

In Brief: Revealing the Hidden Curriculum of Our Courses

Brief Description

A guide to get introduced to the hidden curriculum in your course(s) and begin to reflect on strategies for communicating your expectations to students.

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Introduction

Do you ever think or say, “They are Northwestern students, so they should know _____ or be able to _____?” Do students meet your expectations? What do you assume students already do or do not know to learn? Do you want your students to succeed but recognize barriers for learning?

Use this guide to get introduced to the hidden curriculum in your course(s) and begin to reflect on strategies for communicating your expectations to students. You are encouraged to use the prompts for individual reflection or group discussion with colleagues.

1. What?

When there is a disconnect between faculty and student expectations, it can create a barrier to student success. This disconnect, or hidden curriculum, is present within every course. The hidden curriculum, a term first coined in the 1970s in response to the broad and unmitigated structural racial, gender, and social inequities in education, refers to the difference between the curriculum as designed and the curriculum in action. [Laiduc and Covarrubias \(2022\)](#) define the hidden curriculum of U.S. universities as “the privileged implicit cultural norms and expectations critical for success.” Examples of such expectations may include how to prepare for class, participate in class, ask for help, and study for exams.

Reflection Prompts

- **What are you expecting from your students? What are you assuming about your students?** What do you expect students to already know or be able to do? What do you assume does or does not need to be told or explained to students? Where do your expectations or assumptions come from?
- **In what ways do you try to engage and include *all* students?** Do you have different expectations for or assumptions about different students? Are some students or groups privileged more than others to meet your expectations? Do some students or groups benefit from your assumptions?

2. So What?

The hidden curriculum can present disproportionate barriers to some students’ learning due to their lived experiences and educational backgrounds. However, the hidden curriculum can be mitigated, [Orón Semper and Blasco \(2018\)](#) argue, when instructors acknowledge their assumptions and reflect on how their own lived experiences and knowledge might inform their curricula and how there may be differences between their explicit and implicit expectations. It is essential to think through all aspects of our course and have a rationale for everything you do. Being transparent about what you are asking your students to do can: reduce unnecessary confusion; allow students to more effectively make connections between ideas, concepts, and practice; and provide clarity to you, as an instructor. [Gonin and colleagues \(2023\)](#) recommend talking to your students, early in the quarter, about what they know and don’t know as well as what their needs and concerns are, especially as it affects their learning.

Reflection Prompts

- **Have you experienced or witnessed barriers to student learning because of a hidden curriculum?** What was the hidden curriculum that impacted your or others’ student learning? What social identities or positionalities impacted and were impacted by the hidden curriculum?

- **Why is revealing the hidden curriculum important to you?** How would you like to reduce unnecessary confusion and provide clarity to students? What are the other effects that you would like to mitigate by revealing the hidden curriculum?

3. Now What?

What can you do to reveal the hidden curriculum of your courses? Below are some ideas and suggestions, depending on how much time you have now or later.

15-30 Minutes

Reflect on one (or all) of the **reflection prompts** in the **What** and **So What** sections.

1-2 Hours

Read any (or all) of the articles referenced in the **What** and **So What** sections, which are listed below:

- [Gonin, M., et al. \(2023\). "Unspoken expectations and student success: Revealing the hidden curriculum." Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning. Indiana University, Bloomington.](#)
- [Laiduc, G. & Covarrubias, R. \(2022\). "Making meaning of the hidden curriculum: Translating wise interventions to usher university change." Translational Issues in Psychological Science, 8\(2\), 221-233.](#)
- [Orón Semer, J. V. & Blasco, M. \(2018\). "Revealing the hidden curriculum in higher education." Studies in Philosophy and Education, 37\(5\): 481-498.](#)

1-2 Days

Complete the following activity:

1. Choose a course you currently teach or may teach one day. Find the syllabus from that course.
2. Download the [Course Equity Map](#). Use it to review each of the course components on [Course Design](#) and [Pedagogy](#), as described (or not) in the syllabus.
3. Reflect on the following:
 - **What are your activities and assessments intended to do? How can you clarify your goals and objectives with students?**
 - **What are you expecting or assuming about your students that impact their learning experience? When can you ask your students about their learning-related hopes, concerns, and needs?**
 - **What can you tell your students to make your expectations more clear or obvious? How can you effectively communicate your expectations?**
 - **What can you do to reveal your hidden curriculum to students? How can you partner with your students to learn from them?**
 - **What is a remaining question about your expectations or assumptions or newly created approach that you would like to ask and potentially work through together with your colleagues in the department?**

How to Cite this Guide

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We are here for you. As you engage in ongoing reflection about ways to enhance teaching and deepen student learning, The Searle Center offers thought partnership and support. Check our [calendar of events](#) or [schedule a consultation](#).