

In Brief: *Transparent Communication of Course Expectations for Student Success*

Brief Description

A guide to explore the “hidden curriculum” in your course(s) and reflect on strategies for communicating your expectations for student success in your syllabus.

Introduction

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

Use this guide to explore the “hidden curriculum” in your course(s) and reflect on strategies for communicating your expectations for student success. You are encouraged to use the prompts for individual reflection or group discussion with colleagues. For optimal interaction with this guide, choose a course you currently teach or may teach one day. Find the syllabus from that course for the **Syllabus Check** questions, informed by [Richmond \(2016\)](#)’s self-assessment on learner-centered syllabi, and the **Course Equity Map** activity, adapted from the [Inclusive STEM Teaching Project](#).

1. What Can Research Tell Us About the Hidden Curriculum?

When there is a disconnect between instructor and student expectations, it can create a barrier to student success. This disconnect, or hidden curriculum, can be present within every course. The “hidden curriculum,” a term first coined in the 1970s to acknowledge and address 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.” It is common for instructors to be unaware of the hidden curriculum in their courses until it is brought to their attention through an unexpected and, oftentimes, undesired interaction with students. For example:

- Exasperation: “I can’t believe the student didn’t raise their hand to ask a question during the lecture,” unaware that some students come from educational backgrounds where questioning authority is encouraged;
- Frustration: “It’s such a behavioral problem that students use their laptops during discussions,” unaware that students are accustomed to using these devices to take notes;

- Confusion: "I don't know why some students walked out during the panel," unaware that students are self-regulating or that they assumed classroom policy is business as usual with guest speakers;
- Disappointment: "I'm discouraged my student didn't come to office hours to ask for help with their research assignment," unaware that students might feel intimidated or be unaware of the benefits of office hours;
- Surprise: "It never occurred to me that students wouldn't complete the reading before class," unaware that some students are struggling with time management or have competing responsibilities, while other students assumed that assigned readings would be reviewed in class; and/or
- Concern: "I'm worried that my students used AI when they shouldn't have," unaware that students do not fully understand academic integrity policies regarding use of artificial intelligence.

These moments are helpful in revealing a disconnect in an instructor's expectations or a hidden curriculum operating in a course.

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 prepared more than others to meet your expectations? Do some students or groups benefit from your assumptions?

Syllabus Check: What expectations or assumptions of yours for student success are explicit in your syllabus? What expectations or assumptions of yours for student success are implicit in your syllabus? Does your syllabus communicate how all students can succeed?

2. Why Does Revealing the Hidden Curriculum Matter?

The hidden curriculum can unfairly hinder some students' learning, because their unique experiences and educational backgrounds may not align with implicit expectations and norms. For example, [Gable's \(2021\)](#) research illustrates that the unspoken academic norms and social rules of institutions with historical legacies can be disorienting for first generation college students and threaten to derail their success. [Calarco's \(2020\)](#) guide uncovers the hidden curriculum of navigating academia for graduate students. 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. It is essential to think through all aspects of your 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?

Syllabus Check: How learner-centered is your syllabus? Does your syllabus include detailed success tips? Does your syllabus acknowledge common misconceptions and pitfalls to avoid? Does your syllabus include a list of academic and non-academic resources? Does it embed an explanation of course assignments, assessments, and activities?

3. What Can We Do?

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 can research tell us about the hidden curriculum?](#) and [Why does revealing the hidden curriculum matter?](#) sections.

1-2 Hours

Read any (or all) of the articles referenced in the [Introduction](#), [What can research tell us about the hidden curriculum?](#), and [Why does revealing the hidden curriculum matter?](#) sections, which are listed below:

- [Laiduc, Giselle, and Rebecca Covarrubias. "Making Meaning of the Hidden Curriculum: Translating Wise Interventions to Usher University Change." *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 8, no. 2 \(2022\): 221–33. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000309>.](#)
- [Orón Semper, José Víctor, and Maribel Blasco. "Revealing the Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37, no. 5 \(2018\): 481–98. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-018-9608-5>.](#)
- [Richmond, Aaron S. "Constructing a Learner-Centered Syllabus: One Professor's Journey. IDEA Paper #60." *IDEA Center, Inc.* IDEA Center, Inc, 2016.](#)

1-2 Days

Complete the following activities:

1. Download the [Course Equity Map](#). Use it to review each of the course components on *Course Design* and *Pedagogy*, as described (or not) in your syllabus.
2. 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 and co-create course policies?
 - 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

Sandoval-Lee, Eun Y., and Veronica Womack (with contributions from Susanna Calkins and Jennifer Keys). "In Brief: Transparent Communication of Course Expectations for Student Success." Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching, Northwestern University, last modified June 26, 2025, searle.northwestern.edu/resources/our-tools-guides/learning-teaching-guides/in-brief-hidden-curriculum.html. Licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](#).

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](#).