

What a Professor Learned as an Undercover Freshman

By [DIANA JEAN SCHEMO](#) • AUG. 23, 2006



"I took my alienation as the springboard for this project. It wasn't so much to observe undergrads, as to be an undergrad and see what they come up against." **CATHY A. SMALL** Anthropology professor, Northern Arizona University Jill Torrance for The New York Times

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. — Why do college students seem allergic to intellectual debate? Why do they all seem to run away the instant class ends? Do they date? And did the dog really eat the homework?

As these judgments masquerading as questions began striking Cathy A. Small, an anthropology professor, she realized that she had heard similar ones as a student 30 years earlier.

But instead of giving in to the creeping alienation her questions suggested, Professor Small, a compact, energetic woman, reached into anthropology's kit bag. She enrolled as a freshman at Northern Arizona University here in the 2002-3 school year, determined to apply the same techniques she had used in studying tribal societies to understand the 18,000 students on the campus where she teaches.

“I took my alienation as the springboard for this project,” Professor Small said. “It wasn’t so much to observe undergrads, as to be an undergrad and see what they come up against.”

Professor Small envisioned her study as “a very little book,” but “My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student,” published under the pseudonym Rebekah Nathan, has gone through five hardback printings. A paperback edition, put out by Penguin Books this month, exhausted its first run of 14,500 copies in a week and is into its second printing.

“There’s some kind of chord that it’s striking,” Professor Small said recently over a dinner of Thai chicken soup, with mushrooms and coconut milk, a blend that recalled her years in the South Pacific, where she lived on Tonga. “People want to have this discussion.”

Her book found today’s students “not as elite, not as prepared” for college as earlier generations, she said, and burdened with debt. “They’re more practical in their education,” she said.

Up close, she found that they could be intellectually engaged, but that rather than engaging in political or philosophical discussions, students were more likely to talk about how they pulled off specific assignments, often with a minimum of effort. They saw fitting in to campus culture as crucial, and purely academic or intellectual quests as only tangential to their education.

“I think people are more engaged than the veneer suggests, but there definitely was a push to show one’s disinterest in the academic side of life,” Professor Small said.

And they seemed indifferent to values like diversity.

Although college is, Professor Small, said, a “liminal experience” — a place of enormous creative potential, where new identities can be forged and

destinies transformed — she found a pervasive, if tacit, emphasis on conformity and an undercurrent of cynicism.

Professor Small, a native of Brooklyn who practices both Judaism and Buddhist meditation, did her doctorate on the impact of [immigration](#) on the people of Tonga.

To do the research, she lived on the island for three years, participating in a co-op of women who created cloth from the bark of the tapa tree, to be used in ceremonies. A large sample of this work hangs along a second-story walkway in her home, visible from the living room below.

Writing her book is not the first time Professor Small used her anthropology background in a modern-life situation.

In 1993, she created a catalog to help Native American tribes market their crafts without middlemen.

In “My Freshman Year,” Professor Small called Northern Arizona AnyU, describing it as a midsize, not particularly selective, public university. A reporter at The New York Sun, piecing together clues in the book, revealed her identity last year.

At first, she said, she refused to confirm that she was the book’s real author, worrying that doing so would violate the promise of anonymity she had given her subjects. But eventually, she decided that holding out would jeopardize the privacy of individual students, especially after a journalist threatened to seek school records under the Freedom of Information Act.

It helped, she said, that her university’s president, John D. Haeger, publicly praised her work, and has used “My Freshman Year” as a framework for making changes to student housing and academic life.

Now, Professor Small speaks to groups nationwide about the implications of her findings for colleges and universities, especially about how to

promote diversity.

“I’m representing the angst that my own generation is having” in dealing with students these days, she said.

Fieldwork for her project meant leaving her nice home to live in a student dorm, taking a full course load and trying to make friends. It meant giving up her coveted faculty parking space and making her way around the sprawling campus by foot and bus. But mostly it meant losing her status as a professor, and trying to see the world from the level of her students.

Initially, the prospect was frightening. Her first night of orientation, Professor Small said, she took her cue from other students, many of whom packed up their pillows and went to stay with their parents in hotel rooms around town. She headed home.

“I was, like, panicking,” she said, slipping into college-student cadence. “It’s very disorienting to be out of your place.”

But she was back the next day, gaining insights on matters from how students decorate their dorm room doors to their social lives.

Federal studies have shown that college students today spend less time studying than previous generations, but also less time socializing. So what are they doing?

Professor Small learned that many on her campus were struggling to balance academic demands with long hours in jobs off campus. She also found that the university had unintentionally fragmented the student body by offering a plethora of options on many aspects of student life. Everything from course loads to living arrangements can be tailored to suit individual tastes, but the results reduced the chances that undergraduates would mix with people unlike themselves.

During her research, other students assumed that the friendly, short, trim

woman with graying curls must be down on her luck: 50-something, perhaps divorced, taking classes because she suddenly had to make her own way in the world. But they avoided questions.

“They didn’t know what it was, but they were sure it was a sad story,” she said, and laughed.

In her book, Professor Small wrote about the art on dorm room doors, which she sees as personal billboards, advertising the occupants as carefree, spontaneous, fun-loving and sexually adventurous. One door to a women’s dorm room had a sign up board for male classmates to say hi, and condoms for the taking.

On the women’s doors, there was usually a white message board, where notes from friends were seldom erased. Men would post affectionate or saucy letters from women. Each was a way of broadcasting the popularity of the person within, Professor Small said.

She found the students were highly practical, with friends calling on one another for shopping trips, meals and lifts to classes. And she noticed that most friendships were forged early in the freshman year, so that she, living among upperclassmen, made friends mostly among other outsiders, including transfer and foreign students.

As an anthropologist, Professor Small does not believe she knows the natives better than they know themselves. But she said that in taking a step back to describe their world, she hopes her book will give students perspective.

“I didn’t write it for freshmen, but there are things about seeing the way culture works that I think gives you some freedom when you realize it,” she said. “You may not make any changes, but at least you’re aware that what you’re doing is a cultural prescription, and it gives you a kind of flexibility.”