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## 'Freshman' Documents College Life 101

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"Freshman Diaries" is a series of real-life tales of students at the University of Texas.

Even in a plague, there can be pluses.

Yes, the new "reality" genre has dominated television, too often with simple-minded tributes to hormones and humiliation.

But it has also made room for some compelling new documentary work that networks likely would have never had the courage to put on TV.

Case in point: Sunday's new "Freshman Diaries," from "War Room" and "American High" producer R.J. Cutler.

By giving cameras to a dozen or so extremely well-chosen University of Texas freshmen, and then deftly editing the results together, Cutler tells a parallel series of aching poignant, real-life coming-of-age tales.

The spirit of this series of 10 half-hour episodes, beginning at 10 pm Sunday

on Showtime, is captured in this quote, from one of the young women: "I'm ready to go and do things that I've never done before. I want the world. I want the whole world. I want to lock it all up in my pocket. It's my bar of chocolate. Give it to me. Now."

It's also a perfect summary of the giddy anticipation of going to college, and a demonstration -- delivered over and over in "Freshman Diaries" -- of the feel Cutler has for recognizing the essence of his stories.

Other outlets have tried to capture college life. It's a natural topic for any TV outlet that prizes the young demographic, sex and inebriation. But MTV's "Fraternity Life" and "Sorority Life" come off as hollow and exploitative, almost soulless, next to this show.

When "Freshman Diaries" gives you sex or sloshy

drunkenness, it's also giving you enough of the characters to understand the sadness or rebellion or exuberance behind the deed.

So rather than simply being about wild college times, this is a show about the first kiss, the thrill of discovering somebody likes you back, the excitement and danger and disorientation of being away from home.

It's about the hard-case dad telling his daughter, over lunch, "You just can't get a 'D.' ... Just be a little tougher. Give me one of your ribs." And it's about the daughter going back to her room and crying into the camera, trying to summon the courage to take control of her life.

It's about losing your closest high school friends and trying to find a new place, a new identity. It's about shedding the rigid adher-

ence to the rules that got you into a good school like UT in the first place. And it's about gleefully slamming the door on high school, because it was so hard to be gay there, and then coming to college and feeling uncomfortable for a new reason.

"What do you do?" asks Neil, after a mixer. "I don't know how to be gay."

Like the real-life blueprint for the short-lived fictional series "Undeclared," "Freshman Diaries" nails that sense of being confused on the cusp of life.

On the scales of television justice, it's almost enough to counterbalance, say, all three "Temptation Islands."