

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

NEWS

## We Must Help First-Generation Students Master Academe's 'Hidden Curriculum'

By *Marcia Chatelain*

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When the word “innovation” gets used on my campus, I often notice panic spreading across my colleagues’ faces. The thought of chalkboards being dismantled and replaced with complicated, high-tech smartboards and screens can terrify some of them. I admit that the thought of a flipped classroom turns me a bit upside down.

But my ideas about what innovation looks like have changed since I started team-teaching a course created to help first-generation students adjust to Georgetown University. Sometimes innovation requires no power cords or wireless network upgrades; rather, it requires the hard task of acknowledging how inequality has shaped and continues to shape our students’ lives, and doing something about it.

The experimental, one-credit course, “Mastering the Hidden Curriculum,” welcomes students in their first semester of an experience that can be as dizzying as it is exhilarating. The 16 students in my section are from all over the world. A few were scholarship students at prestigious prep schools; most were not. They have been given advice on how to get good grades and develop their leadership skills, so they can get into a competitive college. But they haven’t been told that in academe, there are unwritten rules and unspoken expectations.

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The course shows students how to cultivate relationships, advocate for themselves, and pursue opportunities in ways that their more advantaged peers have learned from college-educated parents and mentors.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about one-third of college students are considered first generation, and many of them are students of color. This cohort of students will prove critical as colleges look to alternative strategies to diversify student bodies under the specter of an anti-affirmative-action White House and Supreme Court.

Our course was created by Jason Low, a recent alum-turned-staffer on the team of the Georgetown Scholarship Program. The program has created a host of resources — including mentoring and assistance with buying winter coats — to supplement financial aid to low-income students, many of whom are also first-generation students.

We also had help from Georgetown's Designing the Future(s) initiative, which serves as our educational-innovation center.

The "Hidden Curriculum" syllabus includes an array of readings about higher education and the experience of first-generation students. Students read about theories of cultural capital and first-person accounts that reflect some of their experiences — including impostor syndrome (induced by being counted among the best and the brightest) and guilt about having plenty of food and a warm bed while family members face eviction. This approach helps students name the dissonant

experience of being away at college while tethered to the challenges of home. In introducing them to this body of academic literature, we are doing more than giving them the vocabulary of sociology or psychology; we are acknowledging the kinds of issues not mentioned in the student handbook.

Our 10-week course also puts a human face on articles dense with data about degree completion, Pell Grant eligibility, and lifetime earnings by drawing upon the experiences of our undergraduate teaching assistants, who are also first-generation students. They offer advice on how they navigated their own responsibilities to family and community, and are open about the personal detours and failures that can feel ruinous to students pressured to become role models before they turn 20 years old.

On a practical level, we also offer advice to students on how to talk to professors and other authority figures. We discuss how some of their classmates are “at home” on campus because they have networks that extend beyond their shared high schools — summer camps, enrichment programs, and parents who socialize at country clubs and alumni gatherings together. Because such class advantages are all too often hidden, our first-generation college students may believe that it is natural for privilege to be concentrated and reproduced among a small few.

**I**n preparing our course, my three colleagues and I were fortunate to have a growing cohort of first-generation organizations and programs to look to for inspiration. Notre Dame has offered its own version of the course, called “Exploring the Experiences of First Generation College Students,” and two undergraduates there have formed a student organization called First Generation Notre Dame, known as [1stG ND](#). Northwestern University’s [I’m First](#) campaign and Vanderbilt University’s [Vandy Firsts](#) program show us how resources can be institutionalized campuswide. Brown University’s [First-Generation College and Low-Income Student Center](#) includes undocumented students among its target constituents. Nationally, the Alliance for the Low-Income & First-Generation Narrative, known by its acronym, [Align](#), has offered national conferences that invite students to talk about financial literacy, graduate school, and other issues.

When interested colleagues ask about our “Hidden Curriculum” course, I emphasize that we are not offering an intensive etiquette lesson, designed to tell students to adopt the practices of an elite class in order to mask their disadvantage or confusion. We cannot address inequality with a crash course on manners; we need more tutorials on power. First-generation advocates have to listen to our students’ critiques, take their protests seriously, and understand their perspective on what is lost when opportunities are gained. The reality is that no matter how well-intentioned such initiatives are, they are not a salve for the sting of racism and classism that has yet to be fully acknowledged, let alone confronted, in the academy.

The responsibility to democratize our institutions and ensure socioeconomic diversity does not fall on our first-generation college students. Universities must acknowledge that opportunity is not the same as stability. Our course — while it thoughtfully discusses academic culture and encourages students to seek comfort in their moments of alienation — cannot calm all our students’ fears or steady the anxieties of families and communities back home. What we can do is provide a model and show them that another higher education is possible, one in which a parent’s alumni status or connections or wealth are not the only ways to realize success.

**I**n 2015, Georgetown embarked on a journey to acknowledge its deep dependence on the system of slavery, which helped fund, build, and sustain the Roman Catholic institution (as well as many of its elite peers). As a historian on the working group that investigated this issue, I have watched the revolutionary potential of truth-telling on my campus and others. I find myself returning to that experience in “Mastering the Hidden Curriculum.” As colleges invest in first-generation students, their enthusiasm must be met with a willingness to challenge their campus culture. All too often, practices of exclusion and elitism have shaped how we define, cultivate, and promote talent. In the excitement to ride the wave of first-generation student advocacy, administrators and faculty members alike must understand that first-generation students are not recipients of institutional benevolence. Rather, they are members of our communities who remind us about the need to confront our histories of exclusion and choose a future of inclusion.

I have a lot of hopes for my students. I hope they feel at home at Georgetown. I hope they make it to graduation, if that is what they want. And I hope that after having had these conversations about power and inequality with my students, I can show them that once we expose, and perhaps “master” the hidden curriculum, we can go about dismantling it.

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*A version of this article appeared in the [October 26, 2018, issue](#).*

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INNOVATION & TRANSFORMATION

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

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