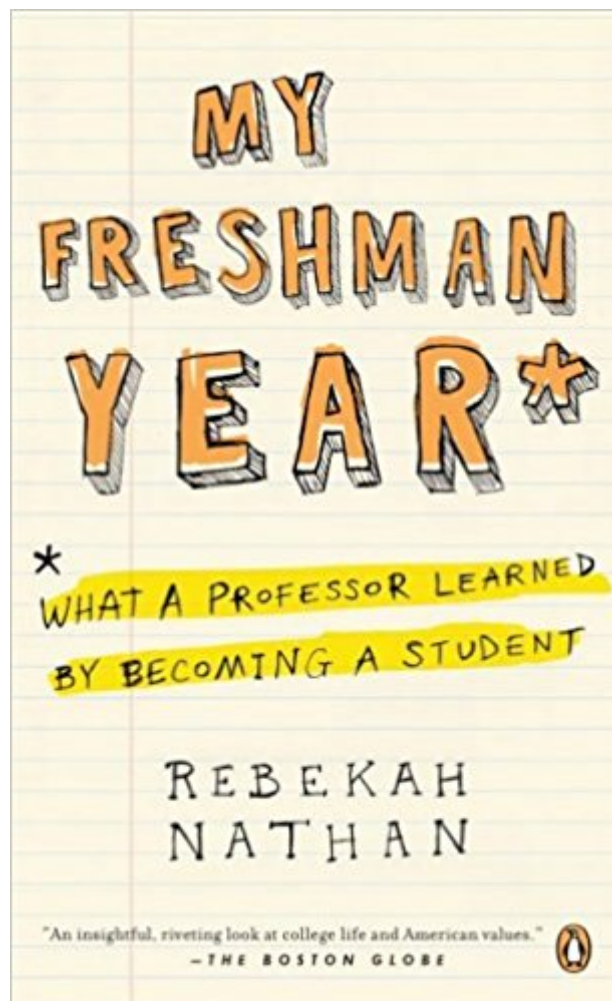




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# My Freshman Year: What A Professor Learned By Becoming A Student



## Synopsis

After fifteen years of teaching anthropology at a large university, Rebekah Nathan had become baffled by her own students. Their strange behavior—eating meals at their desks, not completing reading assignments, remaining silent through class discussions—made her feel as if she were dealing with a completely foreign culture. So Nathan decided to do what anthropologists do when confused by a different culture: Go live with them. She enrolled as a freshman, moved into the dorm, ate in the dining hall, and took a full load of courses. And she came to understand that being a student is a pretty difficult job, too. Her discoveries about contemporary undergraduate culture are surprising and her observations are invaluable, making *My Freshman Year* essential reading for students, parents, faculty, and anyone interested in educational policy.

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## Customer Reviews

After nearly two decades as a university professor, the author (writing under a pseudonym) realized she was out of touch with her students. She didn't understand them. They no longer stopped by her office for consultations, no longer did assigned readings or participated in class discussions; they openly took naps in class, brought in food and drink, and behaved as though their education was of no importance to them. Looking for a way to close the gap between her and her students, Nathan enrolled in her own university as a freshman. Over the year, she gained an understanding and appreciation of contemporary college life. She found that many students who seemed uninterested in the whole idea of school were actually intensely curious and passionate about their education.

They weren't the problem; the institution of learning was. This book offers insightful exploration of contemporary higher education and fascinating commentary on the ways in which the system has not kept up with the ever-changing needs of its students. David PittCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"It's anthropology at its best: accessible, illuminating, contextual." —•The Christian Science Monitor  
"My Freshman Year... is an insightful, riveting look at college life and American values." —•The Boston Globe

I came to this book as a college instructor of first-year students and wanted to see what observations "Rebekah Nathan" had made that might surprise me or change my expectations. While this book is 10 years old, and her observations almost 13 - the culture she describes has changed very little. The biggest difference is how technology has shifted even the already minimal pre- and post-class conversations. Occasionally, I'll quietly observe the first 10-12 students in the classroom and notice that the vast majority are texting/surfing/whatever on their smartphones instead of even making tepid small-talk with the classmate sitting next to them. I'll sometimes make a comment just to get an easy laugh. Other than that, I think her observations continue to be relevant - it's often not the "education" that's important to students but the process and the 'ticket punch' of the degree. Instructors fight for "participation," and RAs fight for "community," but for the most part the majority of students are content to go along to get along...good kids across the board, but perfectly willing to listen to me...or, generally give me what they think I want to hear (and they'll even say - "do you mean the writer meant XYZ?" "I don't know - you tell ME what you think he meant!" And it's a struggle. But who am I kidding? I think some of my general success comes because I remember being a freshman myself and while we had limited technology, I was happy to sit in the back, muddle through my work, and pick and choose the instructors I decided to help out on quiet days and those I let flail around. I remember the grind of schlepping to the library, pulling down a bunch of books and shuffling through them trying to pick out a few relevant quotes I could cite. I managed sometimes well, and I was happy to sacrifice a couple courses to working instead, earning my share of 'gentleman's Cs.' So I can keep it all in perspective. I understand that my class is 25 percent of my student's academic life and maybe 5 percent of their REAL life. So my suggestion for faculty would be to remember your own college experience and remember that you were probably not super-student either. I was hoping for more suggestions from the book itself - she acknowledges a few well-worn tropes...the "go around the room" introductions, for example. They

are well-used for a reason, but is there a way in her discussions with students that might work better? She talks about a "sexuality" class that apparently the students love, and the professor is "cool" because he swears (in context) right away - well, I'm not cursing a blue streak on my first day, but do they want provocative, controversial approaches? I'm teaching a 'social justice' class this coming semester and I intend to provoke a response - I'm not sure what that response will be, but is that what students seemed to want? So it lacked a really good "Here's what I, Rebekah Nathan, will now change or adjust based on my observations." I wanted more of that. It also lacked any interaction with the staff of the university - above, I said I am 25 percent of their academic life. But in their daily life they interact with staffers (not faculty) as much as me - the library, the registrar, parking services, dining halls, custodial staff, Information Tech - basically, this byzantine bureaucracy that they are thrown into with little guideposts. We expect them to be tech-savvy and otherwise on the ball - but they probably never did their own laundry before showing up! So how important are staff interactions to their overall success and morale? She talks about international students frustrations with dealing with Americans - and I looked into this as a neutral window into how the students act. They ARE self-absorbed, they ARE prone to hanging out with their peer group and are often unwilling to break out of their comfort zone, they ARE unfairly dismissive to language barriers and other cultural holdups (I had a student who spoke heavily-accented English - but also French, Spanish - but inevitably, people would talk to her in halting, pidgin-English). But, really, that describes Americans, not American college students. As an aside, her "acting" as a 50-year-old college student might have seemed like it wouldn't work - but most students wouldn't care that much. They'd think "oh, she's kind of weird living in the dorm," but a couple weeks in it wouldn't matter to them anymore. They live their own lives and she'd probably be a mascot. Any critiques aside, I liked this book - yes, it told me a lot I already knew, but it's good to see that my observations are correct and for the most part shared across the board. My students are likely no quieter or talkative than any, I have my share of grade-grubbers who try to shmooze me (and I mean, it works - I understand how the game is played! Have a personality, for crying out loud!), and I have students who are genuinely interested in talking about the course, etc., and they don't even know they've actually done the amazing thing of connecting as individuals with their education - they think their curiosity is NOT unique, and it often is! This book validated a lot of my personal feelings, frustrations and strategies. Again, a reader - especially an instructor - should ask themselves how different they REALLY were from the students described here. If they are honest, the gap will be much less than they might want to imagine.

This book to me felt like it was meant for high school students being introduced to anthropology, not a college sophomore. It's an interesting project and great idea for an ethnography but didn't really challenge me in the way I wanted to be challenged.

Interesting since I teach college freshmen. It mostly confirmed things I've also observed.

This is an interesting, but sometimes curious book. Cathy Small, an anthropology professor at Northern Arizona University, used her sabbatical for a 'field experiment'. She enrolled as a freshman at her university, moved into a dormitory, took classes and studied university life from the true 'inside'. The results were invariably interesting though not always counter-intuitive. She learned that students value the total collegiate experience more than that experience's academic center. She learned that they are somewhat more serious than she first anticipated. She learned that a large number cheat, though the 'cheating' is conceived in various ways. Some see it, for example, as part of the game, like a runner on second base's expected attempts to steal the catcher's signs. Some of what she learned seems to be the result of considerable naiveté. She is struck, for example, by the look of the campus at eye- or bus window-level. While she can park anywhere, as a faculty member, the students are restricted to the peripheries of the campus and must traverse large portions of the campus on foot or by bus. At the same time--with these restrictions--there seems to be an uncommon amount of traffic on campus. The reason? Students are calling people on their cell phones and asking them to pick them up. As an anthropologist she has a sharp eye for cultural details, but as an anthropologist she tends to become immersed in some of those details to the exclusion of others. For example, she spends a great deal of time studying the messages and cartoons that students affix to their doors and does a gender-based content analysis of them. Fine, but do students read anything beyond required class materials? She notices that the resident assistants within the dorms are at pains to develop a sense of hall community. They organize comedy nights, lay on food for the communal watching of televised sports and films, and so on. Nevertheless, few of the dorm residents attend these functions. Why? Because the students have their own televisions and a small network of friends; they do not participate in communal events. This is very interesting, but the author does not make the corollary point that universities offer students 'services' which the students are forced to pay for, but which the students do not actually use. How do they feel about that? In a closing chapter, the author explores a host of important issues regarding college costs. One is the increase of 'administrators'. The real growth, however (240% vs. 81% for line administrators), is in nonteaching 'academic staff', including the dormitory

hand holders whom she described. At no point does she question her fellow students concerning these 'services', their contribution to rising tuition costs and the students' actual desire (or disdain) for such services. Similarly, she talks about other aspects of college life and cost, e.g., the fact that enrolment in liberal arts and science majors have been halved (or worse), while the 'professional' degrees have multiplied (business, education, and so on). It is clear that students are now more 'vocational' than in the past. How do they feel about that? Do they worry about that, at a time when we are routinely told that we are all likely to have not only multiple jobs, but multiple careers? Is a vocational major actually a great risk rather than a safe thing? She is aware of the degree of indebtedness that students are incurring but she does not discuss this with them. Are they aware that one cannot erase student loans by filing for bankruptcy? Do they think about the fact that when they are extending their college time to 6 years (the standard number used for 'completion' percentages) that they are not only investing two more years of their lives but also foregoing two more years of potential income? Curiously, she makes a great deal of the fact that students face challenges with regard to time management. These challenges are exacerbated by their need to work (generally ca. 10 hours per week). Why is this a revelation to a person who not only successfully completed college but also successfully completed doctoral work? In the same connection, she notes that the students often work in order to be able to afford luxuries, not simply to pay for basic necessities. How do they feel about that? Do they perceive that colleges (trying to 'be like businesses') are providing quality of life facilities in lieu of, in many cases, tenure-track faculty? Is that a problem or are they fine with that? I think that all people involved with academic life will profit from reading this book. All will learn something or see something familiar in a fresh way. Unfortunately, they may also be frustrated (as I was) that the author didn't take this interesting and important opportunity and use it to explore some of the cultural and policy issues which threaten higher education, issues which she enumerates but does not confront.

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