



## **Mentoring At-Risk Students through the Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education**

Smith, Buffy  
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013

Book Review

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Dr. Smith's book addresses various issues plaguing the world of higher education in the United States. According to Smith, there is continued disparity between low-income and high-income families' access to the tools for academic achievement and unconscious cultural favoritism in academic institutions whose institutional culture is primarily informed by a White middle to upper class majority. Both patterns culminate into an amalgam of what Smith refers to as a hidden curriculum which students must master along with the formal curriculum in order to succeed academically. Because obtaining a college degree has the potential to increase a student's chances at financial security for themselves and their families, being unaware of the hidden curriculum within an academic institution could cost students a great deal.

If higher education is still viewed by many Americans to function as "a ladder for upper mobility for the masses of people who were not lucky enough to be born into wealthy families," then the limitation of access to higher education based on financial or cultural grounds is anathema to the American dream (1). If national morality does not sway the reader, Smith also presents a more utilitarian argument for those who see the civic benefits of a highly educated population (better health care centers, schools, social services, lower crime rates, and a stronger democracy). If those two arguments fall flat, Smith reminds the reader of President Obama's Administration's goal to increase the U.S. college graduation rate from 40 percent to 60 percent by 2025 (2).

What does this have to do with at-risk students? The population of students often categorized in this way represent a group whose struggles within the university might have more to do with being unaware of the rules of higher education and the hidden curriculum present in their

home institutions than a lack of ability, effort, or desire. Smith's research suggests that one way to help students (at-risk and others) would be to "implement a mentoring model that explicitly teaches students how to decode the hidden curriculum" (55).

Smith acknowledges that most educators do not want to admit that cultural and economic favoritism are pervasive in higher education, but research has proven otherwise. According to one 2011 survey referenced by the author, "senior college admission directors admitted to giving preferential treatment to wealthy students even if they had lower grades and test scores" (55). Full-pay and out-of-state students might find entrance into higher education easier than those needing financial assistance. Once low-income and underrepresented students make it onto campus, staying there requires facing challenges of a less overt nature... adjusting to the institution's culture. Utilizing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of institutional cultural capital, Smith describes universities as institutions embedded with the norms and values of the dominant group (in this case, often White, upper-class culture). Students are being 'graded' not only on their academic ability and progress but also their adherence to these norms and values (the hidden curriculum). According to Smith, the hidden curriculum is important because "teachers use it as an informal indicator of their students' ability and performance in the formal curriculum" (22).

If students are being graded on expectations of which they are unaware, then, per Smith, it is up to these institutions to unveil the hidden curriculum. Smith champions the academic mentor as best suited to teach students about the institutional cultural capital (cultural knowledge, behaviors, and skills that foster academic success). Academic mentors have insider knowledge of how their university works and often have access to privileged information and to social networks on campus.

Outlining three cycles of mentoring (advising, advocacy, and apprenticeship), informed by four theoretical perspectives (involvement theory, academic and social integration theory, social support theory, and theory on cognitive levels and developmental stages), Smith lays out a clear but also nuanced mentoring method. While studying the systematic marginalization of students uninitiated into the culture of higher education may lead researchers to despair, Smith's method offers many examples of how mentorship can empower and enrich the lives of both mentees and mentors. Smith's steps recommend that mentors advise (tell students what they should do), then advocate (motivate and connect students with key resources on campus), and then, in the apprenticeship phase, "empower mentees to transform into powerful social agents who determine their academic destiny" (62-64). Her model does suggest the view that academic mentoring is a great deal like teaching... just at an intensive level. As an academic advisor, I was especially impressed with the conclusion's section on the benefits of colleges

creating mentoring institutions. Having seen students stumble unaware of the institutional culture and academic etiquette required to succeed in higher education, I hope to bring some of these theories and practices to the attention of the advising community at my university.

Notably best suited for administrators and faculty within institutions of higher education, this text would also be insightful to any reader interested in education reform, academic advising and mentoring, and social equity in education. It would not hurt readers to have some familiarity with academic theory from the disciplines of sociology and education but the author does not assume that her readers are well versed in either and provides well-summarized definitions of crucial theoretical terms and concepts throughout the book. Perhaps what I found most helpful in the book were the multitude of fictionalized examples (based on actual experiences of students and mentors) of the hidden curriculum in action which illuminated for me the variety of struggles many at-risk students face.

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