What is my point in all of this? I believe strongly in the inherent importance of the professoriate. It is my hope that the professoriate will rise to this role.

Michael G. Murphy is Dean of the School of Computing and Software Engineering at Southern Polytechnic State University.

The Curriculum

Dawn Dekle

The Metacurriculum: Guarding the Golden Apples of University Culture

The president of Harvard University, Lawrence H. Summers, recently oversaw curricular changes that sparked much debate in the academic community. Many other universities are following his example of reexamining the relevance of their official curricula against current educational challenges. Unfortunately, there is a growing awareness of something inchoate in the official approach to curricular reform, that perhaps only part of the university picture is visible to us. A deeper look at the metacurriculum may provide a more complete picture and lead to a more robust analysis of the keys to success in these endeavors.

The metacurriculum is the emergent curriculum of a university, the net effect of the interaction encompassing the official curriculum and the hidden curriculum. It is an important driver of the culture of a university because it contains the socially transmitted behavior patterns that we have adopted as a heuristic for distinguishing one university from another. More precisely, the official curriculum consists of the descriptions of the various degree plans, course syllabi, and graduation requirements set by the university. In contrast, the hidden curriculum refers to the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and rules that students internalize about a university, both intended and unintended.

The hidden curriculum refers to how students “learn how to learn,” the socialization process that they undergo upon entering and learning how to succeed in a tertiary environment. To survive, by trial and error, students learn the undisclosed norms and unstated rules of the university game, which takes as much energy and time as studying textbooks and attending class. Scholars such as Philip Jackson (Life in Classrooms), Eric Margolis (Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education), Pierre Bourdieu (Homo Academicus), and Benson Snyder (The Hidden Curriculum) have provided solid evidence that hidden curricula are alive and thriving at the tertiary level of education.

The most challenging aspect of the hidden curriculum is its elusive nature, which is abstruse even for scholarly study, as it is nearly impossible to ascertain all of the informal rules and values that must be obeyed at a university in order to succeed. The hidden curriculum is by definition an artifact of the university, but it is not merely a passive or stagnant phenomenon. It is dynamic, and capable of exerting a tacit force so powerful that it can throw a university’s sextant off course. Universities need to begin putting in place structures that will look at the hidden curriculum. Universities have an obligation to make their particular hidden curriculum as explicit as possible, so that it can be harnessed and redirected if necessary.

Unfortunately, even the attempt to initiate dialogue on the hidden curriculum is often associated with casting aspersions on the university or engaging in subversive activities, as if it were a pejorative topic. It is as if the image of the hidden curriculum is dark and menacing, something happening behind the curtains, outside the rules; and most universities would rather remain in a silent state of denial about its existence than address it directly. However, it is also possible that many positive aspects reside in the hidden curriculum, facets that could help the university in a constructive and desirable manner if they were universalized as part of the core values.

Through active listening, sensitive facilitation, and careful interviewing, some broad categories of inquiry can help a university begin to understand its own hidden curriculum. Some examples might include identifying the Out of Bound Markers (OBMs), the moveable goalposts, implied agreements and negotiations, and the informal channels of power and information. Additionally, close readings of course syllabi matched with exit interviews of graduates can lead to enlightening insights about what is really being taught. Even locations of buildings and departments geographically convey importance and meaning to students about the status of different disciplines and courses of study.

The challenge to universities going forward is to acknowledge, identify, and unkennel this hidden curriculum, because it is an important component of the metacurriculum that interacts with the official curriculum and affects university culture. Culture is learned, and how universities are teaching and disseminating that culture is crucial. Most importantly, if the hidden curriculum is investigated and identi-
fied, a university can begin to manage its own culture.

Dawn J. Dekle is an associate professor in the School of Economics and Social Sciences at Singapore Management University.

Lea Puljcan Juric

Is General Education Higher Education?

When the time comes for students to choose a course or instructors to create a syllabus, they find that their academic freedom is quite circumscribed: there are requirements to fulfill and guidelines to follow. This restriction is particularly evident in case of courses that fulfill the so-called General Education requirement.

Students can choose which classes that they wish to take, yet they must take one or two courses from each predetermined category (humanities, social sciences, and so on). Further, courses offered in each category are often very limited in number and, more importantly, unlimited in scope. For example, an introductory humanities course that satisfies the General Education requirement is a mechanical survey of topics within the field that are deemed necessary for general culture. Consequently, students are overwhelmed with a mind-boggling heap of information that they tend to forget the moment they step out of the classroom, whereas the instructor, however experienced and accomplished, may well be entirely at a loss as to, first, how to organize such an extensive course in only one semester, and second, how to keep students from daydreaming (or literally dreaming). Instructors can choose what and how they wish to teach, but only if they follow predetermined guidelines that specify which goals must be achieved for the course to be deemed successful (and, one hopes, useful). Hardly anyone worries about the fact that, as a result of limitations imposed by the framework of general education, students and professors are numbed into fulfilling requirements and are often personally detached from the process of learning/teaching: they consider it their duty, not an opportunity for exciting exploration of a given topic.

How useful can any such general course really be, then? Is college supposed to be about specializing in a chosen field, or about making up for the time lost in high school, where teens, so my students tell me, draw pictures instead of learning about the arts? Not only do they not learn about the arts; it is even more disconcerting that many students who enter college also exhibit great difficulties with such elementary skills as reading and writing. The mere fact that these are elementary skills points to the stage of education in which they should be gained.

General education should not be a luxury accessible only to those who somehow manage to enter college, or to those who are lucky enough to attend a quality (often private and expensive) high school. Perhaps if background knowledge were steadily and consistently acquired throughout the years before entering academia, university students and teachers would really have more freedom to delve into thrilling and engaging particulars, and university would indeed be an institution of “higher education.”

Lea Puljcan Juric is a visiting lecturer at California State University-Stanislaus.

Mentoring

Carol Boswell

Mentoring: More Efficiency Needed

t every turn in the road, higher education is confronted by challenges. Basically, the number and type of challenges have not changed over the years. Higher education is called on to find innovative means for addressing the challenges of finance, enrollment, faculty shortages, and academic freedom, to name a few of the trials jeopardizing the educational process. One continuing adversity for the educative process is the need for effective mentoring of novice faculty members. As America grays, so does the faculty across the country. As these professors contemplate retirement, novice faculty members are hired to replace the seasoned experts. Given the fact that the replacement process is occurring, effective mentoring becomes of grave importance.

The partnership established by the mentoring experience requires short-term skill-development activities, lifelong-learning expectations, role development, and professional development. The process must be far more than just facilitating the transition from the work world into the academic environment. Moving into the classroom is part of the process anticipated within the mentoring encounter, but it does not stop at that point. M. G. McKinley (“Mentoring Matters: Creating, Connecting, Empowering.” AACN Clinical Issues, 15.2, 205–