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Review Essay

Managing the Freshman Year

The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School

Tim Clydesdale

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007

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

Rebekah Nathan

Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005

Each summer Beloit College publishes its “Mindset List” of events that mark the lives of eighteen-year-olds arriving on college campus that fall. This year’s list, for example, notes that for incoming freshmen, Clarence Thomas has always been on the Supreme Court, IBM has never made typewriters, and Jay Leno has always hosted the *Tonight Show*. We may smile—or wince—as the items remind us of gaps in time and culture that separate us from our students, but the novelty usually wears off before we set out to teach the first class of the year.

Two recent books offer much more full-bodied accounts of the culture that college freshmen inhabit and remind us that we typically see but a small slice of our students’ complex lives. Be forewarned that these studies can be at times downright depressing, especially as they chronicle the intellectual dispositions of first-year students. Yet we ignore these books at our own peril, and not because either author addresses writing or writing instruction directly (indeed, we should be humbled that the most frequently taught course in the

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first-year curriculum registers hardly a blip on the radar screens of the students studied here), but because writing and learning are deeply contextual activities, shaped powerfully by the youth culture of late high school and early college. Most sobering for teachers of first-year writing—even those who work earnestly to make their classrooms student centered—may be the strong evidence of just how distant that culture is from assumptions that guide much theory and practice in composition.

Tim Clydesdale, a sociologist, and Rebekah Nathan, an anthropologist writing under a pseudonym, take the lives of incoming students and the span of the freshman year as their subjects. In *The First Year Out* Clydesdale tracks seventy-five New Jersey teens as they travel from the senior year in high school through the first year of college. In *My Freshman Year* Nathan offers a participant-observer ethnography of a large public university.

My Freshman Year made a splash when it was published in 2005 because of Nathan's novel research method: she enrolled as a freshman at the university where she teaches, moved into the dorms, and lived the student life for a year (a sabbatical year, no less). A second wave of publicity followed when the press outed "Rebekah Nathan" as anthropologist Cathy Small and the "AnyU" featured in the book as Northern Arizona University.

Small was motivated to undertake her study by concerns that will resonate with faculty. She wondered, Why don't more students come to office hours? Why don't they do the reading, take more notes, speak up more in class? Why don't these students seem as motivated as, well, I was when in college? Small sets out, in a spirit of inquiry rather than judgment, to explore the gap in values that separates students from faculty. The book is appealing for how it marries personal reporting with cultural analysis. For academics the book has an almost voyeuristic feel, but at the same time Small proves an attentive observer, synthesizer, and critic.

Clydesdale's study adopts a somewhat wider scope, tracking students during the senior year of high school into the first year of college. Moreover, he follows a group as it disperses to different kinds of higher education institutions: some go to residential four-year colleges (public and private, secular and religious, mainstream and elite); some live at home and attend community colleges. As for method, Clydesdale did on-site observations at the suburban New Jersey high school where his informants originated, but he relies more on 125 in-depth interviews conducted between 1995 and 2003.

A central finding of both books is that first-year college students are so utterly consumed with *daily life management* that they have little time, energy,

or inclination to embrace intellectual inquiry, politics, self-scrutiny, personal change, or much of anything beyond pressing schedules of classes, jobs, and leisure. Freshman year is, for most, not a season of intellectual awakening, self-exploration, philosophical inquiry, or community engagement. Faced with managing the multiple demands of academics, work, family, new freedoms, and personal gratifications—all framed by a fragmented consumer culture—this relentlessly pragmatic bunch seeks ways to do school, maintain a small network of friends, have fun, and get through. In their approach to academics most are what Clydesdale calls “practical credentialists,” including a clear majority of those who attend elite colleges. They focus on what counts toward the grade and what will serve their careers. Not many come to value the liberal arts, few seem inclined to scrutinize their own identities, and few expand their political consciousness. Of the about one in five that do, Clydesdale finds, nearly all of have carried such habits with them from high school rather than developed them during the first year out. There are always, of course, those few who affirm our idealized versions of college and who do in fact open themselves to change and engagement, but Clydesdale suggests that those are the very students most likely to become future faculty and to perpetuate for another generation the narrative of the freshman year as transformative.

All that may sound harsh, but both Small and Clydesdale refrain from wagging their fingers. Both come to empathize with the dizzying array of school, work and social demands that new-to-college students juggle. Small even confesses that despite her earnest efforts as a freshman, she earned mostly Bs in her classes. Both researchers lament the materialism, fragmentation, political disengagement, and intellectual paucity that mark the youth culture they encounter, but they are intent on understanding and analyzing that culture rather than on censuring young people.

Of the two books, *My Freshman Year* offers the fresher analysis of community and diversity. Small’s analysis of life in the dorms reveals dramatic disjunctures between official ideals of community and diversity and what she observes. She puzzles over why students don’t show up for the dorm Super Bowl party but then discovers that most are watching the game in their own rooms in small groups. In fact, most student social life is organized around small, intensely reciprocal, ego-centered networks and special (though rarely academic) interest groups. From the day they enter freshman orientation, students are presented with a sprawling menu of social options. “Community” on campus becomes a set of electives, a sea of different options and schedules, “both elusive and unreliable,” always in flux (39). When choice and consumerism

are valorized both on campus and in U.S. culture, Smalls reflects, perhaps we should not be surprised that individualism trumps community in the dorms and the curriculum. And she finds that much the same pattern holds for diversity. The friendship networks that are the hubs of daily life rarely cross lines of race or ethnicity—quite a contrast to the official images of diversity, intercultural dialogue, and community featured in university publications and the speeches of administrators.

Interesting as Small's finding are—including her descriptions of how students “handle” and “manage” their professors—Tim Clydesdale's *The First Year Out* proves more relevant to teachers of first-year writing, especially those committed to critical pedagogies. Such pedagogies hinge on inviting students to re-examine their own roles within social systems, their very identities as emergent cultural critics and political agents. But consider the consequences if Clydesdale is right that most freshmen arrive at college with durable identities forged by their family, faith, and home communities; that they stow their (mostly disengaged) political, religious, and intellectual identities in an “identity lockbox” during the first year out; that the freshman year is for most a time when prior behavior patterns and life priorities become more deeply habituated rather than reexamined and altered; and that these patterns persist across all types of higher education institutions. Can we really expect one course to jar them into either critical consciousness or intellectual engagement? For those who have tried critical pedagogy and been frustrated with the results, this book offers some comfort. It's not you. It's the student culture and the larger U.S. culture. Neither of these books offers much hope that kindling critical consciousness or bookish intellectualism—except among those who arrive from high school already open to such overtures—is a viable outcome for first-year composition.

Yet Clydesdale and Small don't traffic in hopelessness. For example, while Clydesdale tags most first-year students as “intellectual immune,” he finds that nearly all of his interviewees are cognitively sharper after two semesters of college. They may not display a zest for learning or politics, but they are more articulate, better at making and supporting claims, more astute in their capacity to interpret, argue, and analyze. (Freshman composition is given no credit for that, but perhaps we should claim our share.) And while neither Clydesdale nor Small speculates on whether seeds of intellectualism are being quietly sown in the first year (they stick to what the data tell them and don't collect data beyond the freshman year), Clydesdale pins some hope on the prospect that once students acclimate to the demands of daily life management, they might,

in later college years, open their “identity lockboxes,” that is, open themselves to engagement and change.

Both books end with recommendations. The main counsel is hardly surprising: make an effort to understand contemporary student culture as it really is rather than through idealized official university discourses, the popular imagination, or one’s own personal history and commitments. Small links this to policymaking: “Educational policy, I believe, cannot afford to rely on inaccurate or idealized versions of what students are, and student issues should be analyzed with a fuller understanding of how they are embedded in student culture” (141). If we do that, we might not only be less alienated from our students and more effective teachers, but we might also stumble upon some surprises. For example, Clydesdale expected to find that the events of 9/11 had shaken students into a greater political and global consciousness. He found instead that Columbine proved much more influential to the worldview of this cohort: it taught them to expect random violence and to lay low. That life lesson ended up blunting the effect of 9/11 on these young people.

Both authors deliver further advice specific to teaching. For example, they encourage us to raise our academic standards. Each discovers independently that students arrive at college thinking that courses will be especially challenging but soon discover that for most classes they can skip much of the reading, suck up to their professors, cram for tests, and still do just fine. As a result, most students treat academics as part-time work, and not many spend more than four hours per day on classes, reading, and homework. Another lesson that Clydesdale has applied to his own teaching of sociology is to put greater emphasis on to what he calls “cognitive skills” rather than coverage. As he advocates for giving more attention to writing, speaking, and problem solving, teachers of composition, rhetoric, and writing across the curriculum will nod at being well ahead of that curve.

Finally, both Small and Clydesdale recommend that we leverage the pragmatic habits of students rather than sneer at them. That is, no longer does either professor take the question “Will this be on the test?” or quips about “useless” general education courses as marks of small-mindedness. Instead they make efforts to clarify the use-value of their courses and assignments; they acknowledge instrumentalist student attitudes even as they seek small, strategic opportunities for inviting students into wider intellectual involvements. Such bending toward the practical and careerist ambitions of students may sound familiar to readers of Russell Durst’s *Collision Course: Conflict,*

Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition, which a decade ago documented a clash of faculty and student values in a composition course. Durst presages much of what Small and Clydesdale conclude when he writes, “I think theorists have been far too eager to advocate approaches that fail to consider adequately the issue of student instrumentalism, and far too quick to condemn this instrumentalism as wrongheaded and in dire need of correction. I would argue that instrumentalism, broadly defined as an emphasis upon the world of work and career advancement, is too deeply ingrained in U.S. culture and history to be so blithely ignored or dismissed in composition pedagogy. It is a fundamental characteristic of our students” (174). Durst does not suggest that we cave in to student careerism; instead, he suggests that we draw on that kind of practical ambition and take “reflective instrumentalism” seriously as a teaching aim, especially in the first year of college. Both Small and Clydesdale end up in a very similar posture, less interested in pursuing conversion than seeking common ground. Some may see such a stance as anti-intellectual or as acquiescence to market-driven values, but these scholars see it as meeting students where they are.

Works Cited

Durst, Russell. *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1999.