

The Covert Curriculum: The Lifelong Learning Skills You Can Learn in College

by [Drew Appleby](#), Director of Undergraduate Studies in Psychology - Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

Category: [Faculty/Teaching/Curriculum](#)

Two distinct curricula exist within a college student's undergraduate experience. The obvious one--the overt curriculum--consists of the classes listed on the student's transcript and the knowledge the student acquires in these classes (i.e., specific facts, concepts, and theories). The less obvious--but more important curriculum--is the covert curriculum, which is composed of the skills and characteristics the student develops as a result of successfully completing the overt curriculum. Colleges and universities often call these "lifelong learning skills" because they refer not to the specific information that students acquire during their formal education (i.e., the contents of their education), but to how successfully they can continue to acquire information after their formal education has ended (i.e., the processes they developed as they acquired the contents of their education). Put in a chronological context, the overt curriculum stresses the knowledge a person has achieved in the past, whereas the covert curriculum emphasizes the abilities and characteristics that will enable individuals to continue to acquire new knowledge and attain new skills in the future, both on the job and in their personal lives. A psychometrist would refer to the products of the overt curriculum as "achievement" (i.e., what you already know) and the results of the covert curriculum as "aptitude" (i.e., your ability to acquire new skills or knowledge in the future).

In an article entitled "A Human Capital Approach to Academic Advising," Shaffer (1997) stated, "Human capital is created when people acquire transferable skills that can be applied in many settings and that can inform many different occupations" (p. 6). Shaffer used the phrase "investment in human capital" (p. 6) to refer to actions taken by individuals to increase their productivity. Savvy university students understand the concept of human capital and seek out academic experiences that will enable them to develop it. The result of this wise investment in their human capital is greater success and satisfaction in their future careers as well as in their personal, social, and civic lives. Uninformed students often behave as if their future success depends solely upon the ability to master the overt curriculum (i.e., to learn all the facts, concepts, and theories presented in their classes) and to obtain documents that proves this mastery (i.e., a college diploma). These students spend most of their time and energy on the acquisition of course content so they can graduate with a high GPA. Savvy students also understand the value of acquiring the knowledge presented in their classes and performing well on tests, but they are also keenly aware of the value of the covert curriculum. As a result, they make a conscious effort to continually improve their skills and refine their attitudes. Hettich (1998) lists many examples of the covert curriculum, some of which are given below. The majority of undergraduate psychology majors enter the work force immediately after they

graduate. If you are one of these, please consider the value of applying the following examples of the covert curriculum within the contexts of both your future workplace and your personal life.

Reading With Comprehension and Identifying Major Points

People who are employed in management positions (i.e., the kinds of positions to which most college graduates aspire) are constantly in search of new ideas and methods to help them perform their jobs more successfully. They understand they must keep up with the current literature in their profession and obtain relevant information from other printed sources such as books, magazines, and trade publications. Reading complex written materials rapidly, comprehending their contents, differentiating between relevant and irrelevant information, and identifying major points are all skills that can be developed and strengthened in school. Studying the contents of reading assignments for tests is an excellent way to develop these valuable job skills. Savvy students do not read assignments just to say their eyes have passed over all the words on all the pages; they read assignments to learn new materials because they realize this is a skill that will help them for the rest of their lives, both on and off the job.

Communicating in a Clear, Organized, and Persuasive Manner

The ability to communicate in a clear, organized, and persuasive manner is one of the most crucial characteristics of successfully employed people. The inability to do so leaves others confused about what we have written or said (because we are unclear), convinced that we do not know what we are talking or writing about (because we are unorganized), and unlikely to do what we ask them to do (because we are not persuasive). College is full of opportunities to sharpen communication skills. All students take basic communication courses such as English Composition and Fundamentals of Speech because they are required to do so. Unfortunately, most students take these courses simply to "get them out of the way" rather than to actually learn something from them. Savvy students take more advanced courses in these areas and seek out experiences that will require them to polish their ability to communicate because they understand that strong communication skills will help them to distinguish themselves from others during the employment acquisition process (i.e., cover-letter writing, resume production, and interviewing).

Writing in a Particular "Style"

Students must not only learn to write clearly, but they must also learn to write with "style." The majority of academic disciplines require their students to write in a particular style, which has specific requirements in regard to format, citations, references, and supporting evidence. Psychology students learn to write in the style prescribed by the American Psychological Association (i.e., APA style). Although few psychology majors will find that their employers require them to write in APA style, most will be required to learn and use some type of prescribed writing style. This may take the form of grant proposals, annual reports, employee performance appraisals, client progress reports, requests for insurance payments, or formal requests--including appropriate documentation--for promotion or salary increases. The inability to write these documents in the appropriate style often results in the unwillingness of others to provide the requested results (e.g., the denial of a request for a promotion or salary increase, the rejection of grant proposals or insurance claims, or a reprimand from a supervisor for an unacceptable annual report or set of employee performance appraisals). Learning to write in one

style (e.g., APA) provides the opportunity to pay close attention to the directions of a writing assignment, to follow these directions carefully, and to produce written work that accomplishes its goal(s).

Listening Attentively

Successful employees listen carefully and attentively to their supervisors' instructions, understand what these instructions mean (or ask for clarification to improve their understanding), and then carry out these instructions in an accurate and complete manner. Lectures and tests serve as excellent practice for this valuable skill. Think of lectures as the instructions, and tests as the tasks that must be carried out according to these instructions. Listening attentively and actively, comprehending complicated and/or complex information, and then using this information to answer questions or solve problems are skills that are as valuable in the workplace as they are in the classroom.

Taking Accurate Notes

Employees must often listen to others and accurately remember what they hear. This could take place in a one-on-one situation (e.g., a supervisor giving instructions to an employee) or in groups (e.g., during presentations or workshops). Unless the amount of information provided is very small or the employee's memory is phenomenally large, it is usually a wise idea to take notes. This may seem like a simple task, but successful note taking requires practice. Learning how to listen for important points, summarizing and organizing large amounts of complex information, and writing notes so they are understandable at a later time are important skills. College classes provide wonderful opportunities to practice this crucial skill, and the feedback that students receive on tests can provide them with valuable information that can help them sharpen their note-taking ability.

Mastering Efficient Memory Strategies

All jobs require employees to remember things (e.g., customers' names, meeting dates and times, locations of important information, etc.). Memory refers to the ability to select, store, and use information, and these skills are vital to effective and efficient workplace behavior. The results of a lack of memory skills are confusion, disorganization, and incompetence. Employees who exhibit these characteristics are seldom promoted, receive minimal salary increases, and often lose their jobs. College is the natural place to learn about your memory and how to use it. Psychology majors have an advantage in this area because memory is a topic in many of their classes (e.g., cognition, learning, and human development).

Demonstrating Critical Thinking Skills

Employees must not only be able to remember vital information (i.e., *retention*), they must also be capable of thinking about what they remember in a number of important ways. They must *comprehend* information so they can communicate it to others in an understandable manner. They must *apply* the information they comprehend in order to solve problems in the workplace. They must *analyze* large, complex problems or sources of information into smaller, more manageable units and understand how these units fit together to form the larger whole (e.g.,

dividing a large task into several subtasks and then setting up a time line to complete the subtasks). They must locate, gather, and *synthesize* (i.e., combine) information from a variety of different sources into new and creative ideas and methods. Finally, they must *evaluate* ideas and methods by applying appropriate criteria to determine their value or usefulness. These are the thinking skills that are crucial (i.e., critical) for success in college, in the workplace, and in our personal and social lives. That is why they are called critical thinking skills.]

Submitting Assignments on Time and in Acceptable Form

Employers pay their employees to perform their jobs accurately, completely, and in a timely manner. Employees are terminated if they cannot perform their jobs (i.e., their work is incorrect, incomplete, and/or late). Learning how to submit assignments that are accurate, complete, and submitted on time is a skill that has obvious value in the workplace. Learning to write in a particular academic style is good practice to learn how to conform to the specific writing requirements of the workplace (e.g., legal briefs or annual reports).

Behaving in a Responsible, Punctual, Mature, and Respectful Manner

Employees who fail to show up for work, who are often late, or whose behaviors can be interpreted as immature or disrespectful are seldom employed for long. College is the perfect time to become aware of these negative traits and to develop strategies to eliminate them before they become fatal flaws in the workplace (e.g., leaving home a little earlier so you can arrive for class on time even if the traffic is bad or treating your instructors and peers with respect even when they are wrong).

Managing Stress and Conflict Successfully

Employees are often exposed to stressful working conditions and are required to work with less-than-perfect fellow employees. Stress management and conflict management are essential skills that successful employees possess. The college years are filled with opportunities--both formal (e.g., a stress-management class) and informal (e.g., learning how to get along with the "roommate from hell")--to develop them. Most organizations expect their employees to possess these skills when they begin their jobs, and they rapidly weed out those who do not. It is vitally important to understand that these skills are also crucial to the ability to lead a healthy and successful life when a person is not on the job.

Organizing the Physical Environment to Maximize Efficiency

Employees must be able to organize their physical environments so they can perform their jobs competently and efficiently. Appearing confused, making mistakes, and losing important information are often caused by poor organizational skills. College is an ideal time to learn how to set up a work space (e.g., a desk, a portable file, and a bookcase) in a manner that promotes organization and efficiency. Develop a system to organize the materials for each of your classes (e.g., the syllabus, notes, handouts, assignments, and tests) so that when finals week occurs, you will not panic because you cannot locate the information you need to study for your exams.

Observing and Evaluating the Attitudes and Behaviors of Role Models

Successful employees quickly learn the culture of their organization by observing their supervisors and successful fellow employees. Learning which behaviors to avoid (e.g., flirting with fellow employees and coming to work late) and which to imitate (e.g., dressing in a professional manner and staying late to complete important tasks) is a crucial skill for an employee who wishes to remain with an organization, receive above-average salary increases, and earn promotions. Being willing and able to observe and evaluate the attitudes and behaviors of role models can be the factors that mean the difference between (a) just putting in eight hours every day at a dead-end job because you need the paycheck and (b) actually relishing the idea of getting up and going to work every morning for an organization that makes you feel comfortable, productive, and valued.

Maintaining an Accurate Planner or Calendar

Successful employees in today's fast-paced world must be capable of managing their time and controlling their complicated schedules. Behaving in a temporally clueless manner (e.g., forgetting meetings, neglecting appointments, and missing deadlines) are all signposts on the road to the unemployment office. The ability to maintain an accurate appointment book that lists the dates of tests and assignments--and the dates when you should begin to prepare for them--is something that all college students should master. Without such a calendar, the complex and demanding life of a college student becomes a series of frightening surprises ("I walked into class this morning expecting a lecture, and the teacher was passing out the test I thought we were taking next week."), panic-producing discoveries ("Oh my God, you mean the final draft of our term paper is due TOMORROW!") and bitter disappointments ("I'm sorry you missed the test, but if you had read the syllabus, you would know that I give makeup tests only when I have received an excuse before, not after, the test is given.").

Working as a Productive Member of a Team

Employers pay employees to perform complex tasks that almost always require some degree of teamwork--very few people work alone. The ability to work as a productive member of a successful team and to be seen as a team player requires a set of crucial skills and characteristics that must be acquired through practice, and what better place to practice these skills than in school where mistakes are far less costly than in the work place. *Team players* are those who communicate clearly, are responsible, work well in groups, prefer to cooperate rather than compete, and are goal oriented. Many university students attempt to avoid projects in which they must collaborate with their peers because they fear their grades will suffer. What they do not realize is that even if their grades do not suffer, their future on-the-job performance will.

Interacting Successfully With a Wide Variety of People

The working world is filled with people who differ in many ways. Successful employees are those who have developed the ability to interact in a congenial and productive manner with a wide variety of people (e.g., a supervisor who is older, a client of a different race, or a coworker with a different sexual orientation). Some people seem to be naturally comfortable with diversity, but for those who are not, the university setting is the perfect place to develop this crucial characteristic. The best way for students to become more comfortable with people who are different from themselves is to take advantage of curricular and extracurricular activities that will

bring them in contact with groups of diverse people. The worst thing they can do is to isolate themselves from diversity by deciding to live, work, and spend their leisure time with only those people who are like themselves.

Seeking Feedback About Performance and Using It to Improve Future Performance

Employees are hired to perform certain duties. Those who succeed at their duties gain rewards such as promotions and raises; those who are unsuccessful remain at lower positions and pay levels or are terminated. Savvy employees understand that their performance must satisfy not only their own standards of quality, but also the standards of their supervisor(s). The willingness to actively seek feedback from supervisors about task performance and the ability to use this feedback to improve future performance are crucial traits of successful employees. Students can develop these traits by paying close attention to the written and verbal feedback they receive on tests and papers, by asking for feedback when it is not given, and by using the feedback they receive to improve their future tests and papers. Grades are important components of feedback, but grades do not tell students how to improve their future performance.

Accepting Responsibility for Your Own Behavior and Attitudes

Being able to act in a responsible manner is the cornerstone of personal growth and professional maturity in any occupation. College is the perfect time to learn how to take responsibility for your own actions (rather than blaming your failures on others), and to understand that it is the way you interpret external circumstances that determines how you will respond to them, not the circumstances themselves. College is also the perfect time to learn how to be a person who is regarded as responsible by others. Responsible people are those who do what they say they will do, in a timely and competent manner, even when the circumstances are less than ideal.

Utilizing Technology

The world is becoming increasingly technologically sophisticated, and the person who can't use computers to identify, locate, acquire, store, organize, display, and analyze verbal, numerical, or visual information is likely to find employment in only the most menial job. Even the servers who ask "would like fries with that" must input your order into a computerized cash register. Your college classes will require you to write papers with word-processing programs (e.g., Word), organize information with databases (e.g., Access), manipulate numbers with spreadsheets (e.g., Excel), analyze data with statistical programs (e.g., SPSS), perform literature searches with bibliographic databases (e.g., *PsychInfo*), enhance speeches with presentation software (e.g., PowerPoint), communicate with teachers and fellow students via e-mail (e.g., Outlook), and locate information on the Internet with search engines (e.g., AltaVista). Savvy students master these computer skills in college so they don't have to learn them on the job.

Conclusions

It is not hard to understand how the above-mentioned skills can help you function successfully in the workplace. It is also not difficult to understand how these skills will help you

achieve success and happiness in your personal and social life as well. Being able to communicate clearly, listen attentively, act responsibly, manage stress, deal with conflict, think critically, act as a team player, and interact successfully with a wide variety of people are the skills you will need not only to be a successful employee, but also in your life outside the workplace as a successful partner, parent, friend, neighbor, and citizen. That is why they are called lifelong learning skills.

References

Hettich, P. I. (1998). *Learning skills for college and career* (2nd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Shaffer, L. S. (1997). A human capital approach to academic advising. *National Academic Advising Association Journal*, 17, 5-12.