

Chapter 4

Creating a Value Added College Environment: The Role of the Hidden Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how colleges and universities have struggled to define who they are and what they are responsible for doing. From the understanding that society increasingly equated educated with employed and highly compensated, the discussion traces the formal and informal education student receive on a college campus. Extending the idea of a formal curriculum to the 'hidden curriculum,' that is, the unintended learning and experiences students encounter on campus. The hidden curriculum can play an important role in the student development process, and in many cases, has become the de facto value-added experience on campus. College policy makers and leaders can use the hidden curriculum to their advantage in working with students, but must first take the step of creating expectations for this curriculum and align their activities with their projected outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities around the globe have invested heavily in infrastructure, facilities, and technology. Evidence of streamlined business operations are seen daily by students, families, and public constituents, yet many institutions struggle to identify the value they bring to the student experience. Specifically, institutions have been drawn into the discussion of finding jobs

for students as they graduate, provide technical training for careers, and have struggled to align the developmental aspects of higher education with institutional activities and academic rigor. Even more specifically, students enter higher education with a strong sense of believing that the experience is career training, and many, if not most, equate career preparation with an academic major, and even ask and demand starting salary and life style information for graduating with a specific degree.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0024-7.ch004

The past three decades of student enrollment trends have confirmed this, as occupational programs such as business administration, nursing, and legal studies have grown dramatically.

Institutions, through their academic programming and curriculum, have struggled to segregate technical skill knowledge with other types of learning, such as interpersonal communication skills, emotional intelligence, and broadly, the maturity necessary to navigate life outside of formal schooling. Some programs have ‘built-in’ some of this needed learning by creating specific classes or required experiences, such as ‘public speaking for business majors’ or ‘patient communications’ in nursing. Other programs, however, rely on the campus experience to somehow transform students from youth to adulthood.

The history of higher education institutions in the United States varies from the European tradition in the implementation of *in loco parentis*, meaning that the institution has had historical responsibility for the student (*in place of the parents*). The role dissipated in the United States over 50 years ago, and in Europe before then, meaning that the two systems, similar to others around the world, expect students to grow, develop, mature, and intellectually develop during their enrollment and that much of this is expected to be the responsibility of the individual student. The notion of self-responsibility, or self-directedness, has in turn been the subject of much discussion and debate, particularly in relation to the question of how much guidance an institution should give a student, or how much guidance and involvement parents should be allowed to have with their college aged students (Lythcott-Haims, 2015).

The result of the desire for career education and life preparation accompanied by institutional expectations for student development results in a tension between students (and their parents or supporters) and the institution. The tension is fraught with challenges and opportunities and often results in varying levels of satisfaction with the collegiate experience. Those who find

jobs with salaries that are consistent with their expectations tend to report a positive college experience, while those who struggle finding a job or getting into graduate school or even earning a lower salary tend to be less satisfied. As higher education institutions are primarily designed to offer instructional programs for students, they must satisfy student needs in some way.

An attempt to satisfy student needs on the part of colleges and universities is also difficult, as students must be prepared to learn, possibly fail, and ultimately master material and grow. The attempt to over-satisfy student needs has been the groundwork for accusations about grade inflation and the over production of degrees with little academic rigor (e.g., degree mills). The unintentional middle ground that institutions have arrived at is the provision of massive entertainment and posh living accompanied by some rigor and academic requirement, although there have been charges that the academic requirements have been significantly reduced while affluent life-style changes have been added to the institution (Sperber, 2011; Insidehighered.com, 2015).

There have also been counter charges that some academic majors and programs have remained grounded in previous academic thinking, and that artificial hazing experiences create a false supply of students and graduates (labor), allowing certain occupations, such as medicine, to inflate both tuition and post-graduate earnings. Other disciplines, such as architecture, law, and engineering use pre-enrollment requisites to restrict admissions, and similarly drive up the cost of attendance and post-graduation salaries. This does not mean that some majors have authenticity and others do not; it does mean that in some academic areas students are frustrated by a curriculum and experience that they believe has not or will not change to meet their different learning styles.

There is also the question of how a quality education is defined, and by what standards or criteria either governing boards, accrediting agencies, or external bodies use to define a quality

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