THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN TRANSITIONING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

By Ankur Desai, Alicia Hoffman, Zoë Zibton, and Kristyn Lue
The learning curve that accompanies educational transitions can involve culture shock as students adjust to new environments, demands, networks, and responsibilities. Educational institutions have unwritten, implicit rules and expectations within their culture—otherwise known as the “hidden curriculum.” Navigating the hidden curriculum is part of what can make the transitions to college and graduate school challenging.

The hidden curriculum may also function as a barrier to equity and inclusion: students from higher socioeconomic communities and college educated families are more likely to have gained knowledge about academia’s unwritten cultural rules before transitioning to college or graduate school. This reduces their risk of culture shock, allows them to focus on academics, and can enhance their sense of belonging. Students with fewer resources, on the other hand, are less likely to have had exposure to the hidden curriculum during their schooling, which may result in more abrupt culture shock and a more difficult transition to college.

Without intentional efforts to make the hidden curriculum explicit, graduate programs may unwittingly reproduce social inequalities.

The specialized nature of graduate school requires graduate students to acclimate to their individual departments and academic disciplines rather than the broader campus environments as they may have during their undergraduate degrees. As a result, many individual departments facilitate their own graduate student orientations which are separate from the college-wide graduate student orientation. This resource is geared towards helping graduate programs in that task.
Although there are a variety of resources available for colleges working to improve their undergraduate orientation and first-year experience programs in the service of equity and inclusion, fewer resources are available for graduate schools or graduate programs seeking to improve their orientation programs. This resource provides a brief overview of one tool that departments can use in developing and implementing more inclusive graduate student orientation programs—the IGEN Hidden Curriculum Orientation. This orientation is the outcome of an IGEN Research Accelerator seed grant and provides departments with tips for how to create inclusive graduate orientation programs that help to expose the hidden curriculum of graduate school. Such programs can enhance the adjustment, belonging, and success of graduate students as part of promoting equity.

**EXAMPLES OF THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN GRADUATE SCHOOL**

- Finding mentors
- Building social networks and community
- Time management
- Understanding academic and disciplinary jargon
- Publishing and presenting
- Navigating the job market
- Knowing departmental expectations and milestones

**THE IGEN HIDDEN CURRICULUM ORIENTATION**

The IGEN Hidden Curriculum Orientation is a five-day course developed by Alicia Hoffman and Zoë Zibton, two graduate students in the Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences (AOS) Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Under the supervision of department chair Dr. Ankur Desai, Hoffman and Zibton developed and implemented the orientation program in 2021 (with support from the AOS program) and 2022 (with additional funding from IGEN). This optional orientation, which Hoffman and Zibton based off of the HydroShare resource, was designed to provide incoming graduate students opportunities to socialize with one another and introduce them to the hidden curriculum of graduate school. Approximately 30% of the AOS incoming graduate students at UW Madison attended this optional Hidden Curriculum Orientation in 2021; however, participants in the orientation found the program to be extremely helpful. Although the program remained optional, 100% of incoming AOS graduate students participated in the Hidden Curriculum Orientation in 2022.

On the following page, Desai, Hoffman, and Zibton share their top five tips for creating inclusive graduate orientation programs, based on their experience developing, implementing, and refining the IGEN Hidden Curriculum Orientation.
Creating a sense of belonging and community is a critical part of a positive graduate student experience. When students start with strong relationships, it sets them up for success in learning the hidden curriculum both with and from other students.

Prioritize social interaction over learning new material at the beginning of orientation programs in order to build a sense of belonging through cohort-bonding and team building events with other students.

Don’t gatekeep participation! "Open events to all types of graduate students" in your program, including master’s, doctoral, professional, and clinical degree-seeking students.

In addition to a summer orientation, "Provide routine reminders" or portfolio building exercises to help students navigate graduate programs and terminology over the academic year.

As a department, develop formal seminars or other structures during the academic year to institutionalize the work of inclusive orientation into the curriculum.

Departments who are dedicated to equity should institutionalize inclusive programs to ensure sustainability and the prioritization of these programs, rather than relying on the labor of individuals who are passionate about diversity, equity, and inclusion work.

Every new student who will conduct a thesis or dissertation, whether a masters or PhD student, is assigned an initial committee to advise their work. This committee can be modified over time.

The AOS department at UW-Madison has a research master’s degree program, a research doctoral degree program, and a professional master’s degree program. The IGEN Hidden Curriculum Orientation is open to students in any of these programs.

Beginning in Year 3, AOS graduate student orientation at UW-Madison will include a 1-credit course students take during their first year that will extend the work of the IGEN Hidden Curriculum Orientation during the academic year.

The IGEN Hidden Curriculum Orientation was started by two graduate students who were passionate about diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Rather than rely on the passion and labor of graduate students, the AOS department moved to adopt and formalize the inclusive orientation work Hoffman and Zibton developed.

A single faculty member is unlikely to be able to meet all of the needs of an individual student. Programs can help formalize and make explicit the need for students to have a team of mentors, and provide opportunities to create such teams.

The first day of the IGEN Hidden Curriculum Orientation is dedicated entirely to introductions and community building, and each day starts with an icebreaker to help students continue to get to know each other better and socialize.
LOOKING AHEAD

As a result of the success of the program, the AOS department at UW Madison moved to formally adopt and institutionalize the Hidden Curriculum Orientation in its third year and beyond—with a key change. Going forward, the summer orientation will focus on providing opportunities for incoming students to socialize with each other, as well as current AOS students and faculty. The hidden curriculum component of the orientation will be developed into a required 1-credit course that graduate students will take during their first semester. This 1-credit course on the hidden curriculum of graduate school will now be part of a 3-unit sequence of 1-credit courses that AOS graduate students will take as part of their program requirements.

The 5-day summer curriculum utilized in the summers of 2021 and 2022 is now publicly available on Canvas Commons for other departments that are interested in implementing their own Hidden Curriculum Orientation.

To view the IGEN Hidden Curriculum on Canvas Commons, click here.

FURTHER READING


