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# The Metacurriculum: Guarding the Golden Apples of University Culture

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## **The Metacurriculum: Guarding the Golden Apples of University Culture**

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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 re-examining the relevance of their official curricula against current educational challenges. Unfortunately, there is a growing awareness of something inchoate in the standard 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 artefact 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 identified, a university can begin to manage its own culture.