

Hon 322A
Why are we here?
Spring, 20006

Prof. Jean Goodwin
goodwin@iastate.edu
223 Ross, Mon 10-12, Wed 3-5

Why are we here?

No, I am not referring to a big question about the meaning of life. Instead, I want to think about a more manageable, but still vital, question: Why are you (young people entering the rights and responsibilities of adulthood) and me (someone involved in the discovery and transmission of knowledge) together, here at ISU? Every society does something to help transition people into adulthood, and every society has knowledge-workers; but in our society, oddly enough, these two disparate groups are collected together at an institution known as a "university." Why?

What is college for?

"Rebekah Nathan's" just-out account of her fieldwork, *My Freshman Year*, raises this question in a very pointed form. She paints a compassionate picture of an undergraduate culture that unsympathetically could be described as shallow, careerist, hedonistic and anti-intellectual; of students who are wrapped up in a very narrow circle of intimates, focused on fun, grades, professor-manipulation and the job-getting diploma, but never on the pressing intellectual and political questions of the day. Further, she describes specific ways in which university practices and organization serves to foster these characteristics.

In this seminar, we will earn answers to the following questions:

1. What is Nathan saying? What are the elements of undergraduate culture at "AnyU"?
2. Is she right? Is ISU, AnyU?
3. Is that bad? If we are like what Nathan says, how do we judge ourselves?
4. What can we do? If we don't like the way we are, what specifically can we change?

I was driven to organize this seminar for two reasons. First, I was appalled by Nathan's book; it gave an intimate view of the student culture I had perceived dimly in my classes. But complaining and gossiping with my fellow teachers, while satisfying, doesn't accomplish much; I wanted to talk about these matters with students—that is, you. Second, although I don't know what college is for, one of my most basic commitments is that we're all responsible for *thinking*, and that the place to start thinking is *here*. This seminar gives us all a chance to turn our minds to examine this institution, ISU, which we make together and which makes us.

What's to come

We'll start by reading through *My Freshman Year*, and seeing whether or how it captures student culture at ISU. Then we'll take up two "critiques" of ISU, examining the way the University actually encourages some of the worst aspects of student culture through offering excessive choice and through its communication practices. We'll spend a day on a topic chosen by the you. We'll end the seminar by preparing a series of Op Eds, hopefully to be published in the *Daily*, expressing our final agreements/disagreements to our University community (if we decide it is a "community")

Expectations

Every week, in addition to the readings and discussions, you'll be asked to post your reflections on the course blog prior to class. You'll also undertake responsibility for specific investigations/research for some classes.

All readings except for the book will be online, generally in pdf format linked from the course blog. Look there too for announcements and extensions of ideas.

We're a small group; attendance is expected and absentees will be missed.

Our final publications will be group projects, with teams writing drafts and the whole class giving feedback.

A fair contribution to our blog, to our discussions, and to our final work product: that's what "passing the class" will consist of.

The Center for Excellence in Learning & Teaching (CELT)—ISU's faculty-support office—may be setting up a "reading circle" discussing Nathan's book; if so, I will try to set up a joint meeting between us and them.

This is my first time teaching an honors seminar, and I welcome feedback and advice.

Schedule

Week 1: Introductions

Who are we, and why are we here? What are we going to be doing?

Look over this Syllabus.

Week 2: The problems?

Having read the book, we will make a first try at figuring out what exactly Nathan is saying, whether we believe her, and whether it's bad news.

"Rebekah Nathan," *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2005).

Week 3: Is ISU, AnyU?

We'll try to replicate some of Nathan's data gathering here at ISU, and examine other sources of information about the University. How similar are ISU and AnyU as institutions? How is the student culture here like and unlike the one that Nathan captures? Why?

Selections from ISU's Institutional Research website, TBA.

Week 4: First critique: Does the University offer too many choices?

The University is not by nature: we have made it what it is, and we can make it different. We'll start by examining whether the over-abundance of options paradoxically promotes incoherence, stress and conformity, instead of the synthesis, pleasure and individuality that we should be cultivating. But can we really restrict choice? What coursework should be required of all students? What should a major look like (if anything)?

Selections from *My Freshman Year*, TBA.

Jane Smiley, *Moo* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1995), 384-386.

Barry Schwartz, "The Tyranny of Choice [1]," *Scientific American*, 290 (2004): 70-75.

Barry Schwartz, "The Tyranny of Choice [2]," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50.20 (23 Jan 2004): B6-B8.

Jonathan Z. Smith, "Why the College Major? Questioning the Great Unexplained Aspect of Undergraduate Education," *Change* 15.5 (Jul/Aug 1983): 12-15.

Reading packet (handed out).

Week 5: Second critique: Does "class discussion" undermine learning?

As a Speech Communication professor, I am particularly interested in how the ways we talk together influence our experiences. Today, we'll examine whether the practice of class discussion in which everyone just announces their view promotes the (bad) "epistemology" (theory of knowledge) that all ideas are equal, just matters of opinion.. But what classroom communication would be better? Lecturing? Debating? (We'll also make a preliminary plan for our final publication(s).)

Selections from *My Freshman Year*, TBA.

Selections from William Perry, "Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning," in A.W. Chickering et al., *The Modern American College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass): 76-116.

Selections from Marcuse's "Repressive Tolerance," in Robert Paul Wolff, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 95-137.

Week 6: Third critique: Your choice.

We'll examine one or more issues that the class decides are most important—perhaps a critique of the faculty, or of students themselves. (We'll also finalize our publication plan, assigning specific responsibilities and setting up a timeline.)

Week 7: Organizational

We'll review progress on the final publication, and work groups will have an opportunity to meet.

Week 8: Final

Dinner at my house. We will review and comment on each other's drafts, and look back over the semester.