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## THE BIG PICTURE

### Every Culture Has Rules and Norms. Some Are Written, But Many Are Not

One fall day, some years ago, Terry was sitting in his office at Harvard University near the Charles River. Within one minute (literally), he received two nearly identical requests:

*Dear Professor Burnham, I am applying to graduate school and I would appreciate if you would write a recommendation letter on my behalf. Sincerely, your former student.*

To one of the students, Terry wrote, “Yes. It would be my pleasure to write a letter for you. Please come by my office sometime this week. We can discuss my letter and I’ll help you develop a strategy to get accepted.” To the other student he wrote, “I’m sorry. Unfortunately, I won’t be able to help you at this time.”

Both students had taken the same class with Terry. And the student who received the “Not at this time” response had even earned a higher grade than the student who received the “I will help you.”

What was going on? How is it possible that a student who performed less well can get valuable career assistance and a recommendation letter, while a better-performing student does not? This seeming paradox is resolved by understanding and following some unstated cultural norms regulating behavior in college.

Grades are important, but they are not everything. Far from it, in fact. The best outcomes require artful navigation of the unique college culture. *The Secret Syllabus* is a guide to mastering these unstated cultural norms that lead to academic (and life) success. With it, you won't lose your way.

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Together, we have taught more than 20,000 students at Harvard, UCLA, Pepperdine, the University of Michigan, Chapman University, and MIT. Almost every day, we encounter students who work harder and achieve less than they would if they knew and understood the material in *The Secret Syllabus*.

Additionally, during college, we—the authors, Jay Phelan and Terry Burnham—made some avoidable and spectacularly terrible choices. These blunders caused us to miss opportunities and to waste untold time—sometimes hours, sometimes months—in aimless and unproductive floundering. We needed this book!

Before laying out the book's structure, let's start with a bit of biography.

Jay grew up in California and attended UCLA. He then earned a master's degree at Yale, followed by his doctorate in biology at Harvard. Jay taught at Harvard and Pepperdine before returning to teach biology at UCLA and write biology textbooks.

Terry grew up near Detroit and attended the University of Michigan. He earned a master's degree at San Diego State University and a second master's at MIT, followed by his doctorate in business economics at Harvard. Terry was a professor at the Harvard Business School, the Harvard Kennedy School, and the University of Michigan, before moving to California to teach finance at Chapman University.

You can be forgiven for assuming that two Harvard PhDs must have skated through school and so cannot understand the issues of typical students. This could not be further from the truth. We have certainly had some great outcomes, but, for the most part, we have been depressingly average in the mistakes that we've made.

Let's start with Jay in his own words:

*I was not a good student. Almost from the day I arrived at college (as a first-generation college student), things went poorly for me. My courses didn't speak to me. It felt as though my instructors weren't telling me anything about my life. My textbooks seemed out of touch with my own personal experiences in the world. And consequently, little of my course work felt relevant to me. I wanted to check out. Not surprisingly, my resulting "strategy" of poor attendance led to some very bad outcomes.*

*This wasn't simply a brief, difficult transition to college. I spent years stumbling into and out of "academic probation" and the more dire "subject to dismissal." I was an interdisciplinary disappointment and received the dreaded grade of F repeatedly.*

*I understand what it is like to sit in class and feel that all hope is lost. But I also have learned how to turn things around.*

And from Terry:

*I never saw a clear and obvious path when I set off for college. Initially, I was pre-med because my father wanted me to be a doctor. After getting accepted to medical school, however, I decided to instead try to find my own path.*

*I was a computer programmer, a tank driver in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves, and worked on Wall Street for Goldman, Sachs &*

*Co., before earning an MBA, a PhD, and then becoming a professor. My path was unnecessarily circuitous because of my lack of focus and guidance.*

*Uncertainty about my direction also led me to take time off from college. I lived in Salt Lake City, where I skied and worked at a variety of jobs, including as a busboy and a short-order cook. Only after taking a day labor job at a slaughterhouse and standing waist-deep among bloody carcasses did I have the epiphany that maybe college wasn't so bad.*

We are not proud recounting our struggles and failures; for many years we were too embarrassed to even mention them to anyone. We only reveal them here in the hope that helping you avoid these blunders can be a silver lining.

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Throughout this book, the advice and guidance we provide is not always available from your instructors. Your challenges may be motivation, time management, life pressures, study skills, mentor-seeking, finding a learning community, or something else.

You may feel like you don't know what you should be doing. Or you may know what you should be doing, but don't quite know how to do it effectively. These challenges can be exacerbated because, in many cases, your instructors have never faced similar issues.

For example, while more than a third of all college students have parents who do not have a bachelor's degree, only a tiny percentage of faculty members were first-generation students. It's hard to find your way, let alone thrive, when you're not quite sure that you belong and may lack a sufficiently knowledgeable support network.

The experiences of struggling, juggling, searching, and bouncing back from setbacks may be unfamiliar to many professors, but we know these issues intimately. We have wrestled with (and overcome) these challenges.

### **Advice Is Not Enough**

Much of the advice that students receive about how to be more successful in college is not particularly useful:

**“You should go to office hours.”** *This is true, but it’s not very helpful. Because once you’re there, what should you do? Here’s a hint: asking your instructor to re-explain concepts from class is not among the most valuable reasons to go to office hours.*

**“You should get some research experience.” “You should get some real-world experience, like an internship.” “You should get a faculty mentor.” “You should be more efficient when you study.”** *Again, these are true. But they miss the mark. As is often the case, the more important guidance you need is about how you actually do those things. We will help you succeed with all of these.*

Our overriding goal in *The Secret Syllabus* is to highlight the ideas and practices that you are not likely to come up with on your own. We get particularly excited about counterintuitive solutions, those for which your instincts might lead you to do exactly the wrong thing, even after careful consideration.

**“The sooner you have a major, the better a candidate you will be for jobs, for transfer to a better school, or for graduate schools.”** *Not only is this advice not helpful, in a very large number of cases, it is completely wrong.*

And still other advice—although undeniably reasonable—is just too obvious to be helpful. For example, here are some actual recommendations from other college guidebooks:

- “Get to class early.”
- “Be prepared. Read the assigned material.”
- “Try not to cram for tests.”
- “Avoid procrastination.”

Moreover, we will never suggest that doing well in college simply boils down to a set of tricks or “hacks.” Doing well in college, as in life, does involve learning some important tactics and skills (which we will cover). But reading or memorizing a bunch of unrelated bits of advice from a list of “tips” can take you only so far. Real success requires engagement with the substance and a foundation of deeper, guiding principles.

### **The Secret Syllabus**

With *The Secret Syllabus* our goal is considerably more ambitious than the dispensing of advice. We want to serve as guides and, hopefully, mentors, as you become immersed in a new, complex culture. Across each of the eighteen chapters—think of them as “lectures”—our objective is to illuminate the fundamental foundational principles that will enable you to succeed, as you:

- craft your college experience;
- develop professional relationships;
- achieve academic excellence;
- increase your resiliency; and
- plan your postcollege career.

Throughout this book, we’ll illustrate both productive and counter-productive approaches, using true, real-life stories. And

we will summarize each lesson with “Take Home Messages,” distilling the ideas into clear, concise guides to action.

Our goal is to inspire you not just to get good grades, but also to learn and to grow, to recognize that you belong, and to find satisfaction and excitement in your role as a college student. Whether you are figuring out how to select a major or how to find an effective mentor, there won’t be “one size fits all” solutions.

There is some creativity—even artistry—required. Our approach is to help you develop consistently winning and effective behaviors. With this wisdom, you’ll be equipped to thrive in any situation.

### Take Home Messages

1. In addition to the many explicit rules and requirements, college is governed by unwritten, and rarely stated, practices and cultural norms, which we reveal in this book. True and long-term success requires mastery of both types of material.
2. Almost every student arrives at college unprepared for the impending culture shock—including even those who are academically brilliant. Mastering *The Secret Syllabus* equips students for a rich college experience and a successful life.

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