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# INTRODUCTION

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What does it mean to write a literature review? Who should you choose for your dissertation committee, and how should you ask for their help? How big should a conference poster be? If a journal tells you to revise and resubmit, should you celebrate or cry?

These are the kinds of things you'll need to know to be successful in grad school, but they probably won't be covered in class. Instead, they're part of the hidden curriculum—the things you're expected to know or do but won't be explicitly taught.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, that begs questions—If the knowledge and skills and strategies in the hidden curriculum matter for success, why are they hidden at all? Why not just make them part of the formal (i.e., explicitly taught) curriculum, instead?

The hidden curriculum of grad school stays hidden, in part, because it's taken for granted. Unlike the formal curriculum, which tends to focus on ways of thinking, the hidden curriculum tends to involve ways of doing: how to do, write about, and talk about research, how to navigate complex bureaucracies, and how to ask others for help when you feel lost. Those ways of doing are easy to take for granted because once scholars learn them, they enact them in subconscious ways. And once those ways of doing are taken for granted, they become a lot harder to teach.

Think, for example, about your grandma's blueberry pie (or whatever favorite dish you have that a friend or relative makes). Your grandma probably doesn't follow a recipe, and if she tried to tell you the recipe, there's a good chance she couldn't easily tell you exactly what she does. Essentially, the taken-for-grantedness of your grandma's pie-baking knowledge can make it hard for her to share that knowledge with you, which makes it hard for you to re-create her pie for yourself.

That same taken-for-grantedness works to keep the hidden knowledge of academia hidden as well. Like your grandma with her pie, your professors are experts in the kind of work they do.

After doing that work for many years (or decades), your professors can do it almost without thinking. As a result, they might forget that the hidden curriculum is hidden. They might forget there was a time when they didn't know how to do what they do. They might forget that you don't know what they've spent a career learning. They might struggle to explain what they know in a way that makes it easy to understand.

Taken-for-grantedness, however, isn't the only reason the hidden curriculum of academia stays hidden. Rather, the hidden curriculum also stays hidden because professors have little incentive to uncover that knowledge for their students. In academia, and especially in departments with graduate programs, the big rewards—grants, publications, jobs, tenure, promotions, and awards—go to scholars who do prolific, prestigious research. Doing that kind of research takes a tremendous amount of time and energy. Meanwhile, being a good teacher and a good mentor—the kind of teacher and mentor who systematically uncovers the hidden curriculum of grad school for their students—also takes a tremendous amount of time and energy. But exerting that time and energy doesn't come with external rewards.

Because of that incentive structure, professors have a tough choice to make. Professors can focus on research—chase the big rewards—but they probably won't have the time or energy left over to give you hands-on support. Professors can also focus on teaching and mentoring—provide a high level of hands-on support—but they probably won't have the time to do the research they need to be successful in their careers. And, of course, professors can try to be great at all these things, but that probably means working themselves to exhaustion—putting their health and their career and their relationships at risk.

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Ultimately, then, the hidden curriculum tends to stay hidden, and that hiddenness perpetuates inequalities in grad school and in academia as a whole. Grad students from more privileged groups—e.g.,

those who are white, affluent, male, cis-gender, heterosexual, native-born, and able-bodied—tend to reap more of the big rewards in academia. They're more likely to get into "top" programs, get chosen for "top" fellowships and "top" grants, get their research published in "top" journals, get hired for "top" jobs, and get tenured to keep those "top" jobs. Of course, grad students from privileged groups don't get those big rewards because they're smarter or work harder. They get them because of how they are perceived by key gatekeepers, because they typically have access to more resources, and because they have an advantage in learning the hidden knowledge they need to succeed.<sup>2</sup>

Privileged students' advantage in learning the hidden curriculum is, in part, a network advantage. If you're from a more privileged background, you probably have friends or family members who've been to grad school. Those friends and family members can be your guides to grad school—they can help you uncover the hidden curriculum for yourself. Meanwhile, if you're not from a privileged background, then you probably can't rely on your close friends and family members to help you navigate the hidden curriculum of grad school. You might even face criticism from friends and family about the demands of grad school or the type of person you've become.<sup>3</sup> That lack of support, in turn, can make it harder to succeed.

Privileged students' advantage in learning the hidden curriculum is also an entitlement advantage. If you're from a more privileged group, you're probably pretty comfortable talking with your professors and asking them for help.<sup>4</sup> When you've asked for things in the past, your teachers and professors have probably said yes. And those yesses have probably made it easy to feel entitled to support. Of course, you might've encountered one or two professors who were too intimidating to approach for help. Or you might've had a professor who denied your request. But if you're a student from a more privileged background, you probably didn't have to worry about whether your professor said no because of who you are. Meanwhile, if you're not from a privileged background, you

might find it more difficult to ask professors for help. Professors—like all people—are prone to subconscious biases.<sup>5</sup> Given that possibility of bias, you might worry about how your professors will judge you for needing help.<sup>6</sup> You might worry that if a professor sees you as “difficult” or “demanding,” they won’t want to invest in you or your career.

Essentially, students from privileged groups have an advantage in learning the hidden curriculum, and that advantage helps those students to be more successful in their careers.<sup>7</sup>

If you’re a student from a less privileged group, you probably think those advantages are deeply unfair. And you’re probably not alone. In the United States, the “average” grad student is still a white male student from an affluent, highly educated family, but the face of that average student is changing. Between 2000 and 2016, the number of graduate students in the United States increased from 2.2 million to 3 million,<sup>8</sup> and those increases were concentrated almost entirely among students from systematically marginalized groups.<sup>9</sup> That includes low-income students, first-generation college students, students of color, LGBTQ students, women students (especially in STEM fields), and international students.

If you’re a student from one of those groups, you might need a little extra help navigating the hidden curriculum of grad school. And that’s okay because you deserve success as much as those students who came in knowing the hidden curriculum of grad school or who have more resources to figure it out on their own.

At the same time, it’s important to consider who you ask for help. In most schools, departments, and disciplines, the people who work hardest to help grad students succeed are professors from systematically marginalized groups and especially women faculty of color.<sup>10</sup> Because of their commitment to making academia a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable space, professors from systematically marginalized groups often take it upon themselves to provide the kind of hands-on guidance students need.<sup>11</sup>

In doing so, however, they often put their own careers—and even their own health—at risk. And those are the professors academia needs the most.

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**Nina M. Flores, PhD** @bellhookedme • Jul 23, 2018

#HiddenCurriculum around #gradschool is real, especially for 1st gen students. First year in college I had no clue about grad school. I remember the embarrassment of trying to figure out if I was an undergrad or grad. All I knew is I wanted to graduate, so I selected “graduate”.



**Nina M. Flores, PhD** @bellhookedme • Jul 23, 2018

Replying to @bellhookedme

I can still feel the shame of not knowing the difference between graduate & undergraduate status as a freshman in college. But with no one who had this basic “inside knowledge” about #highered in my life, how would I have known this intuitively? I wouldn’t have. And I didn’t.

If we want to avoid overburdening professors from marginalized groups, we have to find another way to help students uncover the hidden curriculum and get the guidance they need to succeed. Arguably, the best solution would be to make the hidden curriculum part of the formal curriculum. Graduate programs could explicitly teach students—all students—everything they need to succeed. That’s certainly something I’m working toward in my own department. Maybe someday it’ll be something you can work toward in yours. Those changes are important, but they also take time.

In the short term, my hope—as a sociologist who studies inequalities in education, as a professor who cares deeply about quality teaching and mentoring, and as someone who struggled (and sometimes still struggles) to understand academia—is that this book will be your field guide to grad school. In it, I uncover key

parts of the hidden curriculum. I also offer strategies to help you build the confidence you'll need to uncover the rest for yourself.

Along those lines, it's important to note up front that some aspects of the hidden curriculum vary across disciplines, across departments, and across degrees. Essentially, what you need to know to be successful in a doctoral program in sociology at Stanford is going to be somewhat different from what you need to know if you're getting a master's degree in computer science at Oklahoma State.

Given those variations, a book like this one is not easy to write. I'm coming at this as a social scientist, and that's the part of academia I know best. While this book also includes material relevant to the humanities and lab sciences,<sup>13</sup> there will inevitably be things I forget to mention and things I don't discuss in the level of detail you need. That said, I do my best to uncover as much of the hidden curriculum as I can, given the limits of my own knowledge and the limits imposed by the publishing process—more on that in chapter 8. To do that, I focus on the parts of the hidden curriculum that apply widely across disciplines, departments, and degrees. At the same time, I also point out key sources of variation in the hidden curriculum and offer suggestions on how to look for, ask for, and ultimately get help with uncovering the parts of the hidden curriculum that are unique to your discipline, your department, and your degree.

Specifically, we'll talk about the hidden curriculum as it relates to:

- Applying to and choosing a program
- Building your team
- Deciphering academic jargon
- Reading and writing about other people's research
- Staying on track in your program
- Doing research and finding funding
- Writing about research
- Publishing and promoting your work
- Talking about your research (and surviving the Q&A)
- Going to conferences (without breaking the bank)



- Navigating the job market
- Balancing teaching, research, service, and life

In these chapters, I share my own (sometimes embarrassing) stories from grad school (and post-grad school). And I share stories that others (including current grad students, former grad students, and other professors) have shared on Twitter as part of a larger discussion of the #HiddenCurriculum of grad school. Essentially, we'll uncover the hidden curriculum of grad school by talking openly and honestly about the things we didn't know.

I also share resources—like email templates, writing outlines, and checklists—that can help make grad school feel less like getting locked out when everyone else has the key. This includes resources I've created to help my own students navigate the hidden curriculum of grad school and resources that other scholars and organizations have created to support their students and scholars as well.

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**Jess Calarco** @JessicaCalarco • Jul 21, 2018

The #hiddencurriculum of academia isn't just hidden from undergrads. It's hidden from grad students, too.

I'm sure we all had things we were embarrassed we didn't know in grad school. So let's tell those stories. I'll go first. (1/many)



**Kristin K. Smith** @kksmith312 • Jul 20, 2018

Just told an undergrad about graduate assistantships, stipends, & tuition waivers. Her mind was blown. We need to do a better job educating students about #gradstudent opportunities - esp for rural, low-income, non-traditional students #highered

\*\*\*

My hope is that this field guide to grad school will take some of the stress out of navigating the hidden curriculum. That it will

leave you with more time and energy to pursue the passions that brought you to grad school. That it will help you feel confident in yourself and your worth as a scholar.

In grad school, feeling confident is critical because the hidden curriculum is a perfect catalyst for self-doubt. When you're struggling to navigate the hidden curriculum, it can feel as though everyone else solved the puzzle while you're still finding the pieces. Essentially, the hidden curriculum contributes to "impostor syndrome"—that feeling that you're not good enough or smart enough to be in your program, that maybe you got into grad school by mistake.<sup>15</sup>

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**Jess Calarco** @JessicaCalarco • Sep 4, 2018

This is such an important conversation! Acknowledging the #hiddencurriculum seems like the first step in combating imposter syndrome. Helping students recognize that there are things that matter for success that aren't always explicitly taught (and then making those explicit).



**Liana Sayer** @LCHSayer • Sep 4, 2018

Discussing #HiddenCurriculum in prose & curious about strategies to quell #impostersyndrome mine of staying silent isn't effective @JessicaCalarco @sarahburgard @SarahDamaske @familyunequal @tristanbphd

If you've struggled with impostor syndrome, you know the toll it can take on your physical and mental health. Research has found that grad students experience "strikingly high" rates of depression and anxiety, much higher than among the general population.<sup>17</sup> Those health problems also appear to be closely linked to grad students' feelings of inadequacy—the kind of inadequacy you might feel when you can't see the hidden curriculum and you feel like you're being tested on things you never learned.

As a field guide to grad school, this book can help you fight off those self-doubts. As you read, you'll see you're not the only one who's felt confused or inadequate or alone in grad school—far from it. You'll learn key parts of the hidden knowledge you need to succeed. And you'll learn strategies that can help you be more confident in asking for the help you need to figure out the rest.

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