

Hidden Rules

Point of the Assignment: 1) To learn about Hidden Rules and how they impact one’s success at navigating a new culture. 2) To identify whether or not you understand the Hidden Rules of higher education. 3) To help you identify a mentor who can help you to learn the Hidden Rules of higher education.

Culture actually exists any time a group of people come together to live/work/play in community. Therefore, there are many types of cultures: socio-economic status, ethnic, neighborhood, city, state, country, immediate family, family of origin, your social group, corporate, government, school, organized sports and activities, religious, religious sects/denominations, individual church/place of worship, jails and prisons, etc. There are often sub-cultures of smaller groups within a larger group. Therefore you most likely belong to several different cultures.

Each of these cultures has its own set of rules for what is right and wrong. Most of the time, these rules are simply unquestioned assumptions that most “insiders” don’t notice until those rules are violated. Culture plays a role in how we are socialized to believe what is right, wrong, normal and abnormal, and what are appropriate ways to act, dress and communicate.

According to Ruby Payne, author of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*¹, in order for a person navigate their way outside of their present social circle (culture), knowing the “hidden rules” of what is appropriate for particular settings. (e.g.: Proper communication styles for various social settings) Being able to understand, apply and navigate the hidden rules is the most important asset an individual can possess. This is also a transferrable skill.

Your Experience With Negotiating Hidden Rules:

To help you understand the power of hidden rules has on how a person is socialized into a community, you are going to take a few minutes to reflect on an experience you have had with this.

1. Describe a time when you were involved with, or watched, an outsider try to navigate the hidden rules of a new culture, but had difficulty understanding the new “rules”. (Were you the person navigating or just an observer?)

2. What was/were the actual “rule(s)” being violated?

3. Were these rules considered to be 1) rather universal in society (Do not murder, steal,

¹ Payne, R.K. (2005). *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (4th Ed.). Highlands, TX: Aha! Press

etc.), 2) **not universal, but still common** (*using manners and treating people with respect*), or 3) **specific to this particular culture** (*ways of speaking, dressing, etc.*)?

4. **Was that person (or you) aware of the fact they did not know “the rules”?**

5. **How were they/you treated when they/you failed to realize they weren’t living by “the rules”?**

6. **Did anyone try to teach him/her/you the “right way” to do things?**

7. **How did he/her/you respond to that person trying to teach them “the rules”?**

8. **Did that person ever learn to adapt? What was the outcome?**

The Hidden Rules of Higher Education:

The Hidden Rules of Higher Education were originally created by the highly-educated, upper-class European/American culture over the last four centuries, (*with some more modern-day influences of the “equal access” culture*). Therefore, individuals who are not very familiar with the Hidden Rules of the upper-class Caucasian culture may not understand some expectations placed on individuals as they enter college. For example, a student who comes from a non-Caucasian, low-income or non-college educated background may not understand the “hidden rules” of higher education because they may not have been exposed to them. It is also possible that such people are trying to navigate college from the rules of another culture rather than the rules of higher education. This can create obstacles to their success.

The following are some examples of the hidden rules of higher education. Some of these are unique to higher education, and some are a little more common in many institutions of America.

1. To succeed in college requires planning, sacrifice, and discipline.
2. Students who think they can succeed without needing to spend money (*tuition, books, supplies, assessments, lost wages while in classes, etc.*) suffer from unrealistic expectations.
3. You will be expected to be able to purchase whatever books and supplies that are required in each course. Therefore you are expected to budget your finances accordingly so that you can be prepared to pay this expense on or before the first day of school.
4. You are expected to engage in critical thinking by **first** reading anything in print or online (*syllabus, instructions, textbooks, homework assignments, etc.*) **before** asking someone else (teachers, etc.) to waste their time telling you something (*instructions, lectures, etc.*) that you can read for yourself.
5. You are responsible for finding out what is expected of you through available printed and on-line resources (*class syllabus, college catalog, websites, etc.*). **If it is in print, then you are accountable for what it says** (*homework, rules, registration requirements, student conduct, attendance, etc.*), **regardless of whether or not you bothered to read it.**
6. In order to succeed in college, students are expected to read whatever books and other activities the teachers assign. A typical college class will require reading 30 – 100 pages per week. A student who does not do assigned readings will have a hard time passing a class. Students who are not willing or able to read this much are not ready to be in college.
7. Your written communication (papers, assignments, emails, etc.) should always be formal and include proper grammar and punctuation. Students who submit any writing in “texting style” (abbreviations, no capitals, slang, texting shorthand etc.) to professors or college personnel will be judged as being illiterate and lacking an understanding of what is appropriate college behavior and what is not.
8. When you are a college student, it is expected that school is your first priority.
9. If you are a traditional-aged (18-24) college student, then it is expected that your family will provide for your financial needs, and financial aid programs are intended to supplement – not replace – the family’s contribution.
10. Your family should support you emotionally and every other way while you are in school. This includes understanding that when you are in college, you are to put school before anything else.
11. When students (especially traditional-aged) do have jobs, those jobs are supposed to be survival jobs, and they are intended to facilitate your finishing school because your education will prepare you for jobs more suitable to your long-term success. Therefore, the job should not be placed before school.
12. Life is full of choices, and every decision (even minor ones) you make will shape your future and likelihood of succeeding in college.
13. Nobody’s life is perfect. Those students who succeed in college do so because they choose to accept responsibility for their lives and problems, and proceed forward in spite of them.

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14. It is understood that your experience in higher education is intended to be a journey where your values, interests and identity will be repeatedly questioned and evaluated and probably changed; and you will come out the other side a different person. It is not just a matter of “going through the motions” to get a job.
15. This journey is yours to take, and no one can do it for you. The faculty and staff are there to assist you (*walk beside you – not in place of you*) as you journey down your path, but they can’t and won’t do things for you that you need to do yourself.
16. While it is your responsibility to take this journey, you won’t do it alone. You will need to have mentors who can help you navigate the course, and a system of support to encourage you along the way.
17. No one else can tell you what you should major in. Your educational and career goals are yours to decide.
18. In order to prepare yourself to obtain your intended career goal, you must take an active role in the career development and job preparation/search process. That “perfect job” won’t just magically land in your lap when you graduate – you need to prepare and work for it.
19. Higher education is a place to learn how to develop critical thinking skills and improve the quality of your life – not to just get a good paying job. Therefore, if you approach your faculty with an attitude of “I don’t care about anything except how much the job pays,” you are going to really irritate them because of your unrealistic and inappropriate expectations.
20. You are here to learn to think for yourself, therefore, in general, it is ok to disagree with another person’s (including your professor) **opinions**. But you should express them in a respectful manner if you do.
21. Unless directed to do otherwise, you should address your professors as “**Dr. Jones**” or “**Professor Jones**” (*if they don’t have a Ph.D.*), not “**Mr. Jones**”, “**Jones**”, “**Jim**” or “**James**”. This is how you show that person respect.
22. Anyone with a doctorate degree should always be address as “**Dr. Jones**” regardless of their position, unless directed to do otherwise. This is how you show that person respect.
23. Everyone you encounter on campus, (management, faculty, staff, and other students) should always be treated with respect. This means it is not appropriate to harass, ridicule, threaten or make insulting or threatening jokes to individuals. It is also not appropriate to treat other people as “sexual objects” where you treat them as nothing more than an object of your fantasies.
24. Since a healthy learning environment needs to be a place where people feel safe, any of the inappropriate activities listed in Item #23 above, will likely be responded to with harsh consequences, such as being kicked out of school.

How many of these hidden rules were you aware of before your started college?

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What does your response to the above question reveal about you?

Do you believe any of the Hidden Rules of Higher Education listed above conflict with values and Hidden Rules of any of your other “cultures” (*family, work, community, ethnic, religion, etc.*)? Explain your response.

If you do see conflict, how will they affect your educational journey? _____

What can you do to ensure these conflicts do not derail your journey? _____

Navigating the Hidden Rules Through Mentoring

For most people, learning the hidden rules can happen much quicker and easier if they have a mentor to help show them the way. Regardless of your background, you need to have at least one mentor in your life. Do you have mentor(s) who have **successfully** navigated the world of higher education in your life who can help you understand the hidden rules? If not, where can you find them? (*i.e. teachers, counselors, staff, bosses, family, friends, etc.*)

Test your understanding:

What is the main point of this assignment?

Why were you expected to do this exercise?

What type of person would need to do this exercise?

How well do you fit the profile of the person for whom this assignment was created?

Reflection: (*Write down your response after completing this assignment.*)
