College in the United States is an odd mixture of higher learning and youth culture for its students, and it has been for over a hundred years. In the late nineteenth century American undergraduates themselves invented the youth culture of outside-the-classroom-college, naming it "college life" and passing it down to future student generations. What has happened to this same youth culture among the students in the 1980s?

In an effort to find out, I used anthropological methods, including two years of participant-observation in the residence halls of a state university, Rutgers, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, a college of eighty-five hundred undergraduates embedded in a much larger, fairly typical state university. And the first thing I encountered in the Rutgers dorms was an elaborate, vigorous form of modern college life — not the "student life" of college catalogues, but an earthier set of mentalities and behaviors. Now as in the past, college life as the students understand it is one of the principal reasons they come to college, and it is what they often remember most fondly after they have left.

Why should we care about anything as nonintellectual and low-minded as college life often turns out to be? Because, though contemporary outside-the-classroom college is often the focus of popular

1Participatory research was done in 1978–79 and 1984–85, and further research through student self-reports between 1986 and 1988. See reference 10 for more on research methods (pp. 1–23, 187–93, 327–30) and on the probable typicality of these data (pp. 331–39). The present article brings together points made at greater length in reference 10, and draws some new conclusions from them.

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fantasy, it is almost entirely ignored in serious research on American colleges and universities. And because when we grasp its shape more accurately, we can understand certain higher aspects of American higher education more realistically.

In the absence of similar ethnographic studies done elsewhere, there is no way of knowing for certain how typical material from a single institution is likely to be. Rutgers student culture is unlikely to be entirely atypical, however. For as will be suggested below, the cultural worlds of the undergraduates are only occasionally formed from idiosyncratic local sources. Much more of what is important in them is shaped by the institutional structure of American higher education, by general American culture, and especially by nationally defined, media-born, youth culture. Similar mixes are likely to exist in other contemporary American colleges and universities.

What, then, are the outlines of modern college life as I was able to comprehend them through research in the Rutgers dormitories, by observing and listening in on the students in their informal moods and behaviors?

**College Life in the 1980s**

For reasons of perspective — differences of age, generation, and institutional location and agenda — college is never the same for the adults who run it as for the late-adolescents who typically make up most of its residential undergraduates. The purpose of a college education in the assumptions of most professors and educators tends to be what goes on in the classroom: learning critical thinking, how to read a text, mathematical and scientific skills, expert appreciation and technique in the arts, and so on. Some bigger thinkers propose broader, more humanistic goals for college, especially for the liberal arts: to produce "more competent, more concerned, more complete human being[s]" [2, p. 1]; to give students a "hope of a higher life . . . civilization." [1, p. 336]. And, almost all college authorities assume, whatever is valuable about college for the undergraduates is or ought to be the result of the deliberate impact, direct or indirect, of college adults such as themselves on the students.

The students agree that classroom learning is an important part of their college educations. College would not be college, after all, without "academics": professors, grades, requirements, and a bachelor's degree.

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2See, for instance, such apparently endlessly self-replicating films as Animal House, Fraternity Vacation, Spring Break, The Sure Thing, Revenge of the Nerds, Real Genius, Soul Man, Back to School, and so on.
after four years. Most students also agree that college should be a broadening experience, that it should make you into a better, more open, more liberal, more knowledgeable person.

But, in the students' view, not all this broadening happens through the formal curriculum. College is also about what goes on outside the classroom, among the students with no adults around. College is about being on your own, about autonomy, about freedom from the authority of adults, however benign their intentions. And last but far from least, college is about fun, about unique forms of peer-group fun before, in student conceptions, the grayer actualities of adult life in the real world begin to close in on you.

Contemporary college life — the pleasurable, autonomous side of outside-the-classroom college as the students experience it — comes into clearer focus when we compare it to past forms of the same uniquely American undergraduate culture.

Work and Play

American college life has always rested on an understanding among the students about the proper relationship between formal academic work and other activities in college, about the relative value of inside-the-classroom education verses extracurricular experiences. A century ago the evaluation was a simple one. Extracurricular fun and games and the lessons learned in the vigorous student-to-student competitions that "made men" — athletics, class warfare, fraternity rushing, and so on — were obviously much more important than anything that happened to you in the classroom, most of the students maintained [5, pp. 23–55; 8].

The students cannot make the same aggressive anti-academic judgments in the late-twentieth century, however. For as Helen Horowitz has pointed out in a recent history of American undergraduate culture, once there were several routes to comfortable upper-middle class status in the United States, and college could be a lazy affair. In the increasingly bureaucratic, impersonal twentieth-century American economy, however, a college baccalaureate — and a good one with good grades — has become the indispensable initial qualification leading to the choicest occupations and professions, via law school, business school, medical school, graduate school, and other types of professional postgraduate education. Therefore, as Horowitz notes, despite periodic crises of confidence in higher education in the United States, American parents have sent higher proportions of their children to college every decade since 1890, and the trend apparently continues in the 1990s [5, pp. 3–22].
Contrary to Horowitz, however, this trend has not resulted in a grim, unrelieved work ethic among contemporary students. For the students are still youths; and adolescents, especially as encouraged by late twentieth-century American consumer culture, are also expected to have fun. How much fun, and what kind in college?

Consider a crucial set of actions, the students’ use of time in college. According to hundreds of 24-hour time reports made out for my Rutgers research, for ordinary days mid-week, mid-semester, 60 to 70 percent of the undergraduates studied about two hours a day. Another ten to fifteen percent indicated harder academic work, up six or seven hours a day, usually but not always students in the more difficult majors; and the remainder, about a quarter of those who filled out the time reports, hardly studied at all day-to-day, but relied on frenetic cramming around exams.

The students slept a surprising amount, an average of a little over eight hours a day, making up for late nights with later mornings and afternoon naps. They spent about four hours a day in classes, on buses or dealing with university bureaucracy. A quarter of them devoted small amounts of their remaining free time, one or two hours a day, to organized extracurricular activities, mostly to fraternities or sororities, less often to other student groups. An eighth worked at jobs between one and four hours a day (more worked on weekends). A tenth engaged in intramural or personal athletics. And two-fifths mentioned small amounts of TV watching, less than the average for American children or adults.

The students’ remaining free time in college was given over to friendly fun with peers, the bread-and-butter of college life as the undergraduates enjoy it in the 1980s. Friendly fun consists almost entirely of spur-of-the-moment pleasures; with the exception of the fraternities and sororities (see below), very little of it has to do with the older college extracurriculum. It includes such easy pleasures as hanging out in a dorm lounge or elsewhere, gossiping, wrestling and fooling around, thinking up the odd sophomoric prank, going to dinner or having a light or serious discussion with friends, ordering out for pizza, visiting other dorms, going out to a bar, flirting and other erotic activities, and so forth.

Horowitz’s interview method probably encouraged the contemporary students who were her subjects to respond to her research questions in their most serious, adult-like voices. Apparently due to her lack of participatory knowledge of the students, Horowitz almost entirely missed the pleasure-centered, adolescent side of American undergraduate life in the 1980s. See also reference 9.
The average time the undergraduates reported for this informal sociability across the entire sample of time-reports was a little over four hours a day. On the face of it, then, the students were enjoying themselves about twice as much as they were studying in college. But this is a deceptive conclusion, for from their point of view "college work" also includes going to classes, and the total of their classroom time plus their study time was about six hours a day. They also almost all studied harder and played less around exams or when big papers or other projects were due.

It is fairer to generalize that, in student assumptions, academic work and friendly fun ought to be equally important activities during one's undergraduate years. And so the students also say in various ways. Incoming freshmen usually have two goals for their first year in college, "to do well in classes" and "to have fun" (or "to make friends," or "to have a good social life"). Older students look back on college as an even or shifting mixture of work and play. And students in college who are deviating from the ideal balance almost always know that they are and often sound defensive about it. Here, for instance, is a contemporary "grind" confessing to her excessive scholarliness almost as if it were a personality defect:

I am a little too serious about my studies. . . . I often give up extra-curricular activities to stay home and study. This is not to say that I am a "nerd" . . . I have a variety of good friends, and I party as much as is feasible. . . . [But] I am the type of person who has to study. . . . This inner force or drive has been contained in me since childhood.4

"Blow-it-offs," on the other hand, overly lazy students, tend to be equally defensive in opposite directions.

What is the sane middle-of-the-roader, then? Obviously someone who maintains a healthy balance between academics and college life. The two halves of college ought to be complementary ones in student opinion. You come to college for the challenge, for the work, and to do your best in classes in order to qualify for a good career later in life —and possibly to make yourself into a broader, more liberally educated person. College life is the play that makes the work possible and that makes college personally memorable.

**Autonomy**

College life is also about the freedom to enjoy your adolescent pleasures in college independent of adult supervision. On first impressions

4From an intellectual self-report written for a class at Rutgers in 1987.
in the dorms, contemporary students appear to be almost entirely free to do whatever they like, but they actually live in three different zones of relative autonomy and control in college. They are freest in their private lives. Rutgers, like other American colleges, officially renounced in loco parentis authority over the personal conduct and moral behavior of its students in the late 1960s. Many other reforms which the protesting students of the '60s tried to make in higher education have long since been rolled back. But this fundamental shift in college authority has endured for a generation.

The students are least free, on the other hand, when it comes to their formal educations. Here they have to submit to adult authority in certain ways — to professors, who give them grades, their fundamental institutional reward. They have to sit passively through scheduled classes. They have to learn the material the professors think is important. They often feel that they have to think like their professors to get good grades, whether they agree with them or not. They have to meet "requirements."

Between their private lives and "academics" lies a third intermediate zone, where the authority of the dean of students is still intact after the liberalization of the late '60s. Residential students literally walk into this area of deanly authority whenever they leave the privacy of their dorm rooms. At Rutgers, their dorm floors are supervised by undergraduate preceptors, at the bottom of the chain of command. The dorm as a whole belongs to graduate student residence counsellors, one link up the chain. Sets of dorms have full-time area coordinators looking after them. Extracurricular organizations are similarly monitored. And so on up to the dean of students himself, behind whom stands the university police, wielding physical force.

How does the average student experience the power of the deans in the 1980s? Most of the time, not at all. At Rutgers, about seven thousand residential students are ultimately held in check by an adult staff that numbers twenty-seven individuals, a typical ratio for state institutions. The students rarely see a dean in the flesh outside of orientation and the odd official function. The deans do have their more numerous undergraduate preceptors and other student agents, of course, whose "personal development" they are "fostering" by coopting them to their purposes. But they are never completely sure just how loyal these agents of theirs are being. And, in fact, the average preceptor functions best by exerting as little authority and as much "friendliness" as possible among her or his peers.

Consequently, the students live most of their daily lives in college.
without being aware of or thinking about the authority of the deans much at all. But they do know the deans are there, and the deans’ authority can effectively penetrate even the often tight solidarity of undergraduate collectivities such as coed dorm floor groups. During one research year in the dorms, for example, responding to the legal restoration of the 21-year-old minimum drinking age, the deans effectively pushed drinking out of dorm lounges, into private rooms or off-campus, and they also successfully “cracked down” on one particular do-it-yourself student festivity which offended their sensibilities, “Secret Santa.”

The students usually resent the deans’ power when it is brought to bear on them directly, often rapidly shifting from ignoring deans to imagining them as far more powerful personages than they actually are — stereotypically as small-minded, power-hungry, dictatorial autocrats. Images of adult authority drawn from popular culture seem to shape the students’ thinking as much as any other cultural influences. One year in the dorms, for instance, when the deans were insisting that some particularly rundown Rutgers fraternities upgrade their facilities, I listened as three fraternity brothers compared the dean of students of Rutgers College directly to “Dean Wormer,” villainous college authority in that modern college-life classic, *Animal House*.

National traumas can also influence student notions of local authority — Watergate, for instance. Later that same year, as another student confessed to me that for some months she had wrongly believed I was a spy for the deans, she added, in self-defence: “But when you think about it, they could do anything they wanted to here. I mean, they could have all these rooms wired for sound. They could be listening in on us all the time!”

*Private Pleasures and Extracurriculum*

Late nineteenth century college life was a vigorous organizational culture entirely of the students’ own creation: college class organizations, fraternities, glee clubs, campus newspapers, yearbooks, intramural and intercollegiate sports teams, and other student collectivities. Not one college authority had anything to do with these extracurricular student organizations for many years.

In the early twentieth century, however, American social psychologists invented the modern concept of adolescence [4, pp. 133–83; 6, pp. 215–44], and burgeoning American college administrations invented

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5Gift exchanges before Christmas, linked to challenges to perform embarrassing stunts, usually sexually embarrassing stunts. See reference 10, pp. 104–11.
specialists in college adolescence, deans of students. These deans borrowed the notion that college was about late-adolescent development from late nineteenth-century undergraduates, making the older students' "college life" their own new professional specialty, "student life." And from now on, down to the present, the peculiarly American notion that higher education is as much about adolescence as it is about formal learning has been institutionalized; it has been inscribed in the bureaucratic organization of most residential colleges and universities in the United States.

Early twentieth-century deans moved the undergraduates into dormitories under their control on the expanding campuses, and the colleges added new layers of staff to deal with the extracurricular undergraduate: directors of residence life, directors of student activities, athletic directors and coaches, musical directors, health specialists, psychological counsellors, career counsellors, and so on. As they did so, however, the students — faithful to the older student concept that college was, among other things, fundamentally about adolescent autonomy — progressively revised their own notions of college life so that it still belonged to them, moving its essential pleasures closer and closer to their private lives. The end of in loco parentis in the 60s was a key victory in this progressive privatization of college life by the students, at Rutgers and elsewhere.

Hence the dominance of informal, ad hoc, forms of student fun in the 1980s. There are over a hundred and fifty duly constituted student groups at Rutgers at present, not counting the fraternities and the sororities. Most undergraduates probably are affiliated with one or two of them. But according to time-reports, dorm observations, and the estimates of knowledgeable undergraduates, no more than one in ten of the undergraduates is extracurricularly active.6

Contemporary students do make distinctions among extracurricular groups. The radio station is so focal to the interests of current youth culture that it is a prestigious involvement even if the deans ultimately oversee its operations. So too are the Concerts Committee of the Program Council, and the campus newspaper (which the deans do not oversee at Rutgers). Student government, on the other hand, is a joke in the opinion of most students, and they vote for its representatives in the tiniest of turnouts. The only reason to become a student leader, many students assume, is to get to know some dean for reasons of your own.

6Boyer reports similar indifference to most of the older extracurricular organizations nationwide; see reference 2, pp. 177–95. His assumption that student enthusiasm for these organizations can be reestablished by college authorities, however, is naive, in my judgment.
The undergraduates also invented intercollegiate athletics in the late nineteenth century, but in the twentieth century, following nationwide trends, the alumni and a growing professional coaching staff took sports out of the hands of the students. At present in the 1980s, most Rutgers students in the dorms do not know any major varsity athletes personally. Some students enjoy intramural athletics, or jog, or work out. Most are as likely to be fans of nearby professional teams as of any college teams.

The one exception to the students' generally casual interest in the organized extracurriculum at present, the fraternity and sorority system, proves the rule. Given the defenses the fraternities and sororities have been able to mount through their secret ritual constitutions, their intense peer solidarity, and their private ownership, the deans have not really succeeded in penetrating and controlling them despite almost a century of trying. Thus the fraternities and sororities still provide undergraduates with a zone of real autonomy in a group setting of a sort that has not been available elsewhere in undergraduate culture since the early twentieth century. Therefore they are still going strong, joined by about a quarter of the students at Rutgers, utilized by at least as many more for their wild partying.

**Friends and Lovers**

The predominantly private pleasures of contemporary college life are those of friendship and sexuality. Intense friendship has been the staple of American college life for two centuries, its central social relationship. It may be culturally even more salient in the 1980s. For like other middle-class Americans, contemporary undergraduates tend to be "privatized individualists" in their most general cultural orientations, seeking "meaningful relationships" in personal worlds of their own construction, in worlds divorced as much as possible from the constraints of the "real world."

According to the assumptions of American individualism in the 1980s, most other social connections, relationships of family, class, race, and ethnicity, impose themselves upon the self from without (they are "ascriptive": you do not choose them; they choose you). Even sexual love and lust can "overwhelm you" according to American folk psychology [3]. Your friends, on the other hand, are the perfect alters for the modern privatized ego — freely and mutually chosen other selves with often mysterious natural affinities for your own self.

As it is elsewhere in American middle-class culture, friendliness is
the central code of etiquette in student culture, the expected code of
custom in student collectivities such as dorm-floor groups and fraterni-
ties, the one taken-for-granted politesse whose systematic breach
almost always generates anger and even outrage in students. To act
friendly is to give regular abbreviated performances of the behaviors of
“real” friendship: to look pleased and happy when you meet someone,
to put on the American friendly smile, to acknowledge the person you
are meeting by name (first name, shortened, among the students:
“Mike” rather than “Michael”), to make casual bodily contact, to greet
with one of two or three conventional queries about the ‘whole self’ of
the other (“How are you?”; “how’s it goin?”; “what’s new?”). But the
students, like other Americans and unlike most foreigners, also know
the subtle differences between friendliness and ‘really being friends,’
and real friendships are crucial to their happiness and their senses of
self.

The social structure of the students’ college life consists of the thou-
sands of ever-changing ego-centered friendship networks which each of
them constructs. After a month at Rutgers, the average residential
freshman already considers five to six new college acquaintances to be
friends or close friends, and more than half say they would take an
intensely confidential problem to one of their new college friends rather
than calling home with it. Within two months, first-year students on
three different dorm floors named almost one-third of the sixty odd
female and male residents of the same floor as friends or as close
friends. In one longitudinal sample, freshmen and sophomores indi-
cated that a little less than half of their five best friends in the world
were already friends they had made since coming to college, and the
percentage of best college friends then rose to about three in five for
juniors and seniors.

Sexual relationships are even more focal to the private lives of most
students. Space prohibits more than roughest indication of their con-
temporary complexities [see 10, pp. 181–270]. One complication is the
widespread existence of genuine cross-sex friendships in the 1980s. As
late as 1970, a sociologist could still generalize, probably hyperbolically,
that male and female college students were “not expected to form
friendships with one another; . . . thus the assertion that ‘men and
women can be lovers but never friends’ ” [7, p. 145]. But such friend-
ships are now common in the intimate environments created by the his-
torically recent “coed dorms,” women and men living side-by-side in
“alternating rooms.” About one-third of the hundreds of reciprocated
close friendships reported in my research were between women and men. Most students carefully distinguish cross-sex friendships from erotic or “romantic” attachments, suggesting that they value their cross-sex friends for the perceived closeness of their true selves rather than for their sexual attributes. Such connections also can and often do include erotic interests as well, the students admit, usually undeclared ones, usually unilaterally. But eroticism is not an invariant component, and if lust is all that is going on, then a given friendship is “false” rather than “true.”

Rutgers women and men have not somehow lost erotic interest in one another because of these recent moves in the direction of gender-free friendship between the sexes, however; quite the contrary. If relaxed, friendly fun is the private pleasure to which the students devote most of their free time in college, sexual and erotic fun are the even-more-private pleasures they find most intensely exciting. And by all indicators, at Rutgers and nationwide, contemporary students seek and partake of much more “real sex” than undergraduates did a generation or two ago.

Although various forms of the sexual double standard still persist among the undergraduates, women students nevertheless have access to about as much sexual pleasure as men. Most women apparently assume that there are a few “natural” differences between the sexes: “naturally” women have to guard their reputations more carefully than men, “naturally” women have to worry more about sexual danger than men, “naturally” women have a more direct investment in birth control than men, and so on. But, when asked about their political attitudes toward sex and gender, most undergraduate women seem to feel that these natural differences are “no big deal” compared to the real sexual autonomy they now enjoy, and compared to their general equality with undergraduate men in most other aspects of their daily lives in college.

Students “party” for the pure fun of it, but they also go to parties—scheduled or ad hoc events centering on loud music and alcoholic consumption, conducted in dorm rooms, fraternities, off-campus bars and apartments—to meet new sexual partners or to get in the mood for erotic pleasures with those they already know. Liquor lubricates undergraduate partying, and the reinstatement of the 21-year-old minimum drinking age has not done much to alter this fact at Rutgers.

This new gender egalitarianism also has its limits, however. Women have to play more by men’s older rules in the dorms than vice versa, and between a quarter and a third of the male undergraduates do not go along with the new egalitarianism. Many of these males move as quickly as possible into their more natural habitats, into the fraternities.
Erotically, the college and the larger university in which it is embedded present themselves to the undergraduate as places of opportunity for exactly the same reasons that the institution is often criticized by the students in other contexts — for being a big impersonal place where “no one really knows who you are.” There are no adults supervising their behavior and thousands of other players in the game of undergraduate sex on campus. They will never be known by everyone; they do not need to be labelled indefinitely as having any one sexual reputation or orientation. And, after all, as the deans exhort new students during orientation lectures, the whole point of a liberal education is to broaden oneself by seeking out new and different experiences during one’s college years.

Not every student does so sexually in college, however, and the sexual behaviors reported in anonymous self-reports by the undergraduates are exceptionally diverse and idiosyncratic. Some students report “going wild” when they first encounter the sexual smorgasbord of college life; many others find sex in college a simple, progressive development of what they were already doing in high school. Some women and men describe years of sexual experience before arriving in college; others are still virgins as college seniors. A majority of the sexually active students restrict themselves most of the time to sex with established “girlfriends” or “boyfriends” and to conventional heterosexual practices.\(^8\) A minority sample every sexual elective in the modern erotic curriculum.

AIDS, sexual diseases, assault, abuse, and violence are only occasionally mentioned in these student sexual self-reports, which center, as do most of the students’ evident mentalities in the dorms, on sexual pleasure and adventure rather than on sexual danger. Homoeroticism is disliked by most of the students, and gay and lesbian students, about five percent of my samples, report living happily only off-campus.

College life is not an arena of unrestricted sexual freedom for the students, however. There are many cultural and behavioral constraints for the students as well, most of them self-imposed. Considering the potential, the late-adolescent women and men who live together on most coed dorm floors maintain remarkably discrete, self-monitored sexual codes among themselves without adult supervision, generally but not invariably relating within a given dorm floor group as friends or friendly acquaintances rather than as erotic partners. Among the students more widely, a significant minority of both sexes is probably sexu-

\(^8\)Foreplay including mutual oral sex; heterosexual intercourse preferably to mutual orgasm; an interest in technique and variety — of positions, times of day, locations, and so on.
ally inactive at any given time, either out of choice, lack of opportunity, or inaptitude.

Most of the students who are not inactive are guided by the same range of sexual moralities that most middle-class Americans under the age of forty-five follow or espouse in the 1980s. Regardless of their own choices about what kind of sex to engage in, for instance, all but very few of the undergraduates believe that long-term sexual relationships with love or commitment or emotional involvement are more rewarding than casual sex.

Youth Culture and College Culture

From its nineteenth-century origins until the 1960s, American college life was an exclusively collegiate culture, one that also marked an elite among the students. For as Horowitz points out, not just non-college youths were excluded from college life; so too were many of the less affluent or more declassé undergraduates — from the “best” fraternities, and so forth. These students were often “grinds” who were working hard in college in order to elevate themselves to the economic level the college life elitists took for granted.

In the ’60s, however, the students thoroughly and deliberately stripped themselves of most of their older collegiate symbolism. Between 1964 and 1968, casually well dressed college men and women were replaced on most campuses by blue-jean-clad, bearded or long-haired undergraduates, who were making very different sartorial identifications — with a classless, internationally defined youth culture. Similarly radical transformations occurred in the students’ musical tastes during these same years, from “cool jazz” and collegiate-looking groups such as Peter, Paul and Mary to hard rock and other new genres shared with most youths.

American undergraduates at present no longer look like students from the late ’60s. But in the way in which general youth culture rather than a specifically collegiate culture dominates their lives — a youth culture available to everyone and not just a student elite — they are still very much the children of the ’60s. The closest style to the older collegiate look in the mid-’80s, for instance, was “preppie,” named with obvious irony for prep school students rather than for college students. Other ’80s clothing fashions at Rutgers and elsewhere — “punk,” “gay,” “GQ,” (a layered, somewhat European look characteristic of the male fashion magazine Gentleman’s Quarterly), “jock” — have had nothing to do with specifically collegiate identity. The students’ contemporary musical tastes also come to them directly out of popular culture, and
they recognize the '60s, whose music they now revere as "classical rock," as the fons et origio of music as they know it.

Similar arguments can be made about what one sees and hears in the dorms. Some of it originates very locally and particularly in the students' experiences outside college or in their knowledge of small groups of friends and acquaintances in college. As much of it comes to them from mass culture, however. Widely marketed images of near-nude young adults of the opposite sex or pictures of celebrities are much more likely to adorn the walls of the students' rooms than college symbolism. References to the culture of adolescent-market TV, music, or cinema are far more common in student talk than references to literate culture or anything that appears in The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Though specifically collegiate "traditions" may have been handed down from undergraduate generation to generation in the past, such traditions are no longer particularly important among the students at present. Most undergraduates at Rutgers and elsewhere, for instance, probably know only a few things about older college cultures. They know that college is about adolescent autonomy. They know that it is about fun and games: elaborate college pranks, and so forth. They know that they will find such typical college institutions as dormitories and fraternities on most campuses. Since the '60s, they have also expected to find political protestors and cultural radicals of a particular type in college.

Otherwise, almost everything in the college lives of students in the 1980s is less a product of the collegiate past than a projection of contemporary late-adolescent mass culture into the particular institutions of youth which colleges now represent — places where everyone else is fairly intelligent, places where students are on their own with large numbers of their age-mates and with considerable amounts of free time, and places where adult authorities have minimum knowledge of and impact on their private lives.

9Here I disagree with Horowitz, who bases much of her argument about the shape of contemporary American student culture on the assumption of strong patterns of cultural transmission of undergraduate tradition for two centuries, down to the present (5, pp. 263-88). Such intramural historical forces were undoubtedly important among the undergraduates at one time, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But after the 1960s, once there was no longer a strongly marked, highly valued, specifically collegiate subculture to transmit (older, elite versions of "college life"), these forces became far less significant. The growing scale and diversity of most institutions of American higher education, especially at big public schools such as Rutgers, has also increasingly mitigated against such internal inheritance of student culture.
Implications

Why do American college professors tolerate the comparatively modest commitments implied by the current student belief that college should consist of at least as much of late-adolescent play as of academic work? Because, given student vocationalism, and the competition for enrollments built into much of American higher education, it is in the best interests of many of the faculty to do so.

Thus in most colleges and universities, because department resources (numbers of faculty positions, staff support, and so on) are at least partially tied to enrollments, a department in one of the sciences or in economics whose subject is perceived as vocationally valuable by the undergraduates can afford to run tough courses and "maintain standards" if it wishes and still have plenty of students. The putatively less lucrative social sciences and humanities, on the other hand, must attract students to themselves with particularly lively and interesting courses — and, it turns out, with somewhat easier courses.

At Rutgers, for instance, a generally inverse correlation exists between perceived vocational necessity and the percentage of As and Bs a particular department gives out on the average (10, pp. 276–82). Since the academic marketplace operates similarly elsewhere, a similar grading economy is likely to obtain more widely. Thus there is probably always a good supply of relatively nondemanding college courses available to undergraduates throughout American higher education.

To ask a bigger question, why are most American undergraduates generally satisfied with their college educations\(^\text{10}\) at a time when most experts and pundits agree that American colleges and universities are serving the interests of their students rather poorly (due to an unclear sense of mission, lack of community, the indifferent teaching of increasingly research-obsessed professors, and so on)?

One answer lies outside the present analysis. When thinking about contemporary higher education, the students do not usually compare it to idealized alternatives, as adult critics and commentators conventionally do — to a smaller, early twentieth-century liberal arts ideal, to a "never-never land" of great men and great books, and so on. They com-

\(^{10}\)During the period of my research, returns on a survey administered by the Office of Institutional Research at Rutgers indicated that 90 percent of the undergraduates were "generally satisfied" with their college educations. And between 1983 and 1985, according to "Student Opinion Survey Normative Data" collected nationwide by the American College Testing Service, 79 percent of all students were "satisfied" with their particular colleges, and 83 percent were satisfied at universities of over ten thousand students (various documents distributed to subscribers by the American College Testing Service, Iowa City, Iowa).
pare it to what they have already known in their young lives to date. And viewed against the life of the mind as they have experienced it in their suburban hometowns and high schools and in modern American popular culture, college still looks good to them by contrast, uniquely intellectually impressive in many cases, in fact.

Another reason for generally high levels of student satisfaction, however, is college life as the students experience it at present. For in ways I have tried to suggest above, when the undergraduates think about college, they think about it as much as an institution for their late-adolescent pleasure and development as they do as a place for the formal education purveyed by their professors. And as such, it apparently pleases them well.

Nor are they necessarily always thinking strictly about college fun when they pursue this line of evaluation. For closely related to college life in their students’ view of the actualities of college is “outside-the-classroom” learning. There are many kinds of outside-the-classroom learning according to student notions. Some are linked to formal learning or to other officially sponsored college cultural activities, to high culture as it filters down to the undergraduates — browsing through the books in the library for a few student scholars, doing “homework” in subjects particular students enjoy, attending the occasional concert or poetry reading or evening lecture, having one of the intense philosophical arguments in which most students still engage but which they no longer call “bull sessions” at Rutgers.

Other types of informal college learning have to do with important “life experiences” which prepare the students for adulthood in the real world as the students think of it: learning to take responsibility for their own actions in a big institution where nobody monitors them closely, learning to cope with university bureaucracy, and learning from their successes and failures in college life — from what they sometimes call “social learning.” Most of them are hoping to improve their ability to present themselves well and to influence others during their college years. To learn to do such things in the extracurricular college is not to approach all of college life strictly as fun-and-games.

When students are asked to rate these two sides of the college, inside-the-classroom versus outside-the-classroom learning, they produce responses similar to their evaluations of academics versus college life — they are about equally important, the students say, with some tilt in this case toward informal learning as the more important of the two activities.

Different institutional priorities might result in different balances
within undergraduate culture. But the present shape of American college life and undergraduate culture also helps us to understand how contemporary American higher education functions as a largely unplanned trade-off of interests between the undergraduates who attend college and the faculty who teach them. Given student priorities, the professors can concentrate on what matters most to their careers and to the most prestigious, grant-producing university agendas — research and publication — devoting no more than half their time to the undergraduates. The students, reciprocally, can devote their energy to the pleasures and challenges of college life and to as much extracurricular learning as they desire, while attending classes at whatever rate suits them to learn what their professors, most of whom are otherwise complete strangers to them, are up to at the moment.

This quiet accommodation will not make many professional educators happy. But professors, the usual critics of American undergraduates, are creatures of the same system. American college and university professors have been drawing away from the undergraduates through increasing professionalization and specialization for at least a century. If they do not like the result, the simplest solution is to deprofessionalize as researchers and get back to teaching and closer contact with the undergraduates.

To put an even finer point on it, if American colleges and universities had not made their odd historical link between higher education and late-adolescence in the early twentieth century — if American undergraduate populations were now limited to youths who "really belonged in college" (that is, who were in college just for the formal education) — then American college-going populations would arguably be considerably smaller. American higher education would then be less expansive and less well funded than it is, and there would be fewer academic jobs and fewer critics in employment to deplore the fact that American colleges are in fact two very different kinds of institution.

References


