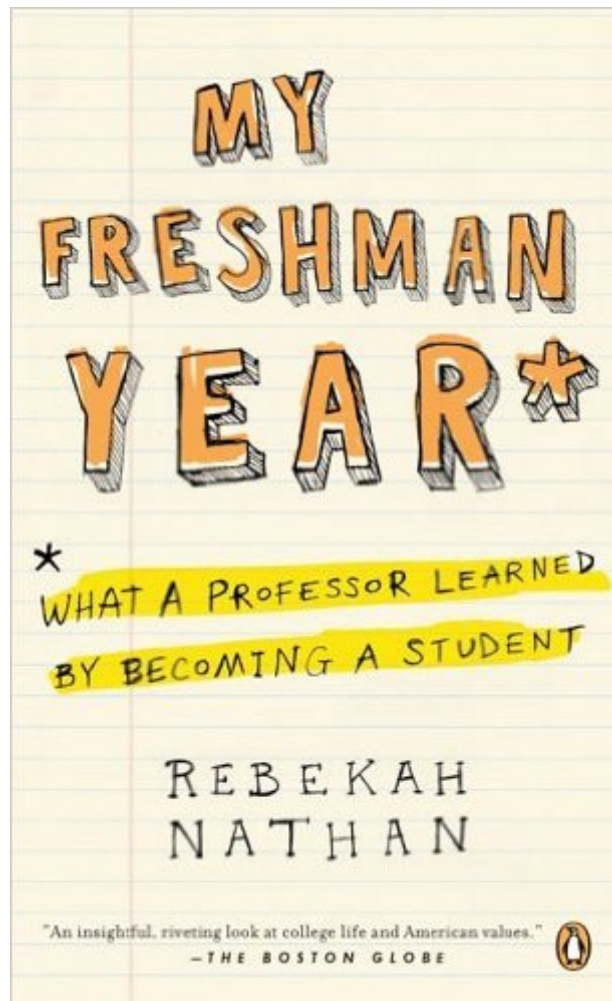


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# My Freshman Year: What A Professor Learned By Becoming A Student



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Like other reviewers, I have misgivings about the ethics of "Rebekah Nathan's" undercover exploration of student life. Anthropologists may become participant observers but certainly her fellow students might feel betrayed. At the same time, I couldn't stop reading. Few university press books combine academic discourse with readability as well as this one does. I was a college professor myself for 20+ years, but in the business school. And I didn't find a single surprise -- except, was Nathan really unaware of her students as much as she claims? Several years ago, I remember a summer school student complaining, "You give too much work! Who has time for this? I have a wedding in my family and my folk dance lessons..." Nathan's glorifies international students,

who criticize Americans for shallow friendship and lightweight classes. But I taught international MBA students who said calmly, "We won't be in class next week. We're going sightseeing. It would be a shame to come all this way and then not see [a local attraction]." And some international students have less than ideal motivations -- not to mention disregard of female professors. Nathan bemoans the lack of student participation. In the business school, we were encouraged to motivate students. I rarely had trouble getting students to participate: discussion groups, in-class activities and more. But she's right about so many elements of student culture. I returned for my PhD when I was in my 30's (deemed the "older woman" by my professors - I wish I were kidding). So in a way I experienced some of her frustrations, including time management, conflicts, inexorable deadlines and arbitrary administrative policies.

I urge potential readers to ignore the harping over perceived intellectual slights suggested by many reviewers of Rebekah Nathan's "My Freshman Year". The intent of the book was to help students in their college experience by informing faculty and administrators about the current student culture, both its limitations and its potential advantages to learning. As such, the book deserves to be read by all parents of college-bound high school students, college students, teachers and professors, and administrators interested in giving students the best education possible. I too am a college professor and find that the intellectual aspirations of my freshmen are now different than my pedagogical expectations. Nathan's book provides at least some answers for the differences, which I rapidly am using to make my classes more accessible --while still providing students the content they need and deserve. So, I am frankly astounded at many of the reviews I have here read, which center not on the content of the book, but on how Nathan got her information--by posing as a freshman to make students feel comfortable around her. As a physical scientist, I am dumbstruck that some social scientists and others think this approach was somehow "unethical." Nathan went to great lengths to avoid reporting things that might be construed to be improper, didn't report actual names, certainly was not "spying" (the intent to do harm or gain advantage over those in the dark), and even became friends with students for whom she obviously had great affection and respect. I intuitively know that if Nathan's freshmen had been aware that they were being observed, they'd have behaved quite differently.

Northern Arizona University anthropology professor Cathy Small decided to enroll as a freshman there during the 2002-2003 school year. This was to be her sabbatical project -- an ethnographic study of college culture at a public university. She turned in her faculty card and parking permit and

lived in a coed dorm, attending classes and taking careful notes -- on those around her. She became a participant-observer, going to classes, reading the graffiti in the women's restrooms and probing feelings about cheating. Taking the pseudonym "Rebekah Nathan" and calling the school "AnyU" to protect those she studied, Small compiled her findings into a book. (According to an article in the New York Times, a New York Sun reporter revealed her true identity last year.) "My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student" is no dry-as-dust study, but rather an insightful and delightful portrait of ordinary student life. My copy is a hardback published by Cornell University Press (\$24) but the book is also now in paperback (\$14) from Penguin. Part of Small's story is about her own ethical concerns over how to handle things told to her by students who think she is (just) a fellow student. She decided not to lie; yet she needed to reveal her true purpose only a few times. Those around her in the dorms were just not that interested in what a 50-plus student was doing at the school. She was a writer, too, she said, and was going to write about student life. True enough, and that seemed to suffice. Small determined that her book would not contain descriptions of sexual or drinking practices, and her comments on the group discussions in her sexuality class are kept general since they were confidential. There is nothing lurid here.

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