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SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Real Campus Scourge

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Frank Bruni SEPT. 2, 2017

Across the country, college freshmen are settling into their new lives and grappling with something that doesn't compete with protests and political correctness for the media's attention, something that no one prepared them for, something that has nothing to do with being "snowflakes" and everything to do with being human.

They're lonely.

In a sea of people, they find themselves adrift. The technology that keeps them connected to parents and high school friends only reminds them of their physical separation from just about everyone they know best. That estrangement can be a gateway to binge drinking and other self-destructive behavior. And it's as likely to derail their ambitions as almost anything else.

Brett Epstein felt it. "I spent my first night in the dorm and it hit me like a pile of bricks: It's just me here," Epstein, a 21-year-old senior at the College of Charleston, told me about his start there three years ago. "I was completely freaked out."

Clara Nguyen felt it, too. “It’s a lot more difficult to make friends than people make it out to be,” Nguyen, a 19-year-old sophomore at U.C.L.A., told me about her experience last year. “I didn’t know how to be someone new while at the same time being who I always was.”

The problem sounds so ordinary, so obvious: People in an unfamiliar location confront dislocation. On their own two legs for the first time, they’re wobbly. Who would expect otherwise?

Well, most of them did, because college isn’t sold to teenagers as just any place or passage. It’s a gaudily painted promise. The time of their lives! The disparity between myth and reality stuns many of them, and various facets of youth today — from social media to a secondary-school narrative that frames admission to college as the *end* of all worry — worsen the impact.

Harry Rockland-Miller, who just retired as the director for the Center for Counseling and Psychological Health at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, told me the emblematic story of a freshman he treated:

“He was 18. He came to school and was invited to a party his first weekend, and he didn’t know anybody. So he started to drink. He drank way too much and ended up lying on a bench in his residential hall, feeling very sick. Nobody stopped and said, ‘How are you doing? Are you O.K.?’ And he felt so isolated. When he came in to speak with me the next day, the thing that struck him — what he said — was, ‘There I was, alone, with all these people around.’ ”

Alone, with all these people around. In a survey of nearly 28,000 students on 51 campuses by the American College Health Association last year, more than 60 percent said that they had “felt very lonely” in the previous 12 months. Nearly 30 percent said that they had felt that way in the previous two weeks.

Victor Schwartz, the medical director of the Jed Foundation, which is one of the nation’s leading advocacy groups for the mental health of teenagers and young adults, said that those findings were consistent with his own observation of college students today. “While they expected that academics and finances would be sources

of stress,” he told me, “many students were lonely and thought this was sort of unique to them, because no one talked about it.”

Their peers in fact do something that mine couldn’t back in the 1980s, when I attended college: use Facebook and Instagram to perform pantomimes of uninterrupted fun and unalloyed fabulousness. And these “highly curated selves,” as the U.C.L.A. psychologist Elizabeth Gong-Guy called them, “amplify the fact that you’re sitting in your residence hall alone.”

Gong-Guy runs her university’s Campus and Student Resilience program, which helps students with emotional struggles and exemplifies many schools’ intensifying efforts to address loneliness, among other mental health issues.

Extended, elaborate freshmen orientation schedules are another intended prophylactic against loneliness, which is a common reason for dropping out. And as Lawrence Biemiller recently noted in an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, there’s even a push to place and design freshmen dormitories so that solitary time is minimized and interaction maximized.

Three new residence halls at Goucher College, one of which opened last fall and two of which are nearing completion, typify this trend. Goucher’s president, José Antonio Bowen, said that the center-of-hall situation of bathrooms, the glass walls of laundry rooms and even the speed of the wireless connection in common areas — much faster than in the rooms — are deliberate pushbacks against forces that can isolate students.

“Students are arriving on college campuses with all of their high school friends on their phones,” Bowen told me, referring to the technological quirks of today. They too easily substitute virtual interactions for physical ones, withdrawing from their immediate circumstances and winding up lonely as a result.

That’s why the solution isn’t hourly messages from concerned moms and dads, whose stubborn attentiveness, no matter how well meant, can leave their children psychologically frail. Mental health experts and college administrators recommend a more thoughtful organization of campus life and more candid conversations about the tricky transition to college.

Nguyen, the U.C.L.A. sophomore, said that in her Vietnamese-American family in Southern California, all the talk was of doing well enough in high school to get to college and not about the challenges college itself might present. Epstein, the College of Charleston senior, said that his popularity in high school in the suburbs of New York City perhaps distracted him from any awareness that “I was going 700 miles away and being dropped in a place of 10,000 people and wasn’t going to know anybody.” What followed, he added, was “a long battle with anxiety and depression.”

One of the narrators of Tom Perrotta’s superb new novel, “Mrs. Fletcher,” is a former high school lacrosse star who arrives on campus “after all the endless buildup” and develops a “queasy feeling” that his world has become at once more populous and a whole lot colder. “There I was, people-watching and eating my omelet,” he says of one morning in the dining hall, “and the next thing I knew my throat swelled up. And then my eyes started to water.”

We urge new college students not to party *too* hard. We warn them of weight gain (“the freshman 15”). We also need to tell them that what’s often behind all that drinking and eating isn’t celebration but sadness, which is normal, survivable and shared by many of the people around them, no matter how sunny their faces or their Facebook posts.

Correction: September 2, 2017

An earlier version of this column misstated the first name of the retired director of the Center for Counseling and Psychological Health at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He is Harry Rockland-Miller (not Henry).

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