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Backpacks Among the Briefcases

By RACHEL AVIV

HANNAH WOLFE traveled to school by air last year. It required precise timing, a skill she honed when she and her friends moved to what they called Rosy — a sprawling apartment complex on Roosevelt Island that doubles as a dorm. All her classes at Marymount Manhattan College were on the Upper East Side, and to get there, she took two buses and a tram that glides 250 feet above the East River and offers postcard views of Midtown Manhattan.

“It still feels like an exciting event,” Ms. Wolfe, a sophomore, said during a rush-hour ride to class. “The problem is it takes so much effort. To do anything in the city, you have to figure out how to get there and when to leave and what to wear — because everyone else in the city is so ‘put together’ you don’t want to stick out — and at the end of the day, you’re just exhausted.”

The austere, marble lobby of Ms. Wolfe’s apartment building, populated by [United Nations](#) workers and young families, gives no indication that students live inside. As a college student in New York, Ms. Wolfe said, “you definitely skip a step and move into this weird adult stage of life.”

Over the next month, more than 64,000 incoming freshmen will descend on New York City’s campuses. Nearly 44,000 of them will come from beyond the five boroughs, with dreamy expectations of what their lives will be like — four years of clubbing with celebrities, sashaying around art galleries. While acclimating to the culture of any campus is trying, the transition to New York City poses particularly daunting challenges. In exchange for culture and independence, students give up the comfort of a built-in, clearly defined community, which can leave them feeling isolated and lost amidst more than eight million strangers. On weekends, Ms. Wolfe can easily go the day without encountering people she knows, so she makes a point of talking to the bus driver each morning. “It’s so anonymous,” she said, “that it just feels good to reach out to someone.”

Lacking the traditional accoutrements — the gates, quads and row of fraternity and sorority houses — residential colleges and universities like Marymount Manhattan, [New York University](#),

[Cooper Union](#) and the [New School](#) are nested within the city. Even New Yorkers don't know exactly where the New School is; its sleek, boxy buildings fit neatly into the downtown office and apartment buildings surrounding them. (Paul Piekarz, who describes himself as one of the few New School students who doesn't enjoy being "ironic with my health," can pick out the school buildings by the smokers outside of them.)

"When you are dealing with a nontraditional campus where the campus is a collection of buildings," said Tracy Robin, assistant vice president for student health and support at the New School, "it can be hard to figure out who to connect with, and where. Going to school here is one of many identities students take on, but being in the city is often the first."

To Taylor Horak, who left her home state of Virginia for the first time when she came to N.Y.U. last fall, passing as a New Yorker quickly became a point of pride. I spoke with Ms. Horak and her roommate, Caroline Ballard, who is also from Virginia, several times throughout the school year as they adjusted to living in the city. They began by dressing differently — more layers, darker colors and whimsical accessories. Inspired by professors who Ms. Horak describes as "all crazy and eccentric and obsessed with whatever they teach," they went to museums and art galleries and began watching morbid independent films. By second semester they were accustomed to the anonymity of the streets and no longer felt compelled to stare when a man waltzed by with a cat on his head. Even so, Ms. Horak says she feels like a "glorified tourist."

Ms. Ballard worries that New Yorkers think she and other students are "infiltrating." Recently, she watched as a "townie" erupted at a campus tour guide who was loudly recounting the charms of the neighborhood. "You don't really live here," the woman yelled. "You're just visiting for four years!"

THE term "college town" appears ill-fitting for a metropolis like New York, but in fact higher education exerts a huge force on the city. According to the Center for an Urban Future, which studies New York's economic development, the city gained 17,000 jobs in higher education over the last decade, and its colleges and universities employ more people than in the entire Boston-Cambridge-Quincy area, typically thought of as the country's center of higher education. Half a million students attend a postsecondary program in New York City. A recent study by the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership found that there are more students in downtown Brooklyn than in all of Cambridge, Mass. And according to the latest Princeton Review student survey, New York City is home to three of the top five colleges ranked for being in "great college towns." (The other two "towns" were San Francisco and Washington.)

To meet increased student demand, urban universities keep stretching beyond the perimeters of their campuses. [Columbia University](#) plans to turn about 17 acres in West Harlem now peppered with meat packing plants, storage warehouses and car repair shops into an extension of its campus, which stands at a slight remove from the rest of the city. It hopes to see 16 new buildings for science, business and the arts rise over several decades. The New School is beginning construction next month on a 16-story, bronze-and-glass dormitory and student center. And N.Y.U. recently unveiled plans to expand its footprint by more than 40 percent over the next two decades.

N.Y.U. is the city's largest private university, and one of the most desired in the country. Since the early 1990s, the applicant pool has nearly quadrupled, and the acceptance rate has more than halved. But the university's steady expansion has rankled longtime residents. Andrew Berman, executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, worries that "more and more, the Village is coming to feel like a company town."

The blocks surrounding Washington Square Park, once the most glamorous place to be poetic and poor, now have a homogenous flavor, and many restaurants, stores and bars have been established with students in mind. These so-called N.Y.U. superblocks are full of ethnic restaurants that are cheap, cute, quick and loud. The waiters serve sugary, alcoholic drinks, and they tend not to object that the ID's handed to them are a little too colorful or flimsy.

Most N.Y.U. dorms are clustered near Washington Square Park and Union Square, and the introductions to the buildings on the university Web site can read like a [Craigslis](#)t posting: "swanky address on Fifth Avenue," "amazing views of the Empire State Building," proximity to "trendy SoHo neighborhoods." Such surroundings can make traditional campus life seem irrelevant. The university has no football team, and the Greek scene, which is oriented around downtown bars and clubs, is slight; many students don't realize it even exists.

Halfway through freshman year, Adriana Candelas, now entering her senior year and president of Theta Phi Beta sorority, says she thought of transferring because she felt so dislocated.

On weekends, she and a few other freshmen on her floor would go to dinner on the superblocks, or to a movie or play, and then come back and hang out in their hallway. But she couldn't find a way to expand her relationships beyond the floor of her dorm. Because the university is embedded in the city, she rarely encountered familiar faces between classes.

Joining a sorority helped relieve the loneliness, she says, but being a sorority president does not

carry much cachet. “When we ask freshmen if they’re interested in Greek life,” she said, “they make a crazy face and run away.” She says she feels a much stronger connection to her sorority than to the university as a whole, whose scattered buildings and thorny bureaucracy can make it hard to get things done. “I feel like the one common connection between students is that we kind of ‘hate on’ N.Y.U. together,” she said.

Most fraternity and sorority houses are on the top three floors of a residence hall in Chinatown, next to an enormous nail salon and a homeless shelter, and the only sign that they occupy these rooms are Greek letters on their closed doors. Like many things in New York, the setup is transient. Because the societies don’t own their own houses, the sisters must adhere to the rules of Residential Life and switch rooms just like any group of students. At the end of each year, Ms. Candelas and her sorority sisters pack up their photographs (a diverse group of women laughing, dancing, hugging, pointing fingers at one another) and the motivational sayings (“Unconditional,” “Genuine,” “Too Legit to Quit”) pasted all over their walls. Come fall, they will set up the sorority house all over again.

IN 2006, N.Y.U. commissioned [Elizabeth Swados](#) of the Tisch School of Arts to turn the sermons of freshman orientation into something more palatable, and she came up with “The Reality Show: N.Y.U.,” a piece of musical theater with topical skits often written by students: among them, the Crystal Meth Song, the Gay Ho-Down, the Condom Song and the Confidence Dirge. This year, all 4,500 or so freshmen must attend at [Radio City Music Hall](#). (Last year, the event was held in Madison Square Garden.) Ms. Swados is versed in the art of listening; she wrote the [Tony Award](#)-nominated musical “Runaways,” which she also directed, using real-life narratives gleaned from workshops with children who lived on the streets.

Each summer Ms. Swados talks with provosts, mental-health counselors and her cast — students from Tisch — to identify topics that should be updated for the revue. The skits offer bits of urban wisdom: don’t walk barefoot in Washington Square Park; keep your wallet hidden; be skeptical of men on Broadway selling what appear to be remarkably cheap show tickets.

Staci Ripkey, director for orientation and transition programs at N.Y.U.’s College of Arts and Science, urges freshmen to strive toward balance. “Students can be overwhelmed by having too many options,” she said. “On smaller campuses, on the weekend, you go to the local restaurant. But here there’s so much, they don’t know where to start.” Some hole up in their rooms. Others become distracted by their surroundings and never go to class.

At many urban universities, a swift education in city living is built into the curriculum.

Marymount Manhattan gives freshmen one academic credit for, essentially, learning to function as a student in New York. The mandatory semester-long course requires that students learn the subway system, give oral presentations on a Manhattan neighborhood, and develop their résumés — to take advantage of internship opportunities in the city.

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation recently awarded Marymount a \$60,000 grant to incorporate the city into courses — say, a tour of the Tenement Museum in a sociology class or a visit to the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) for a painting class.

The New School's small, discussion-based classes also directly engage with the city and require numerous field trips to cultural events in the five boroughs. Recent course offerings include “Punk and Noise,” “Chinese Art in N.Y.C.” and “Personal Map-Making in New York.”

FOUNDED in 1919 by intellectuals who wanted a progressive alternative to the traditional university, the New School has recently become more widely known — 74 percent of its students come from outside New York State, and the applicant pool has increased by 41 percent since 2004. Around that time, the New School embarked on a rebranding campaign, dropping the “university” from its name and adopting a logo that looks like it was written in spray paint. Under the presidency of [Bob Kerrey](#), the former Nebraska governor and senator, there have been protests and building takeovers by students who considered his priorities out of tune with the university's founding ideals.

The New School is still in a state of transition. For many years it was primarily a commuter school for adults who weren't necessarily interested in a college community. But the disperse nature of the university seems to push some students away: about 20 percent of freshmen don't return for a second year (38 percent leave Marymount Manhattan after their first year, though less than 10 percent leave Columbia or N.Y.U.). Two years ago, the student union at the New School's liberal arts college, Eugene Lang, proposed a solution. They decided that a warm and fuzzy mascot — a panda — could instill a sense of community and school spirit. One of the authors of the ill-fated proposal explained the choice to the school newspaper: “I believe that New York City, one of the most heavily populated places in the world, can also be one of the loneliest.”

Mr. Piekarz, a junior from suburban Chicago who transferred to the New School last year from Marymount Manhattan, on East 71st Street, says he has only a few friends at college but prefers it that way. “I love talking to strangers,” he said. “I don't need to be tethered to a big group of friends like I would at a state school.”

Marymount Manhattan and the New School, he said, reflect the ethos of the neighborhood surrounding the campus. “As I see it, the Marymount crowd saw ‘Sex and the City’ and wanted to be part of it,” he said. “And the New School students saw images of the downtown art scene in the ‘80s.”

One recent Friday night, he and his friend Shane Lessa, a junior and avid skateboarder, spent a typical evening wandering the city. They got Cuban sandwiches at Casa Havana, walked down Eighth Avenue past a row of expensive gay bars, and then made their way to Gramercy Park, where a trio of designer-purse-size dogs yapped at each other. “The streets are pure entertainment,” said Mr. Lessa, as he walked by a man angrily pounding the hood of a cab.

Lang’s equivalent of a quad, the campus hangout, is a courtyard between two buildings about the size of a large swimming pool. Mr. Piekarz avoids it because “people stand around in their hipster clothes looking cool and checking everyone out.”

It is true that the students at Eugene Lang dress unusually well. On a sunny afternoon the women wore leather boots and patterned skirts, skinny jeans and fitted Army jackets, and they all had uniformly lovely hair — long, wavy, artfully messy. Although a few people had their laptops out, the place was better situated for casual encounters and eavesdropping. The concrete was covered with cigarette butts.

Suzanne Exposito, a junior from Jacksonville, Fla., who describes herself as a feminist and anticapitalist, says she can’t understand why some people fail to throw away their trash. “There’s this binary here between the people who have a cause and those who don’t,” she said. “Some people only came here to be in the city, and they just don’t care. I think they’re the ones who dump their cigarettes on the ground.”

Ms. Exposito likes that being in Manhattan allows her to get internships and jobs relevant to her career — she wants to be a graphic novelist and pursue antiviolence advocacy work. She also appreciates that it allows her to interact with people of all ages and economic classes, not just well-to-do 20-year-olds. Even Columbia is too claustrophobic for her, she says: “I feel like I would be in the midst of an arrested development if I were in one of those alternate universes known as a college campus.”

The party scene unfolds in isolated pockets in Bushwick, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Sunset Park. “Picture a bunch of punks and anarchists and hipsters,” Ms. Exposito said, “and maybe once in a while some debutante characters will show up, but they usually feel out of place.”

The typical college campus often obscures socioeconomic differences: everyone lives in the same dorms, eats the same cafeteria food and shops for clothes at the same local stores. A member of the Low Income Student Alliance, Ms. Exposito says that as soon as she arrived in the city she realized that the amount of money she could spend — on transportation, drinks or restaurants — would be the “defining factor in whether or not I could hang out with a particular group of friends.”

The high cost of living is an obstacle for N.Y.U. students as well, who tend to spend their evenings in Manhattan rather than Brooklyn. The price of eating and drinking (\$12 is a fairly typical price for a cocktail) can be a deterrent to socializing.

At the end of her freshman year, after a pained period of calculating her savings, Taylor Horak decided that she could no longer afford to go to school in New York, despite having grown increasingly fond of the university. In March, when she received her financial aid package for sophomore year, it covered much less of the approximate \$52,000 for tuition, books, and room and board than she had expected. After computing that she would be more than \$100,000 in debt by graduation, she withdrew from N.Y.U.

This fall she is going to a state school in Virginia where tuition will be less than \$10,000. But she worries that she’s been tainted by her year in the city.

“I’m stuck in this strange in-between space,” she said. “You come up here and you’re the Southerner, and you go back home and you’re suddenly the snotty, cultured girl from New York.”

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