

Most mornings, before the start of popular 9–10 AM classes, there would be a line of women in bathrobes carrying plastic shower caddies with soap and shampoo, waiting for an open shower.

Resident assistants' rooms or suites were positioned strategically in high-traffic areas. There were three on my floor. You could tell their rooms by the animated decorations on their doors and wall spaces around their rooms. You might see a giant brightly colored name tag, a "Good luck with classes!" banner, or a door wrapped like a package, with a "Come on In" sign. The RA usually provided some way of knowing where he or she was at all times, with pointers indicating "eating out," "in class," "out and about," "studying—only emergencies," or "I'm there—knock." RA spaces, always busy with displays and messages, conveyed a kind of big brother or big sister authority, a mixture of law enforcement and availability, concern, and counsel.

Are We Having Fun Yet?

As I would do if I had moved into a village, I started my research by recording my immediate surroundings and taking a census of who lived where. There was a lot to record. Dorm doors, hallways, and bathrooms were filled with messages in the form of flyers, jokes, bulletin board displays, photos, and collages, all in their own way telling me something about the culture of the dorm.

Bulletin boards provided the official imagery of dorm life. There were several on each floor, and creating the displays was an important part of the RA's job. They were usually changed each month, so in a year's time one could see a healthy sample of topics and presentations. I typically wandered the halls on weekend mornings when they were reliably deserted because students were either sleeping or had left on Friday for a weekend adventure. By April of my second semester, I had recorded

fifty-seven different formal bulletin board displays in my residence hall.¹

It was clear that the bulletin boards were coordinated efforts, influenced by directives from the RHD (residence hall director); they rotated in a discernible pattern relating to the time of year and desired theme, although RAs had considerable leeway in deciding how a message appeared. At the beginning of the year the corridors all sported "get involved" messages as well as rape and sexual assault warnings. Mid-semester messages contained more academic advice but also focused on conflict resolution, roommate, and relationship problems. Around the December holidays, health and body image messages were more frequent, while around Valentine's Day was a profusion of boards relating to love, sex, and relationships. "Diversity" issues seemed relegated to the weeks surrounding the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. I saw one board on voting preceding November elections.

Approximately one in five bulletin boards throughout the year concerned academics, and most of these offered tips and tools, including items such as "dealing with test anxiety" or "ten steps to academic success." The biggest category of displays—more than one-quarter—dealt with psychological and physical health, as well as threats to health. This category included four displays on sexual assault and sexually transmitted diseases, three on drugs and alcohol, and four on body image (for example, "Love your Lumps," urging us to accept our bodily imperfections).

Scattered comic relief boards that drew on college culture themes ("Fifty Things Admissions Never Told You about College," "Crazy Things to Do for under \$10," "Fifty Fun Things to Do at Wal-Mart") appeared throughout the year. Almost 20 percent of all messages had danger motifs, warning students about the consequences (suspension/expulsion, AIDS, jail, STDs, pregnancy, sickness, even death) that given actions would reap. In visiting the dorm the following year, I found that many of the boards were recycled, suggesting that this for-

mal culture—touting health, educational and academic advice, information, and warnings—had some consistency over time.

Resident doors, by contrast, belonged to the informal student culture. Although RAs had affixed a handmade name tag and welcome materials to each of our doors, I quickly learned that cool students added things and, boys in particular, took RA items down. Within three weeks of moving in, 60 percent of the boys' doors had been stripped of their RA materials. It was women, though, at about a 3 to 1 ratio to men, who had designed new, often elaborate door displays.

Although not all students of either gender decorated their doors, expressive door art was a regular feature of college life. A variety of objects, text, drawings, photos, collages, pictures, quotes, comic strips, and symbols—often ten to twenty or more on a single door—appeared as public yet personal door displays. If you were to ask students directly about the rules and meaning of door decoration, they would likely say that there are no rules (except for avoiding racial and ethnic slurs) and that door displays don't "mean" anything beyond the interests of the occupant. An anthropologist, though, would say that there are very particular rules and patterns that define the expressive culture of undergraduates, and the way students choose to represent themselves to others is very telling.

If the formal culture stressed advice, academics, and warnings, informal culture stressed sociability, fun, and humor. "Friendly fun," as Michael Moffatt found at Rutgers University, was "the bread and butter of college life."² In 2003, "fun" continued to be one of the most ubiquitous words in college discourse, a way to describe a good evening, a good person, or a good class. "Fun," as a concept, is associated with spontaneity, sociability, laughter, and behavior (including sexuality) that is unconstrained. The value placed on fun was evident in many forms on student doors, in the images and words that were selected for public viewing.

Probably the most common door display included strings of phrases and words cut from magazines, usually interspersed

with cutout images. Although some doors posted discrete messages such as "Saying of the Week" or "Quotable Quotes," most used a collage-like genre to create a carefully constructed impression of freethinking spontaneity and individuality. On one representative door on my hall were the following phrases:

Friends don't let friends party naked; Bitch; 24 hours in a day; 24 bottles of beer in a case. Coincidence? I think Not; Z-Man!! We Test Animals; Crazy Wild; Where the Stars Go; How Long Should you Wait?

While this reads on one level like a highly individualized, almost stream-of-consciousness expression, it is actually highly stylized. Its cutout words and phrases, set at different angles and using different sizes and fonts of type, were in the same visual style that appeared on most doors. Its content references to booze, nakedness, craziness, youth, celebrity, and sexuality were also common themes, which conveyed even larger themes of freedom and fun. Thus, down the hall on a neighboring door, one could see different phrases, also in pasted cutouts, that were manifestations of the same themes: "Bare your butt," "Young and Royal," "Las Vegas," "A Colorful Character," "Once Upon a Mattress," "The Next Best Thing to Naked," or on the next one "Welcome to CrazyWorld" and "Naked on Roller Skates."

Nudity, sexuality, drinking, craziness. These are certainly part of the college scene, but concentrating on the literal content alone misses the underlying values—fun, expressiveness, individuality, freedom, spontaneity—which are really the point. Images, like words, convey the same few themes. On one door it will be "nakedness" phrases that impart the impression of individuality; fun, a lack of limits; on another the same message is communicated with outdoor sport photos, showing a mountain biker or a skier in mid-air or a surfer riding a giant curling wave.

Acceptable alternative images or text include antiestablishment themes, in which the same core values of individuality

and freedom are directed toward critique and rebellion. These door displays use dark, ghoulish, or frightening images: faces or bodies dripping with blood, Dracula-type/punk/goth images, skull and crossbones, a figure holding an automatic weapon. One such door with "dark" images displayed these verbal messages:

Swaying to the Rhythm of the New World Order; The Bootymen are Coming; Every time you Masturbate, God Kills a Kitten; Sort of; Korn Untouchables; Quit Smoking Later; The Rocky Horror Picture Show; Pay No Mind What Other Voices Say, they don't care about you.

Other acceptable messages are funny, cryptic, or eccentric, like this string of phrases on a single door: "Fight Club," "The Only Good Clown is a Dead Clown," and "Dream, Do you?" Although women and men share most of the expressive themes, friendship and love are, on the average, overrepresented on women's doors, while men's doors more frequently show images of violence, political critique, and humor, particularly in the form of cartoons.

Many of the implicit messages of dorm doors directly contradict those of the formal sector. Whereas careful forethought and the consideration of consequences are primary messages in the formal sector, informal student culture emphasizes spontaneity. Drinking, smoking, drugs, and sexuality, while commonly featured in warnings on bulletin boards and official postings, appear as objects of admiration on student doors. And while official messages wholeheartedly urge students to accept their bodies, the images on student doors are unambiguously young, lean, attractive, buff, and/or voluptuous. When fat, old, or unattractive people appear, they are almost always associated with ridicule and humor, thus reinforcing the inverse message.

Some of the most common images on student doors involve leisure and the "good life"—including martini glasses, palm trees, cowboys, guitars, flowers, bikinis, hearts, Hawaii, belly

dancers, beaches. They offer an alternative to the “buckle down” vision of college in the formal sector, which implores students to apply themselves, to balance their social lives with study and seriousness of purpose. Among the diverse images I observed on student doors, none depicted books, studying, or academic honors—not even to critique them.

At least half of all pictures of people on student doors came from magazines or commercial posters, an indication that pop culture is a primary well from which students draw to construct their public identities. The range of “people images” typically included music, sports, and TV or film celebrities as well as anonymous sexy young men and women, models from ads who were either just “looking good” or engaged in an intense but “fun” activity: snowboarding, skiing, surfing, rock climbing, and cycling to name a few. Men, particularly but not exclusively, posted pictures depicting naked women, beauty queens, lesbian sexuality, and other sexualized women’s images that were the objects of both comic and lustful gazes.

The images of “real” people—that is, photographs of the resident and people the resident knew—appeared on several doors, though less frequently than media images. With one exception, in hundreds of images there were no pictures of family members. Images that students chose for their doors were a particular genre of photograph that I can best describe with some examples (I cannot *show* them because of confidentiality requirements):

- The resident on a trip with a group of his friends. They all face the camera with arms outstretched in an “end-of-show” gesture, some on half-bended knees.
- A collage of photos taken during what clearly is a party. In one there are people wall-to-wall, as the resident holds up a glass in a toast.
- The two residents of the room, both making faces at the camera.
- A resident sticking her tongue out at the camera.

- Two residents of the room bending over and sticking out their rear ends (clad in jeans) at the camera.
- A mixed-gender group of friends on the ground, each person’s head resting on the next person’s stomach. The shot is taken from above, and everyone is laughing.
- The female resident and two girlfriends outdoors, facing the camera, with arms around one another’s waist. The girl in the middle opens her mouth in mock surprise as the girls on either side point to her.

The images typically are not serious; they are often posed, but in poses that contrast with the family album picture. Instead of smiling naturally, people are often making faces, or purposely “over”-smiling, or sticking out their tongues. They appear in unusual positions (on the ground, with their butts sticking out) and/or off-balance, with legs and arms akimbo, as if caught in some spontaneous and “fun” activity. The photos almost exclusively feature the resident with others of the same age group.

Many of the photos—just as the words, phrases, and images included—are calculated to say something like: “Here I am doing crazy/spontaneous/‘fun’ things”; “Here I am having a good time with my friends”; or sometimes, “I’m a unique and eccentric individual.” What makes door art, from phrases to images to photos, similar is the spirit and the values it conveys: friendliness, youth, freedom, sexiness, sociability, irreverence, fun, humor, intensity, eccentricity, lack of limits, spontaneity. These are the values of undergraduate life, and although there are many students who do not individually advance or emulate these values, they nonetheless serve as the cultural standard.³

The Absolutely Positively Mandatory First Hall Meeting

My first formal introductions to others on the corridor came in the form of a required corridor meeting, the first of the season.