UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Revealing the Hidden Curriculum

Navigating the Unwritten Rules of the College Experience

The following guide was developed in partnership with the **Digital Education and Innovation Team** within the College of Education and Human Development.

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A Story from the Classroom

"How am I supposed to know what I need to ask you if I don't know what I don't know?"

–Camila, First-Generation Graduate Student

Consider Camila. When Camila, a first-year student and the first in her family to attend college, received an email from her professor about this week's office hours, she panicked. Was she in trouble? Should her response be formal or more casual? Could Camila even go if she did not have a specific question? For Camila, like many first-generation college students in our classrooms, the uncertainty surrounding these unspoken rules triggered anxiety and self-doubt.

This small moment captures a broader issue: how hidden norms and expectations – practices and beliefs we call the hidden curriculum – shape student experiences across higher education.

What Is the Hidden Curriculum?

The hidden curriculum refers to the unspoken norms, values, and expectations that guide behavior in college classrooms and campus life. These often go unacknowledged but powerfully shape student engagement and achievement.

Scholars have described it as:

- **Unstated norms, values, and beliefs** are transmitted to students through formal content and social relations (Giroux & Penna, 1979).
- **Assumptions, beliefs, values, or attitudes** that manifest implicitly and inadvertently in schooling, learning, and professional environments (Villanueva, et al., 2018).
- **Unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives** (Villanueva et al., 2018).

These implicit messages influence everything from how students interact with faculty to how they understand success, authority, and belonging.

The Impact: Why It Matters

The hidden curriculum permeates everyday tasks. For example, navigating how and when to:

- Apply for financial aid
- Email a professor to request an extension
- Speak up during class discussions
- Dress for a research symposium

Students with cultural capital or insider knowledge often handle these challenges with ease. However, for students without access to this implicit knowledge (particularly first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized students), these moments can become barriers to full participation and belonging in the classroom.

Framing the Problem: It's Institutional, Not Individual

Too often, first-generation students are described as "at-risk" or "underprepared," reinforcing a deficit narrative that places the burden of adaptation squarely on their shoulders (Jehangir et al., 2022).

This framing misses the mark.

The real issue lies in institutional design. When colleges assume students already understand the hidden curriculum, they exclude those from diverse backgrounds. The result is unequal access—not because of students' shortcomings but because of institutional silence.

The hidden curriculum is not a student problem. It is a design problem.

Who are First-Generation Students?

First-generation students, those whose parents or primary caregivers do not have a college degree, comprise 56% of college students overall (Hamilton, 2023), and nearly 38% of undergraduate enrollments in CEHD. First-generation students are more likely to come from low-income, non-native English-speaking, or racially minoritized communities (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021). Many of these students enter higher education unfamiliar with this hidden curriculum and without direct access to family members or close contacts who can decode it.

Call to Action: What Faculty and Staff Can Do

Faculty, advisors, and instructional designers can take meaningful action to demystify and dismantle the hidden curriculum:

- **Make the implicit explicit.** Name classroom norms and behavioral expectations out loud and early.
- **Provide templates and examples.** For emails, office hour questions, and academic conversations.
- **Integrate skill-building into coursework.** Scaffold tasks that require academic navigation—like requesting extensions or engaging in respectful disagreement.
- **Validate student experiences.** Acknowledge the challenges of navigating higher education without prior exposure.
- **Foster inclusive syllabi and course design**. Embed transparency and cultural responsiveness into instruction.

Snapshots of Practice

Here are two practical examples of how faculty have revealed the hidden curriculum in action:

1. **Email Templates in Course Modules**
   An instructor includes a mini-lesson during the first week of class on how to write professional emails. Students receive examples, practice drafts, and feedback. The assignment lowers anxiety and models appropriate communication.

2. **Office Hour Invitations**
   A faculty member records a short video tour of their office, explains what to expect during a visit, and embeds it in the syllabus. Students must attend office hours once during the semester, with reflection questions to guide their experience.

Resources for Action

To support faculty, staff, and departments in this work, the First Gen Institute (FGI) and the Digital Education and Innovation Team are developing a set of implementation guides and tools. These guides are expected to launch in Fall 2025.

Further Reading

Castillo-Montoya, M., & Ives, J. (2021). Transformative practices to support first-generation college students as academic learners: Findings from a systematic literature review. *Journal of First-Generation Student Success, 1*(1), 20–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/26906015.2021.1890948.

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