My Freshman Year

What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student

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CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS
Ithaca & London

First published 2005 by Cornell University Press

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nathan, Rebekah.
My freshman year : what a professor learned by becoming a student / by Rebekah Nathan.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8014-4397-0 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. College students—United States—Social conditions—21st century.
2. Adult college students—United States—Social conditions—21st century.
I. Title.
LB3605.N34 2005
378.1'98—dc22 2005002213

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Cloth printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to "AnyU"

Ten years ago, I would never have expected to be writing a book about college life at AnyU. I am a cultural anthropologist, and have spent most of my professional life living overseas in a remote village location (unnamed to preserve *all* our anonymity), learning the language and customs of another culture. As a traditional cultural anthropologist, I participated in and observed village life over a period of many years, joining village organizations, interviewing locals, and establishing long-term personal relationships. I wrote "ethnography," or descriptive accounts of the day-to-day life of a people, hoping to capture the intimate dynamics of social life and culture change. It is quite a leap from life in a village to life in the dorms, but perhaps I can offer a little explanation of how this book came about.

Anyone who has spent much time overseas knows that this experience makes you reconsider your own culture. You become an observer of what was once just lived. On your return from another world, things once unnoticed—our reliance on date books, for instance—seem glaring; what was a daily routine can resurface as an exotic American custom. Since my time overseas, I find myself constantly taking apart the taken-for-granted world in which I live, a penchant I eventually developed into a course on American culture. In it, I direct my stu-

dents to look at their own culture with an anthropologist's eye, to reexamine its issues and its perplexities with the same sense of freshness and compassion and relativity they would bring to another culture. I decided to take my own advice as I thought about my academic experience.

After more than fifteen years of university teaching, I found that students had become increasingly confusing to me. Why don't undergraduates ever drop by for my office hours unless they are in dire trouble in a course? Why don't they respond to my (generous) invitations to do out-of-class research under my guidance? How could some of my students never take a note during my big lecture class? And what about those students who bring whole meals and eat and drink during class? Or those other students who seem to feel absolutely no embarrassment in putting their head or their feet on their desk and taking a nap during class?

I found myself laughing along with Carolyn Segal's tongue-in-cheek article about student excuses for late work and missed classes, including the ubiquitous "my roommate was throwing up blood."[1] I saw considerable truth in another published lament by a Duke University professor, who questioned the quality of undergraduate education even at his elite institution.[2]

I began to notice my own and colleagues' discourse as we continually tried to make sense of what seemed bizarre behavior. Were we like that? Are students today different? Doesn't it seem like they're . . . cheating more? ruder? less motivated? more steeped in their own sense of entitlement? Why is the experience of leading class discussions sometimes like pulling teeth? Why won't my students read the assigned readings so we can have a decent class discussion? The list goes on, despite the fact that we had other stories, too, of students hungry to learn, of "aha!" experiences, and of letters of thanks that arrived two years after a course ended.

Students' attitudes about their education had special significance to me in light of the student-centered mantras of contemporary universities. Professors across the country increasingly

hear university administrators who speak like corporate managers, who believe that they are competing in an educational marketplace for student-consumers. Beyond making housing, registration, and like matters more student-friendly, university administrators are changing the nature of course delivery, pedagogy, scheduling, and degree offerings to address students' tastes and desires and thereby draw more applicants. In this climate, what students want and how they understand their education are becoming more central to the shape of the modern university.

A final impetus for this research came when I sat in on a couple of colleagues' courses that I had long wanted to audit informally. With the permission of the instructors, I attended a computer programming class and a class in Buddhism, courses obviously quite different in their content and in the students attracted to them. I came to class regularly, took notes, and did the readings, although I skipped the papers, tests, and other evaluative measures. In retrospect, I suppose that behaviors such as writing in a spiral notebook, raising my hand to ask a question, and sitting in class waiting for the instructor to arrive marked me as a student, even if I was an old one. To my surprise, I began to hear a new discourse as I was engaged by other students in conversation:

"Psst . . . psst . . . , excuse me . . . were you in class on Friday? Listen, I cut out and went skiing. Can I borrow your notes?"

"Hey, do you know what he said was going to be on the test? I was zoned out while he was telling us."

"Do you think it's fair that we have both the essay and the test in one week?"

It dawned on me soon enough that I had gone through the looking glass, so to speak, and I was now privy to a world that my students typically didn't share with me. I heard about weekend parties, and how someone wrote the paper drunk between 3 and 4:30 in the morning, and how unfair the grading was, and why did we have to take so many liberal studies courses anyway? The discourse I began to hear happened naturally in my shared status as student, and the difference in the

content, formality, and tone of the dialogues struck me. I found myself writing down little snippets in my course notebook to remind myself after class of the conversation topics. "I mean, when are you ever gonna use Nietzsche at a cocktail party?" was one of my first notations from someone who obviously didn't feel that a philosophy course was worth the time.

I realized that I was starting to do ethnography, and to look at my experience with an anthropologist's eye; it was then that the idea of actually becoming a student occurred to me as a research project for my sabbatical year. My interest in American culture, in the changing American university, and in the undergraduate student culminated in a research proposal to study, as a freshman, at my own university. The research questions I formulated were general: What is the current culture at AnyU (my pseudonym for my university) as an example of the American public university? How do contemporary American students understand their education, and what do they want from it? How do they negotiate university life? What does college really teach?

I am not the first to undertake such a project. Michael Moffatt, also an anthropologist and a professor, wrote a valuable ethnography of undergraduate life at Rutgers University, which I often incorporate in my American culture course. In many ways it served as a historical reference point for what I witnessed in 2002–3. Moffatt conducted his fieldwork between 1977 and 1987, with literally a different generation of students, and his accounts—along with other important literature, such as Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's history of campus life and Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart's investigation of women in college—provided me with a helpful foundation for assessing change and continuity in student culture.[3]

I thought, too, that I might bring a new slant to earlier work. As a woman, I expected that my purview would be decidedly different from Moffatt's male gaze on college life, with its heavy emphasis on sexuality. As a reader, you will find that some topics, such as Greek life, dating and sexuality, parents and students, commuters, and athletics, receive short shrift.[4] It

is not that these subjects are unimportant to undergraduate culture; rather, I highlight topics that engage the classic notions we have of "the university" as a world of ideas, as a residential place where diversity and community and integrity are nurtured. I wanted to see how student culture articulates with the *institution* of the American university, including the vision we have of it, its mission, and its future.

To do this, I draw more heavily on the "participant" in participant-observer research than in earlier ethnography, where researchers, though they similarly relied on student interviews and observations for their data, were self-identified as professors.[5] I opted for a more daily immersion, in which I actually took courses, lived in the dorms, and encountered students as an older but fellow student.

In the spring of 2002 I applied to my own university as a student with an undeclared major, using only my high school transcripts as evidence of my education. I was accepted shortly afterward and began receiving "Welcome to AnyU" letters with information packets about financing my education, meal plans, and dormitory living, the summer "Previews" program that all freshmen were required to attend, and optional summer rafting and hiking trips I might want to join before school started.

After some reflection about my options, I decided it was best to "get with the program," following as closely as I could the student script for the first year. I opted, as most freshmen do, for a campus meal plan and on-campus dormitory housing; I signed up for a centrally located coed dormitory, consisting mostly of nineteen- and twenty-year-olds, although I requested and received a single room on my floor.[6] I sent in my forms to attend the two-day Previews session, where freshmen arrive—usually with their parents—to receive an orientation to college life prior to the start of classes. I also planned to arrive on campus a week before classes began to participate in "Welcome Week" activities for new and returning students. After hesitantly peeling my faculty parking sticker off my car and shelv-

ing my faculty ID, I prepared to enter my new status as a first-year student.

How I Would Represent Myself

The undergraduate application process, with its requirement that I list all schools attended and degrees received,[7] had begun a delicate balancing act between truth and fiction about my life. It was clear to me that if I entered student life announcing that I was a professor, I would compromise some of my purpose in doing this project. I wanted to see what college life was like as a student, albeit a "returning"[8] older student, and to relate to other students and to faculty members as a student rather than as a professor and researcher. At the same time, my commitment as an anthropologist is to refrain from misrepresenting myself to the people within the culture I am studying.

My friends and colleagues helped me wrestle with my problem of identity, asking, "What will you say if someone asks you what you do for a living?"

"Can't I say I'm not working now—that I'm a student?" I responded, thinking that this was true even if it wasn't the whole truth.

"Yes," a colleague agreed, "but what if they ask what you did before?"

"I'll tell them I've done many things—which I have. I can say that I'm a writer, among other things, because I still get royalties from my last book."

"But what if they say, 'What other things?' " one colleague pressed.

"Well, I hope they don't ask me that, but I guess I'd have to tell them that I teach and do research."

Friends, role-playing as students, continually engaged me in mock dialogues: So what's your major? "I'm undeclared." What's your hometown? "I was born and bred in New York." Why did you come to AnyU? "I wanted to see what college was like, because I'm a writer as well as a student, and this university was close to home. Besides, I love the town, the mountains, the outdoors here." All true, I reasoned.

As it turned out, my exercises in identity were largely moot. In daily conversations no one (with one exception, to whom I spilled all) ever asked me directly about my life. Two student friends confided to me later that they thought it was a little sad for an older woman like myself to be living in the dorms, and didn't want to ask me questions for fear that there was a horrific divorce story attached.

In formal interviews I always kept strictly to research protocol. I identified myself as a researcher doing a project on undergraduate life who intended to publish her results. I provided informants with a written description of the project and its goals, and asked for their signed permission to conduct an interview. Many of my informants also knew me as a fellow student, though, and I suspect that they thought my research goals and my intentions to publish my results were a combination of wishful thinking and academic bravado. I discuss the ramifications of disclosure and identity on my research in the afterword, "Ethics and Ethnography."

Enter the Abyss

My first real immersion in student life came in June of 2002, when I attended summer Previews, required for all incoming freshmen. Previews was an intensive two-day event that included an overnight stay at one of the premier freshman dorms. Freshmen were told to provide a sleeping bag, towel, and pillow for their dorm room, where they would be housed with another freshman. Bedding was provided for parents, who were to sleep in different wings of the same building.

I arrived at 8 AM to register outside the lobby of the large freshman dorm. I had thought carefully about how I would dress, and I showed up "consciously casual" in denim shorts and a golf shirt, baseball cap (bring a hat, we were advised), athletic socks, and not-too-new sneakers. Like the other fresh-

men, I carried my sleeping bag and pillow and overnight bag awkwardly as I stood in line waiting to get my key and my roommate assignment. "Excuse me, ma'am," said the blond ponytailed upperclassman working the intake desk, "parents go over there." She pointed. "No," I answered with an understanding smile. "I'm not a parent, I'm a freshman." I looked in the direction of her finger to see a group of waiting parents in the lobby, more than half of them wearing denim or athletic shorts, a collared golf-type shirt, baseball cap, and sneakers with athletic socks. The students wore flip-flops, jeans, and short T-shirts. It was already clear that my cultural acumen was flawed.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said. "That's so cool that you're coming to Previews! Well, then, you'll be rooming with Jennifer," and she pointed to the similarly blond ponytailed woman in front of me in line, who turned out to be a prospective health sciences major from Houston. I saw a look of what I considered to be controlled panic cross her face, but she quickly recovered to give me a smile and a greeting. I did feel bad for this poor freshman who drew the old lady for her first roommate, but I found that we could carry on a reasonable conversation about our majors, why we picked AnyU, and the two-day program.

During the next two days I discovered a number of things I never knew about my university. I attended information sessions on meal plans, registering for classes, how to get tutoring and advising help, different tuition payment options, and how to budget our time. There was a walking mall of tables for new students, highlighting services and groups on campus. As a new student, I was overwhelmed; as a professor, I was surprised to see how three particular spheres—sororities and fraternities, religious organizations, and commercial services, including credit cards and phone services—dominated the scene and vied for student attention. As an anthropologist, I was humbled to see how little I, as a professor, knew of my students' academic world.

Besides informational sessions, which parents and students attended together, the formal Previews program offered a number of icebreakers, upperclassman skits, and discussion sessions attended just by students. I stood in circles of students where we threw beanbags and learned individual names by calling the name of the person to whom we tossed the bag. We watched numerous cautionary student skits—on AIDS, on date rape, on drinking—and were asked to reflect on a number of social circumstances we might encounter in school: What if you had a gay roommate who put a pink triangle on the door? Which scenario did you think was worse, a wheelchair-bound student denied access to a second-floor dorm room or an African American student always being asked by the teacher to tell the class what blacks think?

Despite the great variety of planned activities, there was a curious sameness to many of them. As an anthropologist, I saw a "script" in these introductory experiences. First we were confronted with a controversial, usually emotionally engaging issue. Then we were asked, often in a small group, to reflect on what we thought about the issue or what we personally would do in those circumstances. Group leaders expected us to express our thoughts individually on the matter at hand, with the reminder to the group that "everyone is entitled to their view." The upshot was that the group listened politely while all of us, no matter what thought we voiced, shared our opinions. The exercise ended, without dialogue or interaction, when the last person had spoken. In this style of intellectual discourse I noticed some of the themes I would encounter throughout my undergraduate experience. More important, I could begin to see the repeated (and, after a while, anticipatable) elements of the experience that marked shared understandings and cultural elements.

Welcome Week: Life in Another Culture

I moved into my dorm room on a Saturday in August, the first day that students were allowed to take possession of their rooms. The following week was designated "Welcome Week,"

a time when students participate in optional social, sports, and orientation activities prior to the start of classes. Printed calendars of events, along with informal flyers, posters that hung from the lobby rafters, and tiny strips of paper that appeared regularly under my door announced a plethora of dorm events and university activities that competed for student attention.

The calendar for Welcome Week was listed by the hour—touch football game on the quad at 2; time management workshop on north campus at 3:30; an ice cream social at 7 in the dorm lobby—and there were RAs (resident assistants) reminding residents of the next activity and urging them to join in. The resident assistants had been on campus for more than a week preparing for the new students, making posters, designing dorm activities, and crafting decorative name tags for each resident's door. RAs were upperclassmen who received free room and board and a stipend to serve as peer counselors for a given wing or floor as well as local law enforcers for the residence halls. During this introductory week, they served as cheerleaders, encouraging incoming students to "get involved," and were the only people who knew our names: "Rebekah, will you be coming to the ice cream social?" "Hey, Rebekah, don't forget the movie tonight—free popcorn!"

The schedule was designed so that new students would choose from various activities, meet new people, and learn to negotiate the college campus. I joined as many activities as I could. As I began Welcome Week, I knew that I had started formal "fieldwork," but I had never quite anticipated how similar my entrance into college life would seem to my prior fieldwork in a remote village.

As a full-time faculty member for fourteen years, as well as a member of the faculty senate and other campus-wide organizations, I thought I was thoroughly familiar with my home institution. I knew all the shortcuts, both geographically and bureaucratically, for negotiating the campus and was completely comfortable with that knowledge. It came as a surprise, then, to discover after moving into the dorms that I was completely disoriented, much as when I arrived in the village where I first did my overseas fieldwork.

Our first week's calendar called for freshmen to attend a number of events all across campus. The campus, though, had taken on an entirely new physical appearance to me. As a professor, I was used to having my classes built around my *own* location, usually in or close to the anthropology building on the southern end of campus. When I needed to cross campus, I was accustomed to traveling by car—from faculty parking lot to faculty parking lot. I always entered buildings by the door closest to the parking lot and had a sort of "street-eye" view of the campus world.

Many campus buildings have a "street side" and a "walking mall" side. The mall side offers grassy areas and trees, benches with a few picnic tables, as well as walking and bicycle paths. As a student, I had a student parking permit. I was allowed to park in only one area of campus, near my dorm, and then had to walk or use the campus bus system to get to other areas of campus. From my new purview, the buildings and general geography looked completely different to me, so much so that I could not tell exactly where I was on campus, much less identify the building or door I was supposed to find. I could not locate the bookstore or the health clinic or the international student office, all buildings I thought I knew. Moreover, I was being asked to find offices and buildings I wasn't used to finding: the garage from which to get your rented refrigerator; the freshman advising office; the seminar room of the Hotel and Restaurant Management School. This was not my home turf.

I became one of many freshmen whom upperclassmen answered with patience: "Take the 3 Bus and get off at the Union." Or "Follow the walking path to the end and the building is on the left." I was shocked at how vulnerable and out of my element I felt. I found myself frequently wandering in the wrong direction and stopping other students, who looked more competent, for directions. I genuinely felt the part of a new student, or at least a clueless outsider.

My sense of cluelessness reached a peak on my second night in the dorm. I had just finished a dorm volleyball game played in the afternoon sun, and I was hot, thirsty, and hungry in that order. I showered in one of the four stalls provided for the seventy women on the floor, made myself a quick stir-fry in the first-floor communal kitchen, and broke open a cold beer from my rented mini-refrigerator. I brought my meal and drink into the second-floor lounge, putting both on one of the two round tables in the room.

I proceeded to eat and drink, as I watched CNN, and as other students—including my RA—wandered in and out of the lounge. About ten minutes into my meal, the lounge door burst open and, in what seemed a storm trooper–style raid, four RAs descended on me. "Do you realize that you cannot have alcoholic beverages in here?" the head RA demanded gruffly.

"No, I'm so sorry," I stammered. "I thought that this dorm allowed alcohol."

"Please give me your ID," she ordered, and as she wrote down my name and student ID number on a pad, she explained that residents may drink in the dorms if they're over twenty-one but not in public areas. You must be in your own room with the door closed. This was all in my student handbook, which I'd been given earlier in the week and should have read, and even if I hadn't, I was responsible for knowing what was in it. They would get back to me about disciplinary measures.

However embarrassed I was to be cited within forty-eight hours of starting the semester, my RA raid was curiously reminiscent of a famous ethnographic incident, and it buoyed my spirits. The incident occurred in Bali, where the anthropologist Clifford Geertz found himself running from the scene of an illegal cockfight that was raided by the police, scattering and hiding with other attendees. In Geertz's case, this proved to be his entrée into a community that had been wary of his presence: the villagers finally trusted him when they saw him running too. I hoped my drinking debacle would serve the same function for me.

There were other unexpected elements as well that reminded me of doing overseas fieldwork. One of these was language. In her study of student language, Connie Eble (1996) found that in a seven-year span (1980–87), only 10 percent of a college slang lexicon remained in use, and over fifteen years (1972–87), only four out of two hundred words stayed the same. I saw very quickly from the banter of the first week that I did not have my lingo straight, and that to increase rapport, I would have to master the current speech conventions. "Hooked up," for example, was a rough equivalent of 1970s "shacked up," and certain expressions were liberally peppered throughout most conversations, including "sweet," "lame," "awesome," "oh my god! oh my god!" "like" (e.g., "If I was to . . . like . . . go to class, I would . . . like . . . fall asleep"), and "totally!" among many others. These particular terms would likely change again within a few years, but for now they were important badges of in-group identity.[9]

There was also the speed of conversation. I didn't notice it much when a dorm mate spoke directly to me, but I found that when I was listening at the fringes of an interacting group, I sometimes had to strain to understand the conversation. It was as if they were using a different dialect of English—the way an American might feel overhearing a group of Welshmen speaking English informally. You sort of understand, but you can't catch every word. I often wished I had a transcript of the conversations that went by me in the dorms. The dialogue was so much faster than what I was used to speaking or hearing, and interestingly, it was quite a different speech style from my conversations with students as a professor.

As had been the case in my overseas world, sports played a positive role in my social acceptance into the dorm. In the first weeks of fieldwork, before I could speak much of the local language, life was very lonely in the village. When you can speak only a few words of a language, people tend to limit their interactions with you or treat you as a mental defective. Then I discovered that there was a Ping-Pong table at the local rectory and a regular contingent of teens to thirty-year-olds who

showed up to play. I have always been a good athlete, and it was through Ping-Pong that I made my first friends and impressions; it provided one of the few venues where I could show my intelligence, through strategy or cleverness, or where we could share the emotion of a heated rally or close miss. Villagers saw me as a person when I played with them, as opposed to when I talked with them.

Touch football and volleyball played a similar role in my first week in the dorms. That I played at all, at five foot two, 115 pounds, and fifty-plus years, surprised the RAs and my hall mates. That I caught three passes helped cut through the stereotypes of the "older female student." I noticed more joking with me afterward. RAs made a point of telling me when an informal game of something or other was being organized outside. One student invited me to come to the new intramural rugby club for women. (I declined, fearing for my life, but appreciated the invitation.) Others had a new basis for saying a word or two to me in the hall, and vice versa.

I was feeling pretty good about my first whirlwind week of activities in school and the possibilities for full acceptance on my hall. I was acclimating well, I thought, to the late-night hours of the dorm and the loud chatter of conversation and music that permeated the halls. It was about midnight, almost a week after I moved into the dorm, and I was sitting in my room at my computer in pajamas with my back to my open door. A woman's voice came from behind me: "Excuse me, I'm looking for room 443. Can you tell me which direction?" I turned around to help her, now proudly familiar with the layout of my dorm, and she blurted, "Oh . . . sorry! I didn't know you were a mom," and proceeded to walk to the next open door.

That incident presaged a number of similar "mom" occasions, when people assumed in bizarre situations (such as at an underground rock concert or as I was walking out of class with a backpack on and pen in hand) that I was the mother of the person next to me. My old age assigned me to a niche, just as my nationality and young age had caused villagers where I once worked as an anthropologist to see me as a "Peace Corps."

No matter how good my local language skills became and how comfortable I was in my own resident village, I was always a Peace Corps worker to natives new or distant to me. The same proved true in the dorms. While I found that I felt close to being an equal in hands-on task situations—class projects, study groups, or sports—social situations were quite another story. To the students I didn't know well, including most of the men and women on my dorm floor, I was a very much older woman who, despite getting busted for drinking, was never really one of them.

My student life lasted an academic year, and the mainstay of this book is based on my participation in and observation of undergraduate life—both my own and others'—over the course of that year. Let me be clear about one thing, though. My personal experiences as a middle-aged woman cannot say anything directly about "the undergraduate experience." I am not eighteen years old, not subject to the same pushes and pulls of that age group nor privy to their social interactions. As anthropologists learn in their overseas experience, one can never really "go native" or expect that one's own experience is indicative of the experience of others born in the culture. At the same time, it is the experience of living village life that offers the insight and vantage point needed to ask relevant questions and understand the context of the answers given. It is this that I hoped to accomplish by becoming a freshman.

The pages that follow are informed by several types of data. In addition to national education studies and local surveys at my own university, I conducted forty formal interviews with American and international students, two focus groups (one with freshmen and one with seniors), and several "mini-studies," including activity diaries completed by students about the use of their time, a five-month monitoring study of who (based on gender and perceived ethnicity) eats with whom in the student dining areas, a study of residential mobility, a descriptive weekly diary of all formal program activities conducted in my dorm, and a survey of informal conversation topics.

As a participant-observer I concentrated, as many freshmen do in their first semester, on learning the ropes, meeting other students, getting acclimated to the dorm, trying out student clubs, and discovering what it took to do my academic work. I spent every day and night of the week at the dorm, taking a full load of five undergraduate courses that ranged across the curriculum. Like other students, I went "home" only on the occasional weekend night or during holidays. I consciously chose a wide variety of courses, from modern languages to business and engineering, and professors whom I did not personally know (figuring that, if I didn't know them, they would not know me). My name appeared on the roster as that of a first-year student who had not yet decided on a major.

As most fieldworkers would do when starting a field project, I began by mapping the physical space of the dorm and did a "census" of my dorm wing. I listed all the public notices, advertisements, and flyers that were officially posted on the walls and bathroom stalls and noted the sayings, objects, and pictures that adorned individual dorm room doors facing public space. I kept descriptive records of dorm meetings, events, and incidents, as well as daily fieldnotes about my personal experiences, observations, and conversations.

During the second semester, when I was more actively engaged in formal student interviews and mini-study observations, I quietly dropped my class load down to two courses to accommodate my active research agenda, and spent several nights per week at my home computer, showing up back at the dorm most days after my early morning class. During both semesters I was the floor volunteer responsible for "graffiti questions" in the women's bathrooms, a sort of college female convention whereby a question is posted in each toilet stall with blank paper and a pen. The bathroom users respond anonymously, often posing new questions, and writing retorts to one another's responses. This became a constant source of comment and interaction about student issues and interests.

This book has the ambitious goal of describing "the undergraduate experience." In a strictly statistical sense this is impossible,

because no school will be representative of all others, and even at one school no set of experiences or interviews can stand exactly for all others. At last count, in fact, there were more than 4,100 accredited institutions of higher learning leading to the bachelor's degree in the United States, and considerable variety within that educational pool. Given this diversity, what can one person's experience and research at a single school say about undergraduate life?

For one thing, AnyU, a public university with more than ten thousand students, is probably a reasonable representative of the places where most U.S. college students go to school. While the big university represents only 11 percent of the campuses across the country, it enrolls 51 percent of all college students.[10] Like most institutions in this "Big U" category, AnyU is a public doctoral-granting university offering a full spectrum of undergraduate majors and a respectable education at relatively reasonable cost. You would not find it listed in the top tiers of *U.S. News and World Report*'s "Best Universities," and as a non-elite state university, it draws its student body predominantly, but not exclusively, from within the state.

Still, AnyU's reputation for undergraduate education—including the presence of professors (not graduate students) in the classroom, a residential campus, and smaller-than-usual classes for a Big U—attracts a formidable pool of freshmen, the majority of whom ranked in the top quarter of their high school class. AnyU therefore seems solidly in the middle of the American college system, and should be familiar to many U.S. college students, though not identical to their experience.[11]

In making the case for AnyU, I also want to speak to you, the reader, as an anthropologist would. Anthropologists believe that the very nature of a culture is that it is something both learned and shared by others. Any person in my overseas village could tell you when it was time to plant, just as any American could tell you that you should stand up for the national anthem. Although many aspects of culture are contested—Should abortion be legal? Should English be the official U.S. language? Should gay people marry?—the conflict itself is often a recognizable aspect of the cultural scene. Because of

this, I can write an entire book centering on one family from one village undergoing change, yet find that many other people from that country (several of whom have written me) recognize their own stories in its pages.

The same is true of the American public college. Even though colleges vary widely in their missions and student bodies, almost any American college student should be able to confirm that many students regularly sleep until noon or later, that classmates typically try to avoid Friday classes, that the first row in a lecture hall will fill up last, or that underage students drink secretly. Granted there are some students who get up early, a few who prefer the first row or who do not drink while they are underage, but these are cultural actors too, who are probably aware that they are contesting or flouting norms.

It is through the intimate and everyday experiences of college—revealed to me through interviews and participant-observation—that I aim to describe college culture. I contextualize what I see and comment on its content from several vantage points, including my outlook as a professor, the views of foreign students, and the insights provided by national surveys of college life. But the ultimate test of my analysis will be undergraduate students, who can decide for themselves if they recognize their lives and their world in this book.

CHAPTER 2

Life in the Dorms

Walking down the dorm corridor to find my room for the first time, I was struck most by the sheer amount of "stuff." Rooms and corridors were piled high with clothes, appliances, bedding, furniture, and countless boxes. As the clutter cleared during the day and rooms assumed their final appearance, it was hard to believe how many things had been squeezed into a ten-by-twenty-foot space.

I had personally made several shopping trips to stock my dorm room, and had moved in a few carloads of items, but my room—with its computer, lamp, night table, ten-inch TV, microwave oven, wok, books, comforter, and two posters—was bare compared with those of my younger compatriots. In addition to articles like mine, they had joysticks, couches, mountain bikes, ski and sports equipment, guitars and keyboards, large and elaborate sound systems, multiple-layered electronics shelves holding TVs, VCRs, DVD players, refrigerators, tables, cabinets, floor and pole lamps, overstuffed throw pillows, as well as coffeemakers, slow cookers, and illegal sandwich grills. What's more, many rooms had duplicates of every appliance—dueling computers, TV sets, microwave ovens, stereo systems.

Each room contained two single beds, a small sink and mirror, a large built-in armoire, and a double desk running the width of the room with multiple drawers and bookshelves, but

the descriptions of student life attest, diversity is one part of college culture that is intimately tied to community, another part. And both parts are ultimately conditioned by structures in the larger American society—including values of individualism and choice, materialism, and the realities of U.S. demographics—that may seem, at first, to have little bearing on whether college diversity increases because freshmen Joe and Juan truly become friends, or whether Jane strengthens community by deciding to attend Movie Night. But they do. Not understanding this leads to a reality about diversity and community in university culture that does not match its rhetoric, and a persistent confusion about why this is so.

CHAPTER 4

As Others See Us

As a partial outsider in college owing to my age, I found myself drawn to other partial outsiders, and vice versa. Those of us who in some way deviated from the norm perceived something in common and ended up, I noted, seeking one another out. Thus, the transfer student on my hall became a friend; I was close, too, to the more withdrawn and rural students at Previews, the lone African American student in my freshman seminar, and the international students in my dorms and classes.

My conversations with students from other countries were often illuminating. As anthropologists have come to know, culture can be invisible to its natives—so taken for granted that it seems unworthy of comment. Although I could view student life with an outsider-professor's eye, there was much about the U.S. college scene that, in its familiarity, was invisible to me as well. The more I spoke with international students, the more I noticed familiar refrains that both educated me and reminded me about my own U.S. and academic culture. After having many such informal conversations with both international students and teachers, I decided to add formal interviews of international students to my investigation of U.S. college life. In all, I conducted thirteen formal interviews, as well as several informal conversations, which included perspectives from Somalia,

England, Japan, Germany, China, Mexico, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, India, Malaysia, France, and Korea. In this chapter I share the comments made and stories told by international students as they grappled to understand and to fit in at AnyU.[1] Their struggles, surprises, and dilemmas pointed to both mundane and profound revelations about U.S. students, professors, and the college education system.

Getting to Know "American" Students

One of my earliest international contacts was with a young Japanese woman, Toshi, who lived on my floor. During Welcome Week, after we played volleyball together, I introduced myself and began a casual conversation. When I saw her again at a workshop, we eyed each other like long-lost friends, and she introduced me to two Japanese friends accompanying her who lived in other dorms. The four of us talked enjoyably for a while, and it was clear that the three exchange students were pleased to be engaged by an American student in this first week of activities.[2] I told them that I'd like to make dinner for them, and departed intending to stop by Toshi's room and ask her to invite her two friends to a Friday night dinner at our dorm. As I left, though, one of the women (whom I'll call Chiho) asked me a brave question in slightly halting English: "Excuse me but I don't understand. How can we have dinner together if you don't have my phone number and I don't have yours?"

I saw her confusion. After exchanging telephone numbers with all three women for assurance, I asked Chiho whether people had invited her before without following up. "I think so," she responded "but I'm not sure. I have been here for two months and I am still very confused by the customs. American students are so friendly and so nice. They are so open about wanting to get together, but they never take my phone number and they never contact me again. When I see a woman I met

two days ago, she does not seem to know me or remember my name."

I winced at the truth of the friendly American veneer. "Nice to meet you," "Drop by," "See you soon," all sounded like authentic invitations for further contact. And yet the words were without social substance. It was not just Japanese, or even non-Western, students for whom deciphering friendliness was a problem. One German student commented: "There are some surface things about American friendliness. Like 'How are you?' A girl asked me that one day when I was feeling sick, and I answered that I wasn't too good but she just went on like I had never said that. Maybe it's a sign of caring to say that. But in Germany, 'How are you?' is the actual start of a conversation rather than just a hi/good-bye."

Meeting and befriending Americans in more than a superficial way presented challenges to many international students. Even in class, students found it difficult. One Asian student told me how, in her linguistics class, the teacher had told the class that the native speakers should try to include international students in their groups for the study project. "But when we formed the groups," she recounted, "nobody even responded or asked us to be in their groups, so the international students had to make their own group."

In some ways, their dilemma was like my own. Where is community in the American university, and how does one become a part of it? International students learned quickly 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.

"In Korea," one woman told me, "if we all take class together and our class ends at lunchtime, we would go out together as a group." No such group outing was available as a way for new students to meet others in their classes. Because in Japan, creating a network of friends and contacts is a major purpose of going to college, Midori found it surprising that U.S. students "leave the classroom right after class is over. They come to class

to get a grade, not to meet people or talk to people. They leave right away and don't talk to other people. I don't get why students run out of class, packing up and running out immediately."

Many students expressed surprise at the dull reception they received and the lack of interest they perceived from American students about their experiences and backgrounds. "Students don't ask me anything about my life," a Somali student lamented. "Even my friends . . . they don't ask me questions about how I got here, or my life in other places." A student from the United Arab Emirates observed: "Here everyone minds their own business. They're not that hospitable. Like if someone from the U.S. came to the UAE, people would take them out to eat and ask questions. It would be a long time before they paid for their own meal." A Mexican student concurred: "I'm lonely here. I don't think an American coming to Mexico would have the same experience as I've had here. We're more social, more curious. We'd be talking to him and asking questions."

"When I talk to them," one Japanese woman noted with dismay about her American classmates, "they don't try to understand what I say or keep up the conversation. They don't keep talking, and I realize that they don't want to take the trouble to talk with me." She thought that maybe the problem had to do with her thick accent. When I asked another Japanese student what questions students had asked him about his country, he answered: "Well, mostly nobody asks me anything about Japan. Some Americans don't care about other worlds. They don't ask questions, but those that do sometimes know more about Japan than I do."

Almost all international students discovered some individuals who were interested in their lives, but it was much more the exception than the rule, and these tended to be U.S. students who were well traveled or who had been exchange students themselves. "What I miss most," admitted one student, "is to have someone to talk to, to feel that someone else is interested in you." A Mexican student agreed: "I've met people who are

interested in me, but for a lot of other people it's . . . 'whatever'! My [car] mechanic is more interested in my life and my background than other students."

It was difficult, even for someone born in the United States, to see that the outward openness of both college and American life was often coupled with a closed attachment to a small set of relationships, many of them (as we saw in chapter 2) developed early in college and focused on people of very similar background. International students were often forced into the same structure, finding that despite their interest in forming friendships with Americans, they seemed to end up in relationships with other "foreigners." In many ways the active international programs, which ran socials and trips for its students, reinforced a pattern in which international students came in contact mostly with other non–U.S.-born students.

It was interesting to me that, echoing the camaraderie I felt with "others," a number of international students indicated that they found it easier to get to know U.S. minority students than white students. One student told me, "They [minorities] seem to be less gregarious than other Americans, in the sense that they seem not to have as many friends and they are looking [shyly] for people themselves." In practice, despite the fact that many students had come to the United States expressly for the "international experience," the majority fraternized with other foreign students.

"I think I know how to meet Americans," Beniko, a Japanese student, told me, "because my boyfriend meets people and has some American friends. It's his interests." Beniko explained to me that Americans find relationships when they identify hobbies or elective interests in common. She went on: "My boyfriend likes playing the drums, and he plays them in the dorms and people come into his room. They're like a friend magnet. It's the same with martial arts. He likes that, and other boys do too, and they watch videos together, like Jackie Chan. If you don't have a hobby in this country, it's harder to meet people. I need to develop a hobby."

Relationships and Friendships

Both Midori and Reiko had been excited, if a little nervous, to be assigned an American roommate. It was surprising to Reiko that there was no formal introduction; roommates met, instead, when they both happened to be in the room at the same time. Midori had heard that many Americans were messy and loud, but she knew that wasn't true across the board and hoped her roommate would not fit the stereotype.

As it turned out, Midori's roommate—neat and fairly quiet—*was* different from her expectations, but she presented challenges on another level. She spent most days and nights at her boyfriend's apartment, returning only one or two days a week to their room. And when she did, as Midori explained, her personal and spatial boundaries were sharp:

> It bothers her if I change anything in the room, even though she only came to the room one or two times a week. She would say, "This is my window—don't open it"—even if she is not there and I am very hot! "Don't change the heater setting." I ask her, "Can I turn on the light now?" "Can I put some food in your refrigerator?" It had almost nothing in it. After a while, she just comes back to the room and ignores me. She let me know that I am her roommate and nothing more.

The separateness and individualism of the roommate relationship was something that Reiko encountered as well, albeit without the hostility. Her roommate had also communicated that they would be "roommates and nothing more," but Reiko came to appreciate the advantages of this arrangement:

> I like the American system. My roommate is just my roommate. In [my country] I would be worrying and thinking all the time about my roommate. If I want to go to dinner, I feel I have to ask my roommate, "Have you eaten yet? Would you like to go to dinner?" I must ask her about her classes and help her if she has a problem. Here I have a roommate and I work separately. I don't have to care about her. It's easier.

International students saw "individualism" and "independence" as characteristic not only of roommate interactions but of relations with family and friends as well. When Arturo was asked about how AnyU students differed from those in his own country, he responded: "There's much more independence here. At home, students live with their parents. Here families aren't that tied together. My roommates call their dads and moms maybe once a week, and that's it. It would be different if they were Mexican." Alicia, another Mexican student, thought similarly that "Americans have a lot of independence. At eighteen in Mexico, I can't think of living by myself. Maybe it's the money, but we think united is better, for both family ties and for expenses."

For Peter from Germany, Nadif from Somalia, and Nigel from England, the disconnection from family had repercussions for social life with friends. Americans, they felt, sharply distinguished their family from their friends and schoolmates; more than one international student remarked about the dearth of family photos on student doors, as if family didn't exist at school. International students generally saw family as more naturally integrated into their social lives. "When you're not near your family," Peter told me, "it's hard to know where do I invite people. No one here says, 'Come on and meet my family.' Here I have to invite people to come to a home with two other people I don't know. It's strange."

Nadif continued in a similar vein:

> I have American friends, but I haven't been to their houses. I don't know their parents or their brothers and sisters or families. Back home, if I have a friend, everyone in their family knows me and I know them. If I go over to visit [friends] and they're not there, I still stay and talk with

their family. Here friendship doesn't involve families. I don't know where my friends live and who their families are.

Nigel found the American system peculiar, much less similar to his own culture than he had expected. "My friends come to my house, and they just walk in. It's like they're friends not just with me but with my family. You know, a lot of my friends' parents buy me Christmas presents." He went on:

> If I have a party—like at Christmas I had a big party—my mum and dad, they'd just join in and drink with everyone else and have a good time. My American friends would think that's daft. I have friends [at AnyU] who have all grown up in the same city near one another. They wouldn't know how to have a conversation with anyone else's parents. They get their friends to come over when their parents are out, like, "Hey, my parents are away, come on over." At home, it doesn't make a difference whether your parents are there or not.

For Alicia from Mexico, this was all evidence of American "independence." But "independence," she argued, was one side of a coin. The other side "is that I'm not sure that they have real friendships."

The issue of real friendship was often more problematic in interviews than I had anticipated. I typically asked what I considered to be a straightforward question: "Do you have friends who are American?"

"I'm not sure," answered one Japanese girl. "My American roommate might be a friend."

"What makes you unsure?" I queried further.

"Well, I like my roommate," she explained, "and sometimes even I cook and we eat together at home, but since August [six months earlier] we have gone out together three times. That's really not much, not what friends would do in my country, so I don't know."

Another student responded to my question about friends with one of his own. "What do you mean by 'friend,'" he asked, "*my* version or the American version?" A French student responded quickly to my query about friends: "Sure I have friends. It's so easy to meet people here, to make friends." Then she added: "Well, not really friends. That's the thing. Friendship is very surface-defined here. It is easy to get to know people, but the friendship is superficial. We wouldn't even call it a friendship. In France, when you're someone's friend, you're their friend for life." Their trouble answering my question taught me something: There were recurring questions about what constitutes friendship for Americans.

A prime difficulty in sorting out the concept centered on judgments surrounding what one did for a friend. When Maria made her first American "friends," she expected that they would be more active in helping her settle in her new home.

> I was living in a new country and I needed help. Like with setting up a bank account and doing the lease. It was new for me. And looking for a mechanic to fix my car. Or going shopping—I didn't know what to buy [for my room]. And when I tell my friends that I had a hard day trying to figure out all the things they say, "Oh, I'm so sorry for you."

Maria found it unfathomable. "In Mexico, when someone is a friend, then regardless of the situation, even if I would get in trouble, I would help them. American people are always busy. 'Oh, I like you so much,' they say. But then if I'm in trouble, it's, 'Oh, I'm so sorry for you.' 'So sorry for you' doesn't help!"

Geeta's roommates seemed just the opposite. When she told them that she was planning on buying a used car, they told her, "Oh, you don't need a car. We have two cars and one of us will take you where you want to go." But then after a while, she explained,

> I see how life is here. It's like I'm a little eight-year-old girl, and I have to say. "Could someone please take me here?"

"Could someone take me there?" So I don't ask much. One day I said that I need a ride to school, and my roommate says, "Fine, but you have to leave right now," and now isn't when I want to go. After a while, I saw that I needed my own car.

Nigel told me: "I don't understand the superficiality in friendships here. Americans are much friendlier than the English, but then it doesn't really go anywhere. As far as deep friendships are concerned—I know there are people who have deep friendships, but it's a lot harder to figure out who those people will be." I asked him, "What's so different about friendship at home?"

I think friends at home are closer. We're in touch every day, for one thing. For another, when one person is doing something, the others are supporting them. Here one of my American friends graduated, and I went to the graduation to support him. A lot of our other friends were here for graduation, but they didn't even go to watch him graduate, and they weren't even doing anything. That upset me. There's a lot of incidents like that. It's confusing.

"Confusing," "funny," "peculiar" were all words used to describe American social behavior. "Why do so many students eat alone in their rooms rather than go out or cook together?" "Why don't any of the guys on my hall know how to cook anything?" "Why does everyone here use computers [Instant Messaging] to communicate with people who are down the hall or in the same dorm?" "Why do young Americans talk so much about *relationships*?"

The *way* that Americans socialized was also a prime subject of comment. Two points stood out. First, Americans don't socialize as much, tending to spend more time alone, as this British student explained:

People back home of my age socialize a lot more. On a free night, you'd go out and meet friends and be doing something together. You'd probably go out as a big group. In a week of seven days, I'd probably go out two or three nights. It's all student-based and promoted. Here, in the evenings, you walk down the hall and people are sitting in their rooms playing video games and watching television.

The second thing consistently noticed by international students is how Americans seem to separate socializing and partying from the rest of their lives. "Social life in Japan," explained one student, "is different. It's not like, 'This is party time.' It's more integrated with the rest of your day and your life." A French student noted this same pattern, but with regard to clothing. "We'll be hanging out, and then we decide to go out. The American girl in the group says, 'I need to go home and change.' I think, why? It's the same people. We're just going to a different place now. We're not going to anyplace fancy. What is so different now that you have to go change your clothes?"

For one British student as well, the American "party time" mentality was perplexing:

I don't understand this party thing in the U.S. When you go out here, it's get drunk or nothing. If people go out with people and drink, they have to get drunk. If they don't get falling-down drunk, they think, "What's the point of doing it?" I find it difficult to understand. It's really a European thing. You socialize, have a few drinks together, and go home.

For many international students, then, there was more flow between family and friends, school and home, and between academics and social life.

Classroom Life

In the classroom, most foreign students notice what U.S. adults, if they have been away long from academia, would probably notice too: there is an informality to the U.S. college classroom

that some, including professors, would interpret as bordering on disrespect. A Japanese student giggled as she told me: "It makes me laugh when I see how students come to class: shorts, flip-flops . . . torn T-shirts. Some students come to class in pajamas!" A Middle Eastern student exclaimed: "You have so much freedom here. You can step out of class in the middle of the class! We could never do that." For one Asian student, one of the surprises was how often students interrupt the professor in the middle of a lecture to ask their own questions. This would not be tolerated in his country. An African student shared his thoughts: "There are certain things that surprise me about American students. I look at how they drink and eat during class. They put their feet up on the chairs. They pack up their books at the end of class before the teacher has finished talking." One European student noted, "We used to eat and drink in class sometimes, but at least we hid it!"

Indeed, as any American college student knows, stepping out of class or interrupting a lecture with questions is now quite acceptable. Eating and drinking during class, sleeping openly, packing up books before the teacher has finished talking have come to be standard behavior that most professors will ignore.

For the most part, international students liked the American classroom and American professors. U.S. professors were described by different international students as "laid-back," "helpful," "open," "tolerant" (of scant clothing and sleeping in class), "casual," and "friendly." Some, like the UAE and Somali students, appreciated that "teachers are not as involved in your lives—they don't see where you live or try to force you to study." For others, including the Japanese and Korean students, it was the interest in listening to students' problems and opinions and in helping students that was refreshing:

> Teachers think helping students is their job. In Japan they don't think that way. I e-mailed my prof in Japan because I am doing an independent study and I asked her to send me an article. She got mad at me and thought this was very rude for me to ask her to do this.

> American professors are more open; they give you their phone numbers and some let you call them at home. You can really talk to them outside of class and they are willing to give you extra help.

Although American professors and the American classroom received high marks for openness and helpfulness, they received mixed reviews on course content, including its rigor, organization, and modes of evaluation. Although one Indian student appreciated that "profs tell me which points to concentrate on when I read; they sometimes give chapter summaries so I know what to focus my attention on," more than one other mentioned the controlled way in which the American college classroom is run. The student is given a small chunk of reading and lecture to absorb, and then there is a test, usually short-answer format. Then there is another chunk of reading and a test. It is a system that one student described as "forced study," but one in which it's generally fairly easy to master the material and do well.

Most international students were used to a less pre-digested academic diet. Their course content was delivered by lecture, and it was students' responsibility to fully understand the content without the benefit of outlines, projected overhead notes, and other aids, as in the American classroom. Their grades for the semester would be based only on two long comprehensive essay exams and sometimes a lengthy theme paper. The American approach—frequent small short-answer tests sometimes coupled with study guides and lecture outlines—was criticized by different international students:

> [It works but] in some ways . . . it's like elementary school or grade school. The teacher tells you exactly which chapters to study, and then you review just those chapters. The advisers tell you the courses to take and approve your schedule. Sometimes it's annoying.
>
> Students here have lots of exams, really small quizzes. The quizzes make you study. You learn a little bit for the quiz,

> then you learn a little bit different for the next quiz. But people forget from week to week. Once the quiz is over, they forget. . . . Really, I wonder at the end of the semester what people remember when they leave.

> I find it difficult to take the exams here seriously. You can go into a multiple-choice exam without studying really and still come out all right from things you remember from class, and a process of elimination. You could never go into an exam back home knowing nothing. They're essay, and you start from a blank page; you wouldn't know what to write. Knowing almost nothing there, you'd get a 20 percent. Here you could pass the test!

Still some students appreciated the American grading system, with smaller, non-comprehensive exams and a syllabus, serving almost as a contract that laid out exactly how tests, papers, and presentations would bear on the final grade. As one Asian student explained:

> We don't know what we're getting for a grade in [my country]. We don't have small quizzes, just one final exam or sometimes two, and there's no class participation. I had a class that I thought I was doing well in but I got a C. Expectations are much clearer in the U.S. They are much clearer about grading. It's easier to see results of a test or paper and how it related to a grade in a course.

"Teaching in America is like a one-man show," argued Élène, a French student, in the middle of our interview. "Teachers tell jokes; they do PowerPoint. There is audience participation."

"I thought you just said that in France it was a one-man show," I followed up, "because the teacher basically just stood up with a microphone and lectured."

"Yeah, that's true" Élène went on, "but it's not entertainment. It's a lecture. They're not trying to interest and entertain the students, and where I went to school we never rated the professors, like entertainers, with evaluations at the end of every course."

Opinions of the U.S. system varied somewhat with a student's country of origin. While Mexican students found U.S. professors and advisers a little formal, most international students noted their easy informality. A Chinese student was alone in mentioning that "the profs don't seem to prepare as much. There is little in the way of class notes or handouts for the students." And while the UAE and Somali students believed that "U.S. students are more serious about school because it makes more of a difference to your future," for most international students, either the lack of rigor of American classes or the work attitudes of American students presented a different sort of surprise.

"When I was in Japan, I heard how hard it was to go to university in the U.S.," said one student, "but now I'm here and I see that many students don't do the work."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

She responded, "When I talk about an assignment, they say they didn't do it!" It's confusing, though, she admitted: "Students in my class complain a lot about the time commitment while, at the same time, they talk about the parties they go to and the drinking. Some students make the effort, but I see that many others don't do the work."

Most European students agreed that U.S. classes were less demanding. "My first two years of classes in this country," said Élène, "were at the high school level. What a joke! Only at the 300 and 400 level am I seeing much better and harder material." A British student commented: "My involvement within my actual classes is a lot higher here, but as far as the content of work, it's actually a lot easier. I didn't work nearly as hard as I could, and I got Bs and better in all of my classes." According to Li, Chinese students work harder and do more homework: "I don't think the American students work that hard. I did a group project with an American student and I see he follows. I organize. I suggest the books we should read because I want a good grade. He just comes to meetings but doesn't really prepare. At the end, he thanks me for carrying the project."

"Group work" was one of three points that were often repeated when I asked what if anything is different about the

"academic approach" in the American classroom. I had never really thought about it until I saw how many international students noted the frequency of group projects and presentations in their classes. One European recounted: "Here they keep telling you to get into groups; do a presentation. I've done so many presentations while I've been here I can't believe it. . . . Many of them aren't even marked—we just do them as an exercise. I think it's a good thing, because people here get a lot more confident about talking in front of others."

"It's funny," I mused with Beniko, a Japanese student, "that in such an individual culture students do so much work in groups."

"I think I understand why you can," she answered. "It is because of your individualism. In Japan, we don't and couldn't do much group work because we would consider each other TOO MUCH, and the project would get very complicated because of that." Only American students, she suggested, would have the necessary boundaries and sense of their own preferences to be able to negotiate the demands of a group project.

Individualism and individual choice also figured into both of the other mentioned themes. For Asian students in particular, one formidable challenge of the American classroom was in the number of times people were asked to "say what they think." "Professors are always asking what you think of this and think of that," maintained one Japanese student. "It's great, but it's scary when you're not used to this. I don't always know what I think."

One Korean woman remarked to me:

> Everything here is: "What do you want?" "What do you think?" "What do you like?" Even little children have preferences and interests in this country. I hear parents in restaurants. They ask a three-year-old child, "Do you want French fries or potato chips?" Every little kid in this country can tell you, "I like green beans but not spinach, I like vanilla but not chocolate, and my favorite color is blue." They're used to thinking that way.

"Choice" abounds in the U.S. educational system in ways that most American-born students are unaware of. "You can take [courses] that interest you here," affirmed one student. "If I like archaeology—good, I take it. But then I also like astronomy, so I take that." A Japanese student explained that at home she "can't take a ceramics course just because I like it." The courses she takes are determined by her major and not subject to choice. In Europe, another student told me, "when we get electives, we are able to choose from a very short list which course from the list you will take. You get very few 'open credits'—what *you* call electives—where you can actually pick the course, and it is usual for someone to take a course that is related to their major so it helps them with other courses."

In their home countries, most international students could not change their major, nor could they liberally choose classes outside their major, nor could they double-major or double-minor. Most could not drop courses after they were enrolled. For some international students, even being able to pick one's major was a luxury. In countries that rely heavily on test scores for entry into specific fields, one's major often depends on rankings on exams. A Japanese student reported: "Many people in Japan pick majors they don't want. My friend is studying to be an English teacher, but she wants to be a dog groomer. She picked her major based on her test results and what she did well in."

"There's a lot of choice in your curriculum," one Spanish student maintained, "and even in the time you take classes. In Spain, certain courses MUST be taken, and a class is given at one time and that's it."

The same choice inherent in the curriculum was seen in the extra-curriculum. "There are so many clubs to choose from here—you can pick any interest and there will be a club for it!" remarked an African student. "If you want to join a sport in my country," said another, "we have one or two sports you can join (soccer and cricket), but here you can choose from so many different ones like climbing, snowboarding, basketball, soccer, football—and so many more."

There were few detractors from the benefits of choice in the American system, but a couple of students pointed out the downside of having so *much* choice. One suggested: "Your system is much more complicated, and it's much less specialized. Because you take so many different kinds of courses, you are spread thinner and have less focused knowledge in particular areas." Another looked at the implications of students' freedom to drop a course at will: "People here can drop a class whenever they want. If I don't like it, I drop it. If I don't like the teacher, I drop it. If I'm not doing well, I drop it. In Spain, once you sign, you pay, and you can't drop. I think it affects attitude."

Indeed, as one foreign-born teacher confided, "I take time to talk to my students who didn't do well on an exam or who are having trouble. I suggest that they set up an appointment with me, and I tell them what skills they need to work on extra. The minute I do that, it has the opposite effect in your system. Instead of coming to my office, they drop the class. It's really quite surprising!"

Worldliness and Worldview

The single biggest complaint international students lodged about U.S. students was, to put it bluntly, our ignorance. As informants described it, by "ignorance" they meant the misinformation and lack of information that Americans have both about other countries and about themselves. Although most international students noted how little other students asked them about their countries, almost all students had received questions that they found startling: "Is Japan in China?" "Do you have a hole for a bathroom?" "Is it North Korea or South Korea that has a dictator?" "Where exactly is India?" "Do you still ride elephants?" "Do they dub American TV programs into British?"

These are just a few of the questions American students actually asked of international students. While they no doubt came from the less sophisticated among their classmates, it was clear

that international students across the board felt that most Americans—even their own friends—are woefully ignorant of the world scene. It is instructive to hear how students from diverse countries discuss their perceptions of American students' views of themselves and the world.

JAPAN: Really, they don't know very much about other countries, but maybe it's just because a country like Japan is so far away. Japanese probably don't know about the Middle East. Sometimes, students keep asking about ninjas.

UAE: American students are nice, but they need to stop being so ignorant about other countries and other cultures. Americans need to look at the world around them, and even the cultures around them in their own country.

MEXICO: The U.S. is not the center of the world. [Americans] don't know anything about other countries. Many of them don't have an interest in learning about other cultures. The only things students ever ask me about in my culture is food.

CHINA: Americans know very little about China or its culture. Most people think China is still very poor and very communist-controlled, with no freedom. There is a very anticommunist feeling, and people know little about today's China, which is quite changing and different. New Zealanders know much more about China—perhaps it's their proximity. I think that older people here have more of a sense of history, and that history, about the wars, about the cold war, makes them understand more about the world. Younger people seem to have no sense of history.

ENGLAND: People here know surprisingly little about England, and they assume a lot of things, some true, some not. People's impressions of me when I say I'm from England is that I might drink tea off a silver tray, and maybe live in a castle, and use a red telephone box. That's the

honest truth. The questions that I've been asked are unbelievable.

MALAYSIA: I tell people that I am Muslim, and they take for granted that I'm an Arab. How can they not realize that not all Muslims are Arabs when they have many Muslims here who are American?

GERMANY: American students are much more ignorant of other countries and cultures. I suppose it's because it's so big, and knowing about California for you is like us knowing about France. It's a neighbor. The U.S. is less dependent on other cultures, and maybe that's why they need to know less. Still, Americans come across as not interested in other cultures, like they don't really care about other countries. So they think things like Swedish people are only blonds.

INDIA: Somebody asked me if we still ride on elephants. That really bothered me. If I say I'm Indian, they ask which reservation? I say I'm from Bombay. "Where is Bombay?" Some people don't even know where India is. A friend of mine and I tried to make these Americans see what it was like and we asked them where they're from. They said California. And we said, Where was that?

FRANCE: People here don't know where anything is. For World War II, the teacher had to bring in a map to show where Germany and England are—it was incredible! I read somewhere a little research that said only 15 to 20 percent of Americans between the ages eighteen to twenty-five could point out Iraq on a map. The country will go to war, but it doesn't know where the country is!

Despite the critical consensus in these comments, it would be unfair of me to represent international student perspectives as roundly negative. In general, students from outside the United States warmly appreciated the American educational system as

well as the spirit of the American college student. The criticisms that they did have, though, were pointed and focused. Taken together, they amounted to nothing less than a theory of the relationship among ignorance, intolerance, and ethnocentrism in this country, one that international eyes saw bordering on profound self-delusion. When I asked the linked questions, "What would you want American students to see about themselves?" and "What advice would you give them?" one German student stated succinctly what many students communicated to me at greater length: "Americans seem to think they have the perfect place to live, the best country, the best city. I hear that all the time. I used to think you just got that from politicians, but now I see it's from regular people too. The patriotism thing here really bothers me."

It is sobering to hear these words from a German student, whose country's historical experience in the 1930s and 1940s taught him the dangers of hypernationalism. To his fellow U.S. students he offered this recommendation: "I'd give them advice to live elsewhere. They should recognize that the way of living in the U.S. is fine, but it isn't necessarily the best way for everyone. I don't like to evaluate, and I'd like that applied to me. Be more informed. Information leads to tolerance."

It bothered a Chinese student who read in an article that American students don't want to study a foreign language because they believe that the world language will be English. "I think they need to learn about the world, to learn a foreign language," he urged. It bothered a British student, who lamented how much of world music American students seem to miss. "Everything here [on his corridor] is either black gangster rap or punk rock, and that's basically it. They don't want to hear other music—contemporary music from around the world."

The connection between lack of information and intolerance translated occasionally into personal stories of frustration, hitting home in the lives of some students. "I wish they [his hall mates] were accepting of more different music," said an Indian student. "I play my own music. I play it loud just like they do—

Arabic and Punjabi and other stuff—and they complain to the RAs. But it's my right to play that too. Why don't they understand that?"

"They don't accept other cultures," speculated one Japanese student.

> Once I was eating the food I had made—Japanese noodles—and we Japanese eat noodles with a noise. Somebody else in the kitchen area looked at me funny. She asked, "Why are you making so much noise?" I told her that's the way Japanese eat their noodles, and I can see by her face that she is disapproving. It hurt me to see that. Some Americans don't care about other worlds.

One key toward creating a more positive cycle of information, self-awareness, and tolerance was for many the university and university education itself. Learn a foreign language and study overseas, many recommended for individual students. Use your education to expand your purview beyond your own country. For the university, other students recommended a greater emphasis on self-awareness, including a more critical eye directed to our own institutions and history.

For one Chinese student, the need to be more reflective about the media representation of news and issues was critical: "Media coverage has a very great influence here. In China, it has less influence because everyone knows it's propaganda. Here it is not seen that way because there is a free press. But it's curious." In American newspaper articles and TV news, "the individual facts are true often, but the whole is not sometimes. I can see how Americans need to question the way stories are being represented to them."

A French student beseeched us to examine our own educational system:

> Americans teach like the only important thing is America. There is no required history course in college. The history course I took on Western civ. at AnyU was middle-school level, and it was very biased. I mean they taught how, in World War II, America saved France and saved the world, how they were so great. The courses don't consider what Americans have done wrong. All the current events here is news about America and what America is doing. If it's about another country, it's about what America is doing there. There's nothing about other countries and their histories and problems. [In France] we had lots of history and geography courses, starting very young. I learned about France, but then we had to take a course in U.S. industrialization, in China, Russia, Japan, too. We got the history and geography of the world, so we could see how France now fits into the bigger picture.

For the international students I interviewed, American college culture is a world of engagement, choice, individualism, and independence, but it is also one of cross-cultural ignorance and self-delusion that cries out for remediation. It was a Somali student who summed up all of their hopes for "America": "You have so much here, and so many opportunities. I wish America would ask more what this country can do to make the world a better place."