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ENGAGING CAMPUS CULTURE

Is there a “Duke” waiting to happen?

By Sandra M. Estanek

Regardless of the final outcome of the legal proceedings, the incident involving the Duke University lacrosse team has shown a light on a disturbing aspect of university student culture. The fact that this occurred at one of the nation's most prestigious universities has renewed discussion of how prevalent such behavior is and what could and should those of us who work with students do about it.

Novelist Tom Wolfe was asked repeatedly if his novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, was specifically about Duke. Not so, he said, since the novel was published in 2004; but it, too, painted a picture of campus culture awash in sex and alcohol. Little concern for learning was in evidence. The novel's main character, Charlotte, is the first student from rural Allegheny County in North Carolina to receive a full scholarship to prestigious Dupont University. She is the brightest student anyone in the county could remember. She is filled with the love of learning and basks in the admiration of adults, but has few friends among her peers. She ends her freshman year at Dupont having had her first alcohol, her first sexual encounters, and her first introduction to controversial ideas. Not all of her experiences are positive. She squeaks by with her grades, to the grave disappointment of her family and teachers back home, but she is popular and has a boyfriend at school. One wonders if Charlotte had a good year. One wonders what she learned during her freshman year at Dupont.

Those of us who work in Catholic Jesuit higher education, with our deeply held value of *cura personalis*, are challenged anew to ask ourselves whether the culture described by *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is characteristic of our own campus cultures, whether there's a “Duke” waiting to happen; to what extent, if so, and if so, what can and should we do to engage and change this culture to be more consistent with our mission and values.

The convergence of the events at Duke and the publica-

tion of *I Am Charlotte Simmons* by the country's leading practitioner of the fiction of social realism paint a picture of student culture as debauched, devoid of adult participation and influence, and out of control. How accurate is this? No one who works with students can blithely dismiss the prevalence of alcohol use and sexual promiscuity. The state says that one should not drink alcohol until one is 21, and the church says that one should engage in sexual activity only if one is married. Clearly, many students are doing both. However, this picture is far from complete. Before we can design effective interventions we need to have an understanding of the student culture on our campuses.

In this article I will offer some thoughts based upon current scholarly literature that can assist us in framing the discussion of campus culture.

Who Are Our Students?

Rebekah Nathan (pseudonym), a tenured anthropology professor at a large state university used her sabbatical year to study student experience and student culture. She enrolled as a non-traditional, full time freshman student at her own institution and lived in a residence hall. Using the tools of ethnography, she chronicled her experiences and wrote *My Freshman Year* (2005), a “must read” for anyone who is interested in understanding today's student culture.

Unlike the fictional picture painted by Tom Wolfe, Nathan did not find that adults were absent from engagement with students. The dominant values and expectations of the university were presented at new student orientation and throughout the semester. One form of this in the

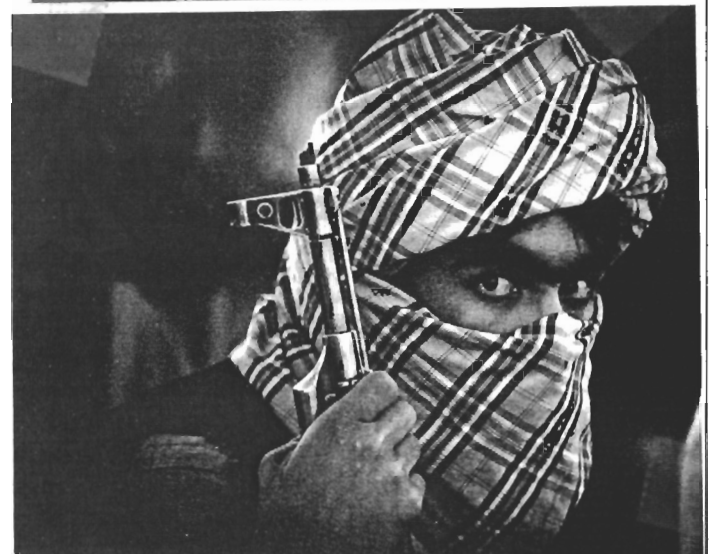
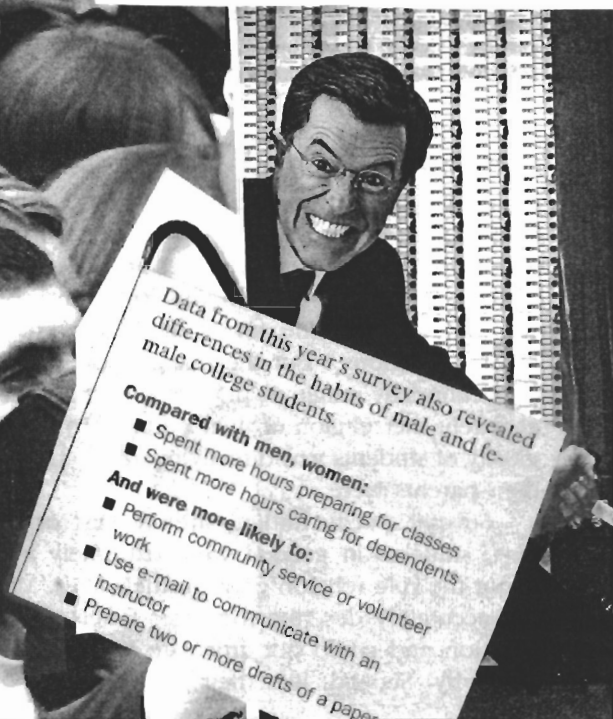
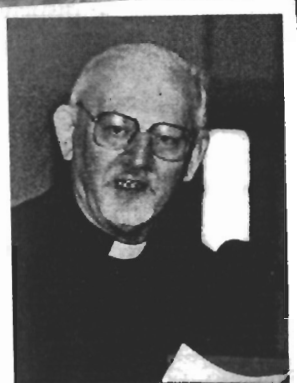
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What College Students Do

A report on data from this year's National Survey of Student Engagement compared the participation of adult learners and traditional-age college students in a variety of activities.

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residence hall was the informative bulletin board displays that were the responsibility of resident assistants to create. These informational displays promoted the “formal” culture of academic success, responsible personal behavior (including sex and the use of alcohol), and diversity.

However, this formal campus culture often was in direct contradiction to the informal student culture, which was displayed in conversation and through the use of door decorations. Student culture emphasized individuality, freedom (understood as a lack of limits), and fun (understood as spontaneity, laughter, and friends). Sex and alcohol were evident everywhere in these displays, but Nathan cautioned us to see those primarily as symbols of the underlying values of the student culture, rather than indicative of their actual behavior. They were less about the drinking and sexual activity themselves and more about the ideas of freedom and fun they represented. This theme is not unique to student culture. Students were simply conveying the message of the larger American culture. Watch any sporting event on TV, for example. The commercials usually involve alcohol and sexy young people having fun together. The message is the same: “It’s great to be young and free!”

Faculty members also worked hard to engage students, but many students were disengaged from academics despite the efforts of professors to elicit classroom discussion and student opinions. One of the things that disturbed Nathan was how infrequently students talked about ideas outside of the structure of the classroom. Their discussions were almost always instrumental...will the material be on the test, did you “get” the homework?

However, if students cut corners in class or seemed disinterested it typically was not because they

were hung over, as some faculty members presumed. More often they were juggling complex schedules and

class was not directly and obviously (in their judgment) related to tests, grades, and their career goals, then it was “busywork” and a waste of their valuable time. This was reflected in their lack of doing assigned reading unless it was clear that it was related to one of these, for example.

Individualism, instrumentalism, and leading complex and busy lives are characteristic of American lives in general and are evident in Nathan’s descriptions of campus life and student values. These values and behaviors contradicted one of the most deeply held university values, community. Students simply did not connect with the idea of a “college” community. Students were offered so many choices in terms of classes and activities (which they expected) that it was difficult to establish a consistent group of colleagues and friends. Students with “stuff” did not need to use the services provided by the university itself, such as televisions in lounges, which help students to get to know others. “Community” was understood as your small circle of friends who typically were like you and shared the same tastes and values.

Another “must read” for those of us at Jesuit institutions who desire to engage student culture is *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton. This book (2005) presented the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, which was conducted between 2001 and 2005. It included both quantitative data from a national telephone survey and qualitative data from more than 250 individual in-depth interviews.

Although their study was of high school students their findings are relevant for those of us who work with college students as well. In terms of religiosity their findings formed a bell curve; that is, there were some students who were very religious, knowledgeable about and active in their faith tradition, and some students for whom religion was irrelevant, some who were actively atheistic, and some who were “spiritual but not religious.” But the majority of students were conventionally religious, practicing to a greater or lesser extent the religion of their parents. In fact, the religiosity of students was directly related to how religious their parents were.

Several specific findings are relevant for us as well. First, students in general were extremely inarticulate about the role religion plays in their lives. Most could not accurately describe the basic tenets of their faith tradition and could not articulate what they believed and why. Second, like their approach to education,

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demands, tired, and instrumental about the purpose and value of their education. Students worked many hours in off-campus and on-campus jobs and did so not only to pay for tuition but also to support a lifestyle that they have and expect to continue in college, including car payments and car insurance, cell phones, iPods, and other “must haves,” resulting in less time for class preparation. If what was going on in

their approach to religion was instrumental. "What we heard from most teens is essentially that religion makes them feel good, that it helps them make good choices, that it helps resolve problems and troubles, that it serves their felt needs" (Smith and Denton, 2005, p. 148). The authors make the point to say that this instrumental understanding of religion is characteristic of the American approach in general and is not unique to the experience of teens.

Another aspect of American culture that affected teens' approach to religion was individualism. Students did not connect being religious with attending services or obeying the tenets of their religion faithfully. Thus, for example, they could speak of being Catholic and at the same time speak of not attending Mass regularly and believing in birth control and sex outside of marriage. These findings regarding attitudes were similar to the findings of Hoge, Dinges, Johnson, and Gonzales in their 2001 study, *Young Adult Catholics*.

The book contained a chapter devoted to Catholic teens. The researchers found that Catholic teenagers consistently score lower on most measures of religiosity. The authors posited that this was because the two vehicles for the education and socialization of American Catholic children, Catholic schools and CCD, were no longer effective and have not been replaced with more effective vehicles of socialization and evangelization. It also stemmed from the lack of priority placed on youth ministry in most Catholic parishes, they posited. The low scores of Catholic teens also were related to the level of religiosity of their parents.

All of this points to the difficulty of our task. Some students will come to campus with a vibrant faith; however, they likely will find themselves in the minority. The majority will have a tenuous link to their Catholicism. A substantial number of our students will be from other religious traditions. A few will be on our campuses in spite of our Catholic identity. How can we engage such a diversity of students, meeting each where they need to be met without reinforcing the fragmentation of experience Nathan wrote about?

How Can We Engage Them?

A third book I would suggest for anyone who wishes to understand and engage student culture is *Learning Reconsidered 2* (2006), a joint publication of seven higher education associations. When Nathan asked students why they were there and what they "got out of college" they most frequently spoke of "the college experience," the conglomeration of relationships, activities, and experiences they had because they attended college. Classes and professors were a

piece of that conglomeration, but just a piece. This confirmed forty years of student development theory that students experience college holistically.

Although we know this, we still typically organize the university in silos. Those of us who work with students in the classroom typically do not collaborate with those of us who work with students outside the classroom to create an environment of "seamless learning." *Learning Reconsidered 2* provides specific and concrete ways to do this, from mapping the campus learning environment, to developing comprehensive learning outcomes, to connecting learning to planning, and to assessing efforts to do these things.

Based upon my twenty five plus years working in higher education as a student affairs practitioner and now as a member of the faculty, including almost twenty years in Catholic higher education, and my reading of these sources, I would like to offer some thoughts about engaging the student culture.

Don't forget what we are already doing to engage student culture. In our efforts to improve and to reach more students, it's easy to forget the good things that we (and others) are already doing and risk becoming discouraged. Student affairs professionals, for example, spend many hours enforcing rules and engaging students on drinking and other issues of personal responsibility. Campus ministers provide a myriad of programs and opportunities. Faculty members work very hard to engage student creatively in the classroom. One of the things that I like about *Learning Reconsidered 2* is that it respects the contributions each of us already makes and provides concrete suggestions for how we can more effectively achieve the learning and development goals that we have.

Don't forget that one size does not fit all. If I were being asked by my institution to "do something" about student culture, the first thing that I would do would be to gather together a core group that included members of the faculty, student affairs staff, campus ministry, and students. I would then ask everyone to read the three books I have cited here to give ourselves a picture against which we could discuss our own campus. Perhaps we would then decide that we needed to conduct our own research on campus to understand our own environment. The reading could help us to frame the questions we would ask in such a "culture

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audit." Only after we had an understanding of our own campus culture would I ask the committee to think about the question of what can and should we do and to design interventions.

Don't ignore or underestimate the "formal culture" of the institution. Nathan wrote of bulletin boards, orientation activities, and other campus events as conveying the formal message of the institution's expectations of its students as members of the academic community. By writing that there also was an informal student culture she did not intend to dismiss the value of the formal culture. It is important that we use those opportunities to convey our Catholic Jesuit mission and values as well as our expectations as an academic community. We have a myriad of opportunities to do this on campus, and to do this in a welcoming way that celebrates the diversity of our campus communities as well.

Nathan observed that her campus was not as diverse as she would have thought. Students tended to cluster in comfortable groups of friends who were like them in most ways. Her interviews with international students showed how provincial American students were. Although I expect that most of our campuses are like Nathan's, we have a way of talking about community and diversity because of our Catholic Jesuit heritage that gives the concepts power beyond being necessary aspects of a pluralistic society. We embrace diversity *because* we are Catholic and Jesuit and not in spite of it. What most of us don't do, however, is articulate this. We don't *explicitly* connect the efforts of the international programs office and the multicultural pro-

grams office to our Catholic Jesuit values. We need to remember that most of our students do not know this connection so we need to make it explicitly for them.

Use students' interest in social justice as a way of engaging them on other issues. Researchers such as Hoge, Dinges, Johnson, and Gonzales and others have found that students connect most with the social justice teaching of the Church and least with the teachings on sexuality. I believe that it could be effective if we use the language of social justice as a way of beginning to talk about other value issues, including sexuality. What does it mean for me not to use another person? The same perspective that makes a student begin to understand how buying products made in sweatshops directly uses the persons making the items, and thus entails a personal responsibility, can be employed in discussing our personal relationships as well.

Remember that "learning...and grace...lurk everywhere." As a final thought, it is important for us to recall the admonition of Ignatius, "Pray as if everything depended upon you; and act as if everything depended upon God." Every time I read that my first reaction is to think I have it backwards; it *must* be that I have to work as though everything depended on me. But it is not! Ignatius is reminding us to do our best but to remember always that we are planting seeds; that it is not we who are in control. Ignatius' counsel continues to both challenge and support us in our ongoing efforts. ■



Regis University Choir.