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Manifestations of Hidden Curriculum in a Community College Online Opticianry Program: An Ecological Approach

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Manifestations of Hidden Curriculum in a Community College
Online Opticianry Program: An Ecological Approach

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Manifestations of Hidden Curriculum in a Community College

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the influential factors at work within an online learning environment is a growing area of interest. Hidden or implicit expectations, skill sets, knowledge, and social process can help or hinder student achievement, belief systems, and persistence. This qualitative study investigated how hidden curricular issues transpired in an online learning environment's institutional and organization systems using an ecological paradigm. A phenomenological approach rooted in a case study context was used to explore the experiences and perceptions of a group of students, faculty, and administrators involved with an online academic program (opticianry) at a community college. Interviews, non-participant observation, and a researcher reflective journal was employed in the data collection process to better understand: 1) how organizational and institutional systems contribute to the manifestation of hidden curricular issues, 2) how differences and similarities in perceptions between students, faculty, and administrators contribute to hidden curricular issues, and 3) how hidden curriculum issues manifest in online and distance learning environments.

Themes related to the first research question emerged as: 1) Accessibility/Flexibility Differences; 2) Disconnect in Conveying and Perceiving the

Professional Culture; and 3) Disconnected from College; and 4) Differences in Website Usability. Themes related to the second research were reported according to each participant group (faculty, staff, and student) then compared for similarities and discrepancies. Themes in this area for the faculty group included: 1) Workload and Time, and 2) Lack of Support for Online/Distance Learning Processes. Emergent staff themes for this question included: 1) Lack of Resources, 2) Preference for Face-to-Face Interaction, 3) Academic Program Disconnect, and 4) Faculty Interference. Lastly, student themes for this area included: 1) Student Services, 2) Faculty Assistance, and 3) Limited Interaction. Finally, global hidden curricular issues associated with institutional and organizational systems related to this case study manifested in the forms of: 1) Support Functions, 2) Advocacy, and 3) Conveying the Profession.

Chapter One

Introduction

“Teachers and school curricula have always had cognitive agendas that have remained hidden from the learner, the supposed beneficiary of the cognitive goals of instruction.”

Marfo, Mulcahy, Peat, Andrews, & Cho (1991, p. 81)

Problem Statement

Learning environments have long been examined to understand the full effects of how they act on shaping educational and other developmental aspects of those who experience them (Jackson, 1968; Apple, 1980; Eisner, 2002; Snyder, 1970; Tyler, 1969). The concept of a hidden curriculum was developed to refer to the unspoken or implicit values, behaviors, procedures, and norms that exist in the educational setting. While such expectations are not explicitly written or communicated in formal documentation, hidden curriculum is the unstated promotion and enforcement of certain behavioral patterns, professional standards, and social beliefs while navigating a learning environment. Once hidden curriculum is revealed, it is then able to be negotiated, manipulated, and changed which can ease learner transition, promote empowerment, increase academic achievement, inform practice, and guide design. Hidden curriculum that remains elusive or veiled can have a negative impact on the learning process and overall educational experience.

In Distance Education, hidden curriculum can take on different meanings and possess distinct implications due to the uniqueness of the environment, tools, and

resources involved. Anderson (2002) states that due to the distinctive components involved with distance education such as multimedia, computer-mediated environments, learning/course management systems, and electronic communication modes, a new context is created with the possible existence of new issues as they relate to hidden curriculum. Understanding how the hidden curriculum plays itself out in online learning and distance education environments is an important step in the advancement of distance education practices and the field of instructional technology.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to better understand the ways in which hidden curriculum manifests in distance education learning environments from an ecological standpoint. While hidden curriculum has been discussed and studied in K-12 and higher education learning environments, a clear need exists to compare applicability and/or determine new representations of the principles discovered in the face-to-face settings. Distance learning courses and those who act within them require in-depth study to fully understand how hidden curricular issues transpire (Anderson, 2002). Communication practices and modes have been identified as significant conduits for hidden curricular issues in other studies. Jackson (1968) concluded that students must learn and comply with the implicit expectations communicated within a classroom before they can focus on subject matter content. Snyder (1970) conducted studies on hidden curriculum at MIT and Wellesley College to help explain the reasons behind campus unrest and student anxiety. He asserted that unspoken academic and social norms significantly contributed to the dropping out of students and prevented the development of creative and independent thinking. Alessi and Trollip (2001) have discussed the presence of cultural

bias in the design and development process. They caution designers to be aware of their own cultural and stereotypical roles (*language and references*) and how it can be infused into the educational environment.

Media and other symbolic representations have been found to communicate implicit messages. Chandler (2002) found that since online environments are highly constructed, purposeful, and mediated environments, the implications of how language, culture, feelings, ideas, and thoughts play out through signs and symbols used is important. Both the presence and absence of symbolic representations can affect how learners make meaning and construct knowledge. Horn (2003) observed that media carries hidden or implicit messages and that those using media need to be aware of the implications. Kwak (2004) documented the power of the media to shape societal norms and influence perceptions and behavior of cultural groups such as African Americans and Asians. Media serves as an outlet for concerns, interests, ideals, attitudes, and beliefs.

Using an ecological perspective will assist in understanding the environmental influences and factors that may attribute to the manifestation of hidden curricular issues. Various theories exist describing and organizing the process and agents that act within classroom and campus settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1977/1995; Bowers & Flinders, 1990; Moos, 1974, 1979; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991/2005; Strange & Banning, 2001; Young, 2004). The constructivist viewpoint tells us that learning environments can shape the educational and learning experiences of learner depending upon how and what the student interacts with while in the environment (Reiser and Dempsey, 2007). The extent to which these issues and viewpoints are applicable and transferable to an online or distance learning environment has yet to be thoroughly described and explained.

Additionally, due to the vastness of possible issues and to keep the scope of the project manageable, it was prudent to focus on one aspect of the distance learning environment.

The literature provides insight into the possible issues and ways in which hidden curricular issues could manifest in a distance learning environment; however, an empirically-based study is needed to better understand how by conducting in-depth interviews with the agents involved and providing detailed insight into the institutional and organization dimensions of the learning environment. Furthermore, the concept of hidden curriculum used in this study is contemporary and holistic in nature to include collateral issues and environments both in and out of the classroom such as institutional policies, procedures, processes, and resources.

Research Questions

This study explored how hidden curricular issues manifest in distance learning program by using an ecological lens to focus on organizational and institutional systems.

The following questions were explored:

- How do organizational and institutional systems contribute to the manifestation of hidden curricular issues?
- How do differences and similarities in perceptions between students, faculty, and administrators contribute to hidden curricular issues?
- How does hidden curriculum manifest in online and distance learning environments?

Method

Discovering hidden or implicit phenomena that exist and act within a distance education environment requires a research approach aimed at exposing how a learner

assigns meaning when he or she interacts with the various elements present within the environment (e.g. text, graphics, policies, interaction, symbols, content, people, etc.). Many hidden curricular issues are the result of assumptions and expectations that are not formally communicated, established, or conveyed within the learning environment. Schutz (1967), as cited in Rubin and Rubin (2005), states that cultural lenses are “taken for granted” and invisible to most. The researcher must ask questions related to the “every day” dealings or ordinary events to begin to understand and learn about the culture. This helps to articulate an issue related to hidden curriculum; that implicit norms, expectations, and other manifestations may be difficult to identify by the researchers and participants because they are so engrained into the culture and day-to-day activities. Awareness of hidden curricular issues becomes a consideration which has direct implication on how to conduct research on the topic. Questions cannot be directly asked about specific aspects of hidden curriculum because they may not even be apparent and understandable to the participants or will not be broad enough to encompass all the possible issues at hand. Furthermore, the issue explored in this study is contemporary, broad, and unable to be controlled by the investigator, so it warrants using “how” or “why” questions to help gain understanding into the phenomenon (Yin, 1994).

For these reasons, the qualitative methodology best fit the need for exploring hidden curricular issues in online learning environments. A phenomenological methodology was employed, coupled with a case study analysis, to unearth the lived experiences of students, faculty, and staff associated with an opticianry academic program that is facilitated online and at a distance.

Limitations/Delimitations

Anderson (2002) advocated that future research on hidden curriculum in distance and online learning environments will require a qualitative approach; however, with such a methodological approach comes certain limitations/delimitations. The study is limited by its small, purposeful sample which does not make the findings generalizable to the larger population. Additionally, the purposeful sample could leave out different perspectives and voices. The population to be studied is limited to an academic program at a large community college. Demographic information or variables are not being studied and therefore not being controlled or considered.

The role of the qualitative researcher requires awareness and disclosure of any personal beliefs and values. To avoid bias and ensure validity of the conclusions, an outside expert in qualitative analysis will be used to verify coding, rich, thick description will be used to support findings, members will be consulted to verify accuracy of the interviews, and a researcher reflective journal will be kept throughout the data collection process. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted using open-ended questions allowing interviewees to freely express their experiences and viewpoints.

Definition of Terms

Campus Ecology: “The study of the relationship between the student and the campus environment... the influence of environments on students and students on environments...the transactional relationship between students and their environment” (Banning, 1978, p. 5).

Case Study: The qualitative study of a bounded system (setting or context) that has more than 1 person in it with the purpose of understanding an event, activity, system, and/or program (Creswell, 2007).

Classroom Ecology: Environmental factors and practices transmitted within an educational classroom setting such as language processes and cultural patterns that affect behavior, attitudes, learning, beliefs, and performance (Bowers & Flinders, 1990).

Distance Education: “Planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching, requiring special course design and instruction techniques, communication through various technologies, and special organizational and administrative agreements” (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p. 2).

Ecology: Concept used to represent the study of organism-environment interaction.

Hidden Curriculum: Unstated promotion and enforcement of certain behavioral patterns, professional standards, and social beliefs while navigating a learning environment and/or experience; that which is unintentionally conveyed or taught in an educational system (Miller & Seller, 1990).

Institutional/Organization Systems: complexity and cultural press of a learning environment on a student, both in and outside of the classroom, to include but not limited to rules, procedures, regulations, level of efficiency, morale, attitudes, climate, complexity, distribution of power, and accessibility.

Learning Management System (LMS): An online system that is mediated electronically and allows for interaction, the delivery of content, management of resources, and assessment of learning (often often database-driven and secure).

Online Learning: Electronically mediated form of education usually facilitated through a computer that utilizes various forms of technology and media (also referred to as e-Learning, computer-based learning, computer-based training).

Phenomenology: The qualitative examination a group of people who have experienced a common or shared issue or phenomenon; an “object” of human experience (Creswell, 2007).

Semiotics: Study of signs or symbols and their perceived meaning by others (Chandler, 2002).

Socio-Cultural: Issues or characteristics relating to the social and cultural practices, beliefs, paradigms, lenses, and traditions of a group or segment of society.

Web-Portal: A web-site that presents information from different sources in an integrated manner (often database-driven, secure, and customizable).

Web-Site: A collection of content-related HTML-based/written web pages that are usually hosted on a common server and most commonly access through the Internet.

Conclusion

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the need for this research and briefly introduced significant concepts related to hidden curriculum and ecology. Understanding how the various socio-cultural aspects of distance and online learning environments function can have significant implications to the fields of instructional technology and distance education.

The next chapter will provide an in-depth overview of the significant and relevant literature related to hidden curriculum and classroom and campus ecology. Various contexts such as K-12, higher education, and distance education are reviewed. The

chapter concludes with a grouping of the literature thematically into categories to assist with operationalizing the study.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This section will provide an overview of the literature on hidden curriculum and classroom and campus ecology. The evolution of hidden curriculum as a concept and the nature of implicit messages will be explored as it relates to various contexts and settings such as K-12 education, higher education, online learning environments, and media. A brief definition and overview of several classroom and campus ecological models will then be presented to provide a framework for considering how hidden curricular issues could categorically manifest. Lastly, a delineation of the literature into the various ecological categories based on the given models will be offered to assist in operationalizing the study.

Defining Hidden Curriculum

The concept of a hidden curriculum was developed to refer to the unspoken or implicit values, behaviors, and norms that exist in the educational setting. While such expectations are not explicitly written or communicated in formal documentation, hidden curriculum is the unstated promotion and enforcement of certain behavioral patterns, professional standards, and social beliefs while navigating a learning environment and/or experience. In a broader sense, hidden curriculum can be that which is unintentionally conveyed or taught in an educational system (Miller & Seller, 1990). Once hidden curriculum is revealed, it is then able to be negotiated, manipulated, and changed which

can ease learner transition, promote empowerment, increase academic achievement, inform practice, and guide design.

The literature has had some debate about the word “hidden” and its appropriateness in this context (Vallance, 1973). Some have argued that the word suggests intentional or purposeful harm on the part of the educator while others state that it only represents a descriptor for that which is not revealed or apparent (Cornbleth, 1984; Margolis, 2001). For the purpose of this study, the term hidden is used in the latter sense and meaning of the word. It is not the assumption that hidden curriculum is the result of premeditated ill intent; that faculty or teachers are purposefully withholding or hiding information, materials, or expectations from students. It is used in this context, like many others, to represent the unintentional or the unaware. Other words such as implicit, embedded, or unspoken could be used instead; however, a case could likely be made that all similar descriptors could imply a negative connotation. Additionally, the use of the word has, for the most part, been established in the lexicon of the educational canon and poses a recognizable concept.

Furthermore, it is important to note that discussions and research on hidden curriculum have mainly focused on negative outcomes or consequences; however, limited reference has been made to possible positive results (Eisner, 2002). This study will mainly focus on the possible negative issues related to hidden curriculum but will report on any significant findings, negative or positive. Lastly, the study uses the concept of hidden curriculum in a broad sense as seen in contemporary literature on the subject. Peripheral and adjunct systems or environments found within the educational setting are in need of consideration and examination due to their influence and ability to shape

student attitudes, behaviors, achievement, and performance. This study uses the term hidden curriculum to include both classroom and institutional processes or agents that can manifest implicitly.

Hidden Curriculum in K-12 Settings

The concept of hidden curriculum mainly grew out of the literature on K-12 educational environments. Dewey (1948) discussed how one's experiences in the educational system can positively or negatively shape one's growth. His concept of *collateral learning*, those experiences or notions not related to subject matter or formal education objectives, speaks to the ability of an environment to convey messages and information which can contour future attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. In Gordon's (1957) book, *The Social System of High School*, an early formation of the concept was seen. The educational experiences of students are shaped and closely related to that of their greater social status in a community. Those whose families had greater influence and power in the community had easier times navigating and negotiating the school environment compared to those who had less social capital.

The earliest direct reference to the term, hidden curriculum, is accredited to Philip Jackson (1968). In his book, *Life in Classrooms*, he stated that before students can focus on learning subject matter content, they must first understand when and how to defer to the authority of the teacher, the system of learning, and the teacher's assessment of what constitutes progress. Jackson argued that the educational process includes a covert socialization practice that is not formally outlined but necessary to be successful. Students are required to conform and comply with expectations such as attentiveness, punctuality, and compliance; however, such expectations are not a part of the explicit

curricular goals and standards. Those who learn to comply with these expectations will be more successful compared to those who do not comply. Dreeben (1968) also argued that the educational system can influence and shape how students perceive themselves in terms of social relationships and identity. Certain norms and values are conveyed to students which assists in the formation of what it means to achieve and be independent in society.

Scholars expanded upon the idea of hidden curriculum to include factors such as economic class, labor preparation, social privilege, race, and gender (Apple, 1980, 1982; Giroux, 1978, 1981; Grant, 1992; Thorne, 1993). A number of critical theorists explored the issue of hidden curriculum and how it affected children in the K-12 system. Giroux (1978, 1981) argued that student achievement and learning is based more on the constructs and power relationships found in the school setting rather than the formal curricular goals put forth. Students who are not able to function in an environment where they have influence over their own educational path will result in poor achievement and the sustained social oppression of minority groups.

Anyon (1980) observed fifth grade classrooms from various social classes (lower, middle, and elite) and found differences in ways classroom instruction was conducted between the groups. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less challenged and tracked into educational programs that were designed to produce lower to mid working class skill sets and dispositions (obedient, docile). Those from higher socio-economic conditions were more often rewarded, challenged, and tracked into educational programs that were designed to prepare them for work in higher occupational positions

(managerial, college-prep). While all settings had explicit curricular objectives in the same subject areas, the approaches, experiences, and outcomes were vastly different.

Apple (1980, 1982) argued that schools mirror society's social strata and that hidden curriculum practices assisted with maintaining such class structures. Lower-class students were taught skills that would prepare them for unskilled- labor jobs while upper-class students were taught skills and dispositions that required critical thought and creativity which lent themselves to management and skilled-labor positions. Apple argued that schools had the opportunity to act as a counter-agent by acknowledging this form of hidden curriculum and using it to help elevate marginalized groups.

Communication and person-to-person interactions are not the only focus of hidden curriculum research. How other elements within the educational environment interact with and act upon the inhabitants have also been studied. Wren (1999) explored how symbolic aspects and representations found within the culture of the school setting, such as documents (handbooks, announcements, posters, mission statements, newsletters, reports), ceremonies, rules, field trips, and policies, establish expectations and values including. Such artifacts can promote inclusion or exclusion, depending on the messages conveyed and interpreted by students.

Implicit messages and values can also be represented in the very content and materials being used to achieve the explicit goals and objectives (Eisner, 2002; Vallance, 1973). Diagrams, illustrations, language, characters, and reward systems carry associations, customs, and viewpoints which can influence understanding and shape attitudes. The absence of women as referents in a literature passage on the medical profession can instill beliefs that only men should pursue a job in that particular field. Or

a picture book depicting a story about a person succeeding at sports with no ethnic or racial minority representations could mean that only white/Caucasian people should be considered as athletes.

Furthermore, Eisner (2002) argues that schools can instill in students the need for competitiveness, even at the cost of defeating another (through sports, educational games, ranking achievement). This can then influence the perception of one's personal ability and even self-worth by dividing and tracking students into special groups (honors, special need, advanced placement). Schools can influence what subjects are deemed important based on the amount of time spent studying the subject. Elective status and less time on physical education, art, music could translate into diminished value of the discipline. This argument relates to Noddings' (1992) assertions that students are not able to choose content of interest to them; instead curriculum and subject matter is prescribed and forced upon them which can affect performance and attitudes toward learning. Furthermore, schools should use their influence to instill a sense of caring versus competitiveness and achievement. This would require institutions to make personal connections between and among all those involved in the learning process and to use the curriculum to model and develop attitudes and skills to achieve this goal.

Lastly, it is important to mention Eisner's concept of the *null curriculum* due to its close relationship to the idea of hidden curriculum. The null curriculum constitutes that which is not taught or mentioned in intellectual processes and subject matter. The exclusion of certain topics, representations, experiences, and/or values can also propagate implicit messages and expectations. Flinders, Noddings, and Thornton (1986) also explored the notion of null curriculum and its conceptual applicability and utility to the

field of curriculum study and development. They concluded while the concept is challenging to specifically delineate, its relevance is valid.

Most of the literature on hidden curriculum in the K-12 arena has focused on specific phenomena (socio-political influences, subject areas) or affected groups (race, gender). Frameworks or models have not been produced to empirically explain in a more systematic way how hidden curricular issues may manifest. Portelli (1993) identified four themes related to how hidden curriculum has been regarded in the K-12 literature: 1) unofficial expectations; 2) unintended learning outcomes; 3) implicit messages as a result of the structure of schooling; and 4) student-created expectations. Although this does not represent a comprehensive framework, it does provide a categorical means to conceptualize how hidden curriculum has been discussed in K-12 settings.

Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education

While much of the research and discussion on the hidden curriculum has been related to the K-12 educational environment, the concept has also been explored in higher education settings. A distinction is made between the two educational settings in this literature review due to the unique environmental factors and differences present in each (population, socio-political players, choice of attending, funding structures, etc.). Shortly after Jackson's (1968) publication, Snyder (1970) conducted studies on hidden curriculum at MIT and Wellesley College to help explain the reasons behind campus unrest and student anxiety. He asserted that unspoken academic and social norms significantly contributed to the dropping out of students and prevented the development of creative and independent thinking.

Berghenegouwen (1987) observed that the university operates to socialize students in four ways: 1) to distance one's self so as to become detached or emotionless toward the area of study in order to prevent bias; 2) to become familiar with the profession's terminology, concepts, and ways of conduct; 3) to put up a front of self-assurance and confidence regarding their area of study and expertise; and 4) to recognize and appreciate the satisfaction gained from achievement. He argues, "The hidden curriculum in university can be described as the whole of informal and implicit demands of study and study achievements that are to be met for someone to complete units of study. The teachers' informal demands are made partly consciously and partly unconsciously" (pp. 536-537). Berghenegouwen's view primarily focuses on experiences and influential factors that transpire through the classroom between faculty and student. Aspects such as co-curricular activities, organizational structures, and socio-cultural dimensions are not explored.

Margolis and Romero (1998) used Berghenegouwen's work to explain the environmental demands present on students in a sociology graduate program. They found a covert reproduction and perpetuation of oppressive societal attitudes and actions within the department's policies, expectations, and overall climate toward minority racial, ethnic, and gender groups. Margolis (2001) later compiled a collection of works related to the hidden curriculum found in higher education which ranged from navigating graduate advising process (Acker, 2001) to the presence of perpetuating social stratification in professional school through the programs' admissions processes (Costello, 2001). Various topics were presented to demonstrate the wide range of agents

at play, not only within the classroom, but from administrative and other systems within the entire educational context.

Although not explicitly classified as a hidden curricular issue, Biglan's (1973) taxonomy outlines the ways in which academic disciplines are similar and different in their behavioral patterns and general ethos. He found that vast differences exist with regard to presentation style, approach to intellectual investigation, and reliance on other fields to support research endeavors. He concludes that scholars in varying disciplines have different ways of looking at the same issue or phenomena. Also, Donald (2002) explored in her book, *Learning to Think*, how each academic discipline embodies and promotes different thinking practices, knowledge paradigms, and characteristics. Institutions, departments, and faculty convey these expectations and traditions to students in both explicit and implicit ways. This idea supports other work done on hidden curricular issues found in higher education settings (Ahola, 2000; Bergenhenegouwen, 1987; Margolis & Romero, 1998).

Ahola (2000) developed a hidden curriculum model for the higher education setting based on the work of Bergenhenegouwen (1987) and Margolis and Romero (1998). Although not empirically tested, he argued that hidden curriculum in higher education settings can be categorized into four dimensions. The first dimension, *Learning to Learn*, entails the assumption that students are adequately prepared to navigate the demands of the higher education academic landscape. Although students arrive at institutions of higher learning with many years of schooling, the culture and expectations of higher education pose new challenges and demands that can be quite different than previous experiences causing students to learn new strategies and roles as a learner. The

second dimension, *Learning the Profession*, speaks to discipline-specific expectations and nuances that students must come to understand and model. This dimension possesses a relationship to Biglan's (1973) taxonomy and Donald's (2002) work on how each discipline embodies different thinking practices and characteristics. The next dimension, *Learning to be an Expert*, involves learning how to think scientifically and adhering to the traditions of the academy. The last dimension is titled *Learning the Game* which Ahola states is the most profound of the four. This aspect states that students must learn various social expectations or rules that reside within a educational environment and understand how to negotiate them effectively.

The literature on hidden curriculum in higher education settings has largely focused on how environmental influences shape and condition students to be agents of an academic discipline and profession. Some work has explored how implicit organizational processes and administrative complexities affect the success and persistence of students. Lastly, socio-cultural issues dealing with race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status have been mentioned, although to a lesser extent.

Hidden Curriculum in Distance and Online Learning Environments

In Distance Education, hidden curriculum can possibly take on different meanings and possess distinct implications due to the uniqueness of the environment, tools, and resources involved. Understanding how the hidden curriculum plays itself out in online learning and distance education environments is an important step in the advancement of the instructional technology field. Examining the environmental factors present in online environments will help provide additional insight into the ways in which hidden curricular issues could manifest.

As seen in the literature thus far, interaction is a key element in hidden curriculum. Moore (1989) describes ways in which participants within an online learning environment can interact: learner-content, learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-interface. All of these interactions provide opportunities for the learner to create meaning, construct knowledge, and establish beliefs. Such exchanges set the stage for expectations, interpretations, and assumptions based on how the student interacts with the various elements present within the environment. Learners in online and distance education settings are, like in face-to-face situations, negotiating their encounters with content, instructors, and other students which allows for the manifestation of hidden curricular issues.

Feenberg and Bellman (1990) have discussed how distance and online education has moved away from an industrial model to a more critical approach where there are opportunities for mediated communication and a growing focus on the socio-cultural context and presence in the learning environment. The location, arrangement, and functionality of the online learning environment's communication features all influence the effectiveness of group communication just as would the placement of chairs, tables, and other physical structures in a face to face environment.

Culture and the social shaping of an individual also plays an important role in the manifestation of hidden curriculum. Alessi and Trollip (2001) discuss the presence of cultural bias in the instructional design and development process. They caution designers to be aware of their own cultural and stereotypical roles (*language and references*) and how they can be infused into such elements as the user interface, content, and overall design architecture. The use of metaphor in design choices can mean different things to

different people. Symbols and punctuation can have different meanings and functions across different cultures and countries which can lead to different interpretations.

Additionally, they discuss how the use or non-use of pronouns (gender bias) or names (racial bias) to describe characters or people in a certain kind of jobs can imply roles or expectations.

Using the elements related to distance education environments, Anderson (2002) attempted to construct an online learning hidden curriculum model by translating Ahola's (2000) framework. He stated that due to the unique components involved with distance education such as multimedia, computer-mediated environments, learning/course management systems, and communication modes, a new context is created with the possible existence of new issues as they relate to hidden curriculum. The same categories from Ahola's model are used to outline the ways in which hidden curriculum can manifest (*learning to learn, learning the profession, learning to be an expert, and learning the game*); however the descriptions in each category were modified to account for the components and considerations listed above. Table 2.1 provides an overview of Anderson's assertions as compared to Ahola's original model.

While insightful, Anderson's model lacks empirical support and possibly leaves out other factors that are unique to the online learning experience. His argument focuses heavily on access/usability concerns and communication avenues and excludes much of the socio-cultural aspects seen in the literature previously. While the issues raised are relevant and important factors, the use of Ahola's categories and overall framework has proven problematic by its limited ability to illustrate a more comprehensive picture.

Table 2.1

Comparison of Ahola (2000) and Anderson (2002)

	Ahola (2000)	Anderson (2002)
Learning to Learn	How do students learn to be a student?	Does the elearner know how to use the technology involved?
	How do students learn how to study and learn?	Does the elearner know how to pace and structure her or himself?
Learning the Profession	How do students learn their discipline's practices?	How can elearners interact with others to learn the field's values and norms?
	How do students learn their profession's practices?	How can elearning opportunities be afforded to life-long learners?
Learning to be an Expert	How do students learn scientific practices?	How can expertise be effectively communicated or displayed?
	How do students learn to navigate the academy?	How can expertise be defended?
Learning the Game	How do students learn the "rules" or acquire information about the environment?	How can elearners confer with other students to learn the "rules?"
	How do student learn to "play" or negotiate in the environment?	How can elearners be supported by campus resources and contacts?

the socio-cultural aspects seen in the literature previously. While the issues raised are relevant and important factors, the use of Ahola's categories and overall framework has proven problematic by its limited ability to illustrate a more comprehensive picture. This is due to the exclusion of a systematic study explaining how the process of hidden curriculum is fully represented. Furthermore, the research upon which the model is derived looked mainly at classroom interactions and relationships (instructor-student and classroom-student). Other affective considerations such as the organizational or administrative processes involved in higher education, the institutional/campus culture,

and an individual's constructed meaning of the learning environment are not considered in his model.

Implicit Messages through Media

Since online and distance learning endeavors often use computer mediated environments and a significant amount of multimedia to facilitate learning experiences, it is prudent to present literature on how such settings and tools (web-based environments, text, video, images, etc.) can carry and transmit implicit messages. As mentioned previously, online and computer mediated environments use metaphor to represent various symbolic elements (Alessi & Trollip, 2001). Semiotics is the study of signs or symbols and their perceived meaning by others (Chandler, 2002). Both the presence and absence of symbolic representations could have effect on how learners make meaning and construct knowledge. For example, the use of a metaphor to represent navigation, content, or other representational artifacts found in online learning environments could be familiar to some while indiscernible to others. Do the user controls for a media player incorporate play, stop, and pause symbols that are known to all of the users? How can navigation (home page, exit/logout, advance, go back) and layout of the learning environment be graphically represented to account for all user interpretations? Since online environments are highly constructed, purposeful, and mediated environments, the implications of how language, culture, feelings, ideas, and thoughts play out through the signs and symbols used is an important consideration of hidden curriculum and online learning environments.

Related to semiotics, Luke (2005) explored how web portals and participation in online networks influence and shape one's understanding of cultural phenomenon. By

interacting with a web-portal, users are exposed to a number of commercial advertisements and messages which carry various implicit messages. Users are often tracked or monitored for insight into personal interests so they can be targeted with and exposed to certain types of marketing. The result is an acculturation into capitalistic practices which can shape opinions, attitudes, and understanding of a variety of issues and concepts. While this work primarily focuses on the role consumerism plays in shaping digital literacy, digital identity, and personal empowerment, strong correlations can be made to educational settings which make use of web portals and learning management systems, media, the Internet, and World Wide Web as teaching and learning tools or resources.

Media, such as video, text, animations, and images are used heavily in online and distance education learning environments. Horn (2003) observed that media carry hidden or implicit messages and that those using media need to be aware of the implications. Furthermore, students need to understand and learn to recognize how such messages manifest themselves in media so they can be more aware of and process any possible influential messages. Kwak (2004) documented the power of the media to shape societal norms and influence perceptions, attitudes, and behavior toward cultural groups such as African Americans and Asians. Media serves as an outlet for concerns, interests, ideals, attitudes, and beliefs. The author argues that implicit messages can shape cultural identities and social mores just as much as explicit reflection. Dines and Humez (2003) presented a number of works by various authors regarding how media carries implicit messages pertaining to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and disability.

Implicit messages and values can be represented in the very content, materials, and learning environments being used to achieve the explicit goals and objectives (Eisner, 2002; Vallance, 1973). Diagrams, illustrations, language, characters, and reward systems carry associations, customs, and viewpoints which can influence understanding and shape attitudes. Ladson-Billings (2005) noted the considerable lack of African American figures, history, and other references in mainstream and educational literature. Along these lines, the absence of women as referents in a literature passage on the medical profession can instill beliefs that only men should pursue a job in this field. Or a picture book depicting a story about succeeding at sports with no racial or ethnic minority representations could mean that only white/Caucasian people should be considered as athletes.

The heavy use of media in online and distance education makes these assertions and findings particularly relevant. Since media possesses the ability to communicate implicit messages, careful consideration must be taken when media elements are created and implemented in the learning environment.

Classroom and Campus Ecology

Understandably, the creation of a comprehensive model detailing every manifestation of hidden curriculum in an educational environment is not realistic. However, a general framework can be provided to help guide online and distance education designers, administrators, and faculty to understand how hidden curriculum manifests and effects those associated with the learning environment. A common theme throughout the literature on hidden curriculum is the extent to which environmental factors (communication, interaction, administration or organizational processes,

artifacts/symbols, etc.) shape and influence the educational experience in unintended ways. Drawing upon an ecological perspective to assist in establishing a framework seems prudent because it allows for the consideration of how multiple influences concurrently interact with and influence an individual over a given time within an environment.

While the term ecology has mostly been associated with the environmental and natural sciences, the concept has been used to explain how organizational processes and agents such as physical elements, perceptions, people, language, and socio-cultural factors interact and influence each other within a given system. Kurt Lewin (1936) provided a seminal perspective with the equation $B=f(P \times E)$ to help explain why people behave as they do; that behavior (B) is a function (f) of the interaction (x) of a person (P) and environment (E). Because not every person will respond or react in the exact same way to a given situation, personal characteristics in conjunction with the various environmental factors at work within an environment should both be explored.

Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1995) described human behavior as the result of complex interactions between five different subsystems in his *Ecological Systems Theory*. The *microsystem* includes structures closest or most immediate to the individual such as family, school, and neighborhood. Interactions within this subsystem are *bi-directional*, meaning both the individual and the structure can act upon each other. The *mesosystem* involves the relationships between structures at the microsystem level such as between an individual's family and school. The *exosystem* refers to other external social environments to which the individual is linked. Direct involvement with this subsystem may or may not occur; however, he or she is still indirectly influenced by happenings and

situations that transpire. The *macrosystem* is comprised of the larger cultural and social environment (national, political, economic, etc.). Lastly, the *chronosystem* is represented by the events and transitions experienced over time by the individual. As illustrated in Figure 2.1, each system and the structures found within all have the ability to directly and indirectly influence behavior, beliefs, and development.

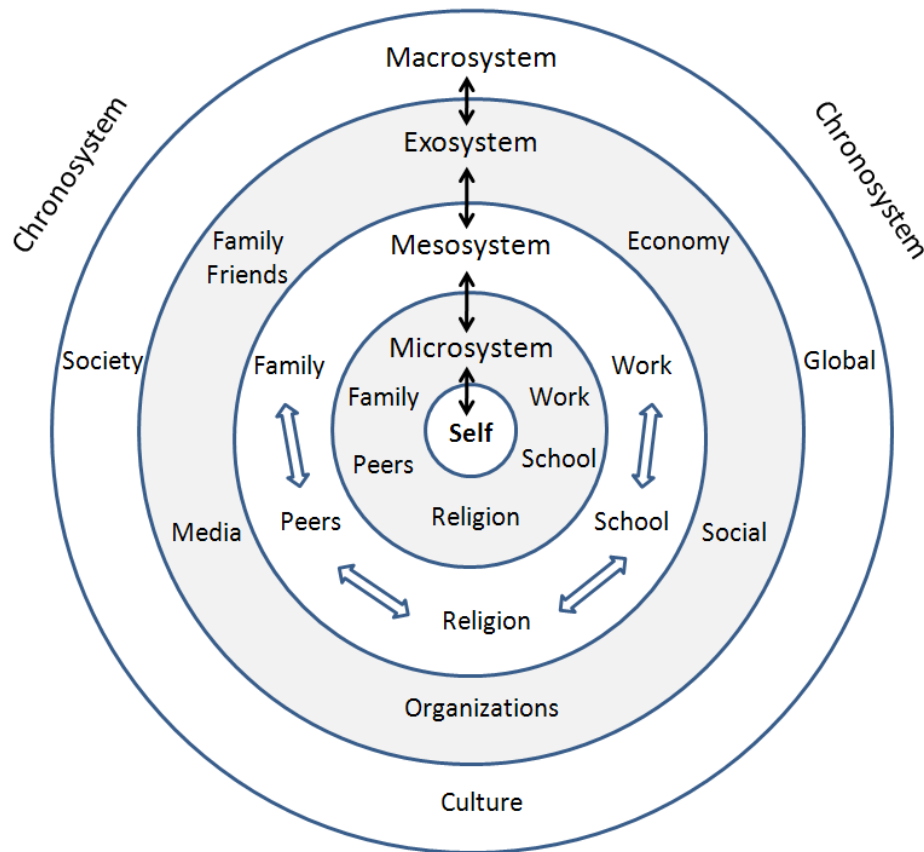


Figure 2.1. Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1995) Ecological Systems Theory.

Bowers and Flinders (1990) discussed the ecological factors present within a classroom environment and their affective abilities. They argued that the classroom is made up of cultural patterns and language processes which are transmitted by teachers

and then interpreted and/or internalized by students. Cultural patterns can be viewed as organized social and psychological processes which are maintained through symbolic and communicative patterns of meaning. Language is needed for cultural expectations, traditions, meanings, and knowledge to be conveyed, negotiated, shaped, and perpetuated. Inherent in language are various kinds of metaphor (*analogic, generative, and iconic*) and hidden non-verbal communication (*proxemics, kinesics, and prosody*). Breakdowns in understanding can occur when meaning is different among a group who possess different cultural paradigms. Since metaphors are culturally constructed, meaning ascribed by one group may not hold the same connotation for others. The behaviors exhibited by the teacher within a classroom regarding language practices and awareness of cultural plurality can have significant affect on student learning, attitudes, belief systems, and performance. The authors connect the issues related with language and culture with implicit curriculum.

The effect of social climate on behavior, mood, health, one's sense of well-being, and overall development has also been studied. Moos (1974, 1979) described several clusters of social climate dimensions. First, the *intensity of personal relationships* entails how people affiliate their mutual support through involvement, staff support, peer cohesion, and spontaneity. Next, *personal growth and self-enhancement influence* speaks to the potential for or opportunity found in the environment for personal growth or development of self-esteem. Factors involved in this cluster include the level of autonomy, practical orientation, competition, and intellectuality of the agents present in the space. Lastly, *system maintenance and change* refers to the extent to which the environment is orderly and clear.

In addition to the ecology of a classroom, the environmental aspects of higher learning institutions have also been examined. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991/2005) outlined how the college environment can shape student learning based on three decades of research. Students are affected on a variety of levels from multiple sources including the institutional context. The authors state, “One of the most inescapable and unequivocal conclusions we can make is that the impact of college is largely determined by the individual’s quality of effort and level of involvement in both academic and non-academic activities” (p. 610). They go on to state that if colleges want students to achieve more, it is incumbent upon the institution to provide students with motivation, aspiration, and support. Classes and services that are intentionally and systematically structured to actively engage them will result in higher levels of learning and achievement. Figure 2.2 conceptually depicts the influence a college can have on student learning.

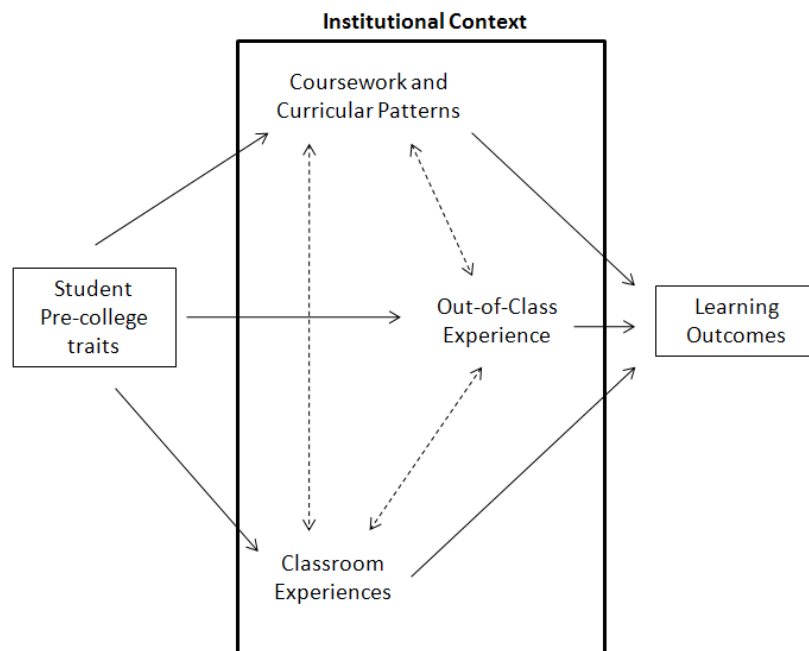


Figure 2.2. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991/2002) Model of College Influence on Student Learning.

Strange and Banning (2001) outlined multiple ecological factors (or environmental types) present within a campus learning environment that can influence and shape a learner's experience. These areas include the *physical environment*, *human aggregate*, *organizational environment*, and *constructed environment*. Through the careful design and purposeful structure of a learning environment, educators can help ensure positive challenging, yet supportive, experiences. Conversely, poorly designed and unfocused strategies can result in unintended and unstable experiences for students.

The *physical environment* includes aspects such as building placement, layout of the educational space, and the artifacts found within a learning environment. This environment can be conceptualized into three discrete positions. The *architectural determinism* of the physical setting refers to the actual structural design and how it functions to permit behavior. For example, the width of a hallway and exit-only doors can determine the flow and movement of traffic within a space. *Architectural possibilism* is viewed as the possibility of a space to limit behavior. The location of a building a mile off-campus may prevent some students from traveling to it but not all of them. Lastly, *architectural probabilism* speaks to the prospect of an environment to shape behavior. The presence of a gated entrance to a college versus an open one may prevent or deter some from entering. Additionally, various kinds of artifacts are found within the physical space such as signs and symbols (wayfinding or placemarking); art work and posters; graffiti or trash/waste; and specific structures (sidewalks, curbs, buildings). The physical artifacts found within an environment can send explicit and implicit messages, as well as influence the process of learning and developing.

The *human aggregate* speaks to how the people within the learning environment present themselves, act, and shape the overall climate. The characteristics of the members who inhabit the setting will exude certain qualities and press. New students must determine the degree of fit between their own traits and attributes and the human aggregate of the environment. This will help determine attraction to, stability, and satisfaction within the setting. Students will either adapt their behavior, move to remake the climate, or seek a new and more congruent environment (leave).

The *organizational environment* includes the rules, processes, procedures, and climate enacted by any purposefully organized entity and administration at all levels. The climate created by an organization can be flexible or rigid, fixed or fluid, and/or dynamic or static depending on the purpose and goals of the organized body. A number of components exist in this environmental type including *complexity* (number and size), *centralization* (distribution of power), *formalization* (rules and regulations), *stratification* (mobility and access), *production* (what is done), *efficiency* (cost), and *morale* (attrition). Dynamic organizations are ones that are flexible in design and respond to change. Conversely, static organizations are more rigid and resistant to change. If an organization seeks to be a positive developmental force, it will be appreciative of individual differences, expect participation, encourage risk taking, and engage in personal interactions versus functional. This type of environment echoes Prasad's (2005) symbolic interactionist view of organizational entities:

Office rituals, organizational policies, managerial styles, and new technologies are all meaningful in the sense that they evoke a variety of emotions and responses to them. As a result, they are also constantly

interpreted and made sense by managers, employees, customers, and other who are exposed to the organization. For symbolic interactionists, organizational phenomena only come to life in and through these interpretations, and they have little existential standing without them (p. 22).

Lastly, the *constructed environment* entails the reality that learners create based on their interactions with and perceptions of all elements within the learning environment. Constructed paradigms are subjective views and experiences created by an individual. Important aspects of this area include the *environmental press*, the pressures and demands that act on a person operating within the setting; *social climate*, as described by Moos (1979); and *campus culture*, artifacts, perspectives, values, and assumptions. Press can come from *administrative* (rules, regulations, procedures), *academic* (curricula, classroom expectations), and *student* (co-curricular, activities, attitudes) sources.

While distance and online learning environments possess some different characteristics and features compared to face to face, overlap and transferability of Strange and Banning's concepts are viable. Table 2.2 provides a comparison of the transferability of concepts between modalities and settings. Distance and online learning environments possess the same capacity as face to face environments to create interactive, dynamic learning ecologies that are mediated and negotiated by those who operate within them (students, faculty, administration). Using a constructivists' viewpoint, Reiser and Dempsey (2007) state:

Reality is constructed by individuals and social groups based on their

Table 2.2.

Transferability of Strange & Banning (2002) to Distance and Online Environments

Physical Features	
Physical/Face to Face Environment	Online Learning Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural features: geographic location, climate, terrain • Human-made features: buildings, open spaces, artifacts • Way-finding and place-marking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web Architecture/Design/Layout • User Interface and Navigation • Metaphors present/in-use • Multimedia present
Human Aggregate	
Physical/Face to Face Environment	Online Learning Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characteristics of members • Degree of “fit” • Relationship forming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to communicate and connect with others in the environment • Inferences of people who inhabit the course • Presence of diversity in media
Organizational Structures	
Physical/Face to Face Environment	Online Learning Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules, procedures, regulations • Complexity, centralization, formalization, stratification, production, efficiency, and morale • Dynamic vs. Static 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules, procedures, regulations • Complexity, centralization, formalization, stratification, production, efficiency, and morale • Dynamic vs. Static
Constructed Meaning	
Physical/Face to Face Environment	Online Learning Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjective views and experiences • Environmental Press • Social Climate • Campus Culture • Administrative, academic, and student sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjective views and experiences • Environmental Press • Social Climate • Campus Culture (face to face and online) • Administrative, academic, and student sources

experiences with and interpretations of the world. The mind constructs its own conceptual ecology for interacting with, interpreting, and making meaning for that world. Rather than being objectively independent from the knower, knowledge, according to constructivists, is embodied in

human experience, perceptions, imaginations, and mental and social constructions (p. 46).

Young (2004) advocates the use of an ecological psychology perspective, compared to traditional cognitive concept of a “learner as a computer,” when considering distance and online learning environments. If the instructional design is learner-centered, the goals and intentions of the learner will be a central consideration. Common learning principles such as self-directed learner goals and intentions, improvement with practice, and improvement with feedback are the foundation for Young’s argument to view the learner as a *detector of information*. Learner *action* and *goal adoption* based on and guided by environmental design become critical elements within learning experiences which, as seen in the literature on hidden curriculum, are also common arguments for the manifestation and transmission of hidden curricular issues.

Categorization of Literature and Research

To assist in operationalizing the study, a categorization of the literature and research based on thematic commonalities seems prudent. Additionally, since a comprehensive hidden curricular model for distance and online learning environments has yet to be presented and empirically tested, the creation of such a working framework is needed. The following section will group literature by author into four domains: communication modes and messages; content and learning material symbols/representations; learning environment functionality and architecture; and institutional/organizational systems and procedures.

Interaction relies upon some form of communication whether it is verbal, non-verbal, or written. Distance and online learning environments have various unique and

purposeful avenues through which communication can transpire including message boards, chat rooms, blogs, wikis, and audio/video conference forums. An emergent theme regarding how hidden curriculum can manifest includes *communication modes and messages*. Research and literature with such references or foci include:

- Ahola (2000)
- Alessi and Trollip (2001)
- Bergenhenegouwen (1987)
- Biglan (1973)
- Bowers & Flinders (1990)
- Chandler (2002)
- Donald (2002)
- Dewey (1948)
- Eisner (2002)
- Jackson (1968)
- Moore (1989)
- Noddings (1992)
- Portelli (1993)
- Margolis and Romero (1998)
- Strange and Banning (2001)

The inclusion or exclusion of diverse representations in course content and materials (videos, textbooks, animations, illustrations, diagrams) can carry and convey implicit messages. Another emergent theme regarding how hidden curriculum can

manifest includes *learning content and materials*. Research and literature with such references or foci include:

- Chandler (2002)
- Eisner (2002)
- Dines and Humez (2003)
- Horn (2003)
- Kwak (2004)
- Ladson-Billings (2005)
- Luke (2005)
- Margolis and Romero (1998)
- Moore (1989)
- Vallance (1973)
- Young (2004)

Distance and online learning endeavors require the use of an electronic or digitally-mediated environment such as a web-portal, learning management system, and/or computer or web-based space. A third emergent theme regarding how hidden curriculum can manifest includes *learning environment functionality and architecture*.

Research and literature with such references or foci include:

- Alessi & Trollip (2001)
- Anderson (2002)
- Chandler (2002)
- Feenberg and Bellman (1990)
- Luke (2005)

- Moore (1989)
- Reiser and Dempsey
- Strange and Banning (2001)
- Wren (1999)

The complexity and cultural press of a learning environment, both in and outside of the classroom, can act up on a student. Distance and online learning students must also navigate through numerous administrative hurdles of the institution, department, and program. A fourth emergent theme regarding how hidden curriculum can manifest includes *institutional/organizational systems*. Research and literature with such references or foci include:

- Acker (2001)
- Ahola (2000)
- Anderson (2002)
- Anyon (1980)
- Apple (1980, 1982)
- Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1995)
- Costello (2001)
- Dewey (1948)
- Donald (2002)
- Dreeben (1968)
- Giroux (1978, 1981)
- Grant (1992)

- Margolis and Romero (1998)
- Moore (1989)
- Moos (1974, 1979)
- Noddings (1992)
- Pascarella and Terenzini (1991/2002)
- Portelli (1993)
- Thorne (1993)
- Snyder (1970)
- Strange and Banning (2001)
- Young (2004)

Furthermore, personal filters and cultural perceptions are also seen as important elements regarding the extent and effect of hidden curriculum on an individual. While not a manifestation or domain, an individual will react and respond differently to hidden curricular issues based on their past experiences, mental processes, and constructed understanding. Research and literature with such references or foci include:

- Bowers and Flinders (1990)
- Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1995)
- Dewey (1948)
- Lewin (1936)
- Noddings (1992)
- Pascarella and Terenzini (1991/2002)
- Portelli (1993)
- Reiser and Dempsey (2007)

- Strange and Banning (2001)
- Young (2004)

Based on this categorization of the literature on hidden curriculum and ecology, Figure 2.3 illustrates the ways in which hidden curriculum can manifest within a distance or online environment and the possible effects. Common inciting agents or domains of hidden curriculum can be found in *communication modes and messages* (verbal, non-verbal, and textual messages); symbols and representations found in *learning content and materials* (images, animation, video, illustrations); *learning environment functionality and architecture* (metaphoric symbols, layout, design, appearance, computer skills/proficiency); and the *institutional/organizational systems* in place within the environment (press, climate, rules, regulations, processes). As a person is exposed to an inciting hidden curricular agent, personal assumptions, interpretations, previously constructed meanings, and expectations act as a filter and influence the impact of effect. For example, the absence of ethnic representations in course content would have greater effect on those who identify with or value diverse representations compared to those who do not. The resulting outcomes, which can be either positive and negative, interconnected, and often overlap, include academic achievement (GPA, content mastery, performance); behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes (social roles, perception of the academic/educational process, professional conduct or culture); and persistence (completion or drop-out).

The consideration of positive outcomes as a result of hidden curriculum is important to mention. Eisner (2002) mentioned that the products of hidden curriculum are not always negative; effects can produce positive results. For example, just as the

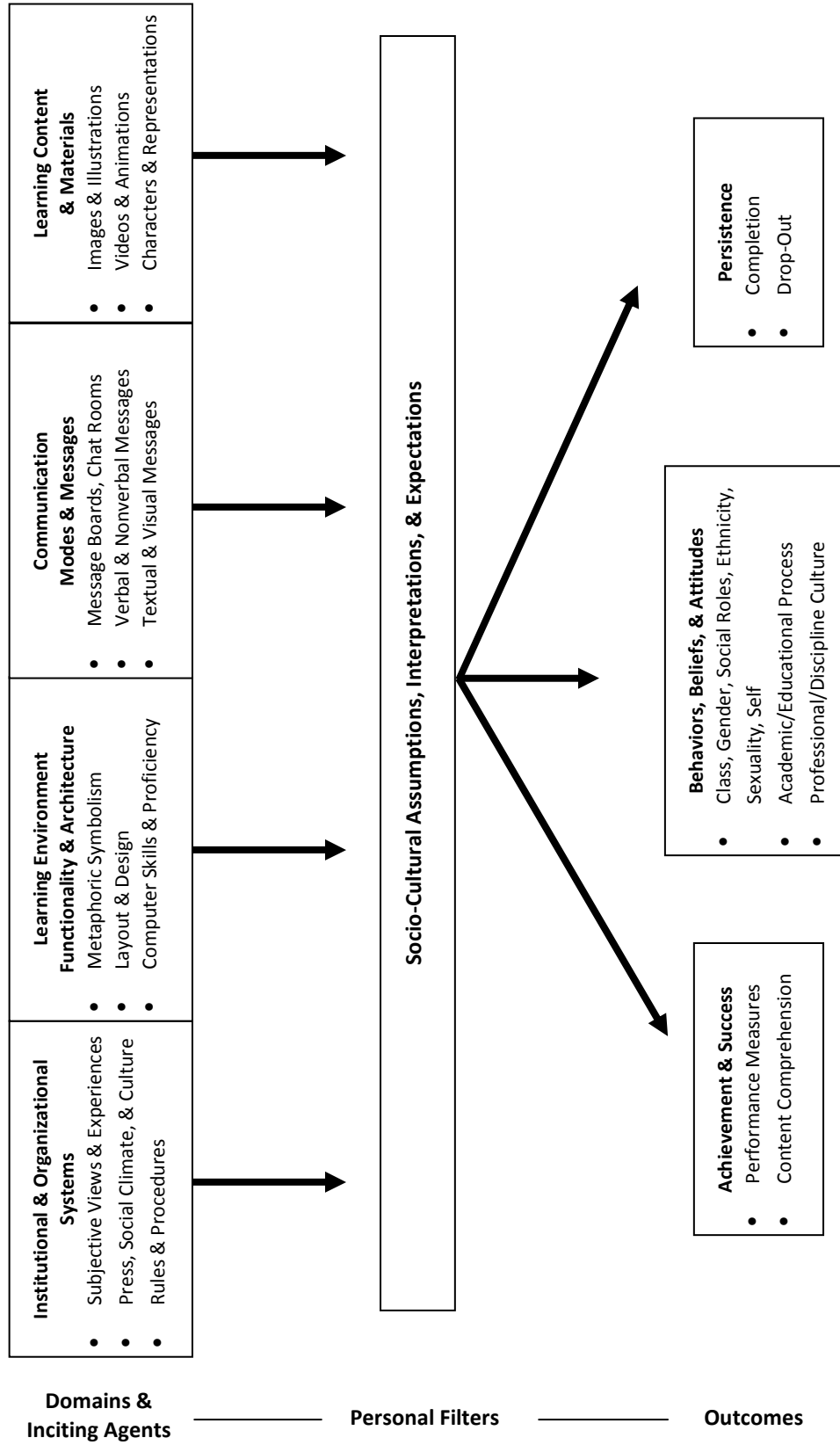


Figure 2.3. Domains and Outcomes of Hidden Curriculum in Online Learning Environments

exclusion of diverse ethnic representations in content can develop negative beliefs, the presence can help promote inclusive attitudes and paradigms. This aspect of hidden curriculum has not been given much attention in the literature or the resulting conceptual models but is important to consider when conceptualizing the functions of hidden curriculum. One should view the result of hidden curriculum as possibly having a negative or positive outcome on such factors as achievement, beliefs, and persistence.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the literature and research associated with hidden curriculum and classroom/campus ecology. Hidden curriculum can be viewed as the implicit norms, expectations, and socialization practices that take place in a learning environment. The literature on hidden curriculum in the K-12, higher education, and distance education settings were all presented. Additionally, several perspectives on person-environment theory, classroom ecology, and campus ecology were reviewed. Lastly, a categorization was performed to assist in operationalizing the study and establishing a working model of how hidden curriculum could manifest in distance and online learning environments from an ecological perspective.

Chapter Three

Method

Introduction

The previous section presented literature and supporting theoretical frameworks related to hidden curriculum in various settings and environments, as well as possible contributing ecological factors. The main question asked in this study aims to understand how hidden curriculum manifests in online learning environment from an ecological perspective. This chapter outlines the research method and data collection techniques used in this study. The research design will be presented, followed by data collection techniques, setting, sample, and ethical considerations. After a description of the setting, a detailed account of each data collection strategy will be offered.

Discovering hidden or implicit phenomena that exist and act within a distance education environment requires a research approach aimed at exposing how a learner assigns meaning when he or she interacts with the various elements present within the environment (e.g. text, graphics, procedures, symbols, content, people, etc.). Many hidden curricular issues are the result of assumptions and expectations that are not formally communicated, established, or conveyed within the learning environment. Schutz (1967), as cited in Rubin and Rubin (2005), states that cultural lenses are “taken for granted” and invisible to most. The researcher must ask questions related to the “every day” dealings or ordinary events to begin to understand and learn about the culture. This helps to articulate an issue related to hidden curriculum; that implicit norms,

expectations, and other manifestations may be difficult to identify by the researchers and participants because they are so engrained into the culture and day-to-day activities. Awareness of hidden curricular issues becomes a consideration which has a direct implication on how to conduct research on the topic. Questions cannot be directly asked about specific aspects of hidden curriculum because they may not even be apparent and understandable to the participants or will not be broad enough to encompass all the possible issues at hand. Furthermore, the issues explored in this study are contemporary, broad, and unable to be controlled by the investigator, so it warrants using “how” or “why” questions to help gain understanding into the phenomenon (Yin, 1994). For these reasons, the qualitative methodology best fit the needs for exploring hidden curricular issues in online learning environments.

Research Design

This research was conducted using a qualitative phenomenological approach situated within a case study context that describes and explains an in-tact academic program being facilitated through an online or distance learning environment. Phenomenology investigates the experiences of multiple persons surrounding a common phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Ehrich, 2003). In the design of phenomenological research, “Human experiences are examined through the detailed descriptions of the people being studied” (Creswell, 1994, p.12). Marion (1997) further explains, “Phenomenographers do not make statements about the world as such, but about people’s conceptions of the world” (p. 145). As illustrated in the literature review, perception and an individual’s socio-cultural lens plays a significant role in how hidden curricular issues manifest. Additionally, phenomenological data analysis involves a reduction method

which allows for the researcher to search for all possible meanings. Data reduction allows the researcher to discover thematic connections between participants or determine if the information is specific to each individual. Unearthing such conceptions, views, and connections is best done using a phenomenological approach.

Complimenting the discovery of the faculty and students' perceived realities would be the case study method, which allows the researcher to understand the how the organizational and environmental context (a bounded system) is impacting or influencing social processes (Creswell, 2007; Hartley, 2004). Additionally, the case study approach is designed to offer detailed, descriptive accounts in areas in which little research has been conducted (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994). Using an ecological viewpoint, understanding the factors that contribute to hidden curricular manifestations requires exploration in a holistic manner. Hartley (2004) affirms the use of case study in the context of learning more about the effects of an organizational entity:

Case studies are useful where it is important to understand how the organizational and environmental context is having an impact on or influencing social processes. Case studies can be useful in illuminating behavior that may only be fully understandable in the context of the wider forces operating within or on the organization, whether these are contemporary or historical (p. 325).

Therefore, observing and interviewing those who are operating in an online academic program or setting (case) allowed for a more comprehensive investigation of the transpiring hidden curricular issues.

Research Questions

This research employed a qualitative methodological paradigm which aimed to answer how or why questions by reporting the lived experiences of others. This study described the perceptions of students, faculty, and administrators associated with an academic program that is facilitated online. The primary research questions were:

- How do organizational and institutional systems contribute to the manifestation of hidden curricular issues?
- How do differences and similarities in perceptions between students, faculty, and administrators contribute to hidden curricular issues?
- How does hidden curriculum manifest in online and distance learning environments?

Data Collection

For this study, the *Institutional and Organizational Systems* domain outlined in the literature review were explored. Due to the scope of all the domains and inciting agents, it was not realistic to explore all of them in this research. The institutional and organizational systems domain was chosen because it includes many issues, inciting agents, and situations a student is likely to first encounter when beginning the academic process. For example, recruitment, admissions, and numerous administrative processes must transpire before a student encounters the functionality and architecture of the learning environment or learning content and materials. While communication modes and messages could be a significant aspect of the institutional and organizational systems domain, it has high applicability to the classroom experience and warrants being explored separately. Multiple sources of information were drawn from in the data collection

process including interviews (student, faculty, and administrators), non-participant observations of the online academic environment, and a researcher reflective journal.

Sample

Qualitative research involves purposeful samples which are non-random and seek to identify information-rich cases (participants) that embody the characteristics of the issue being studied (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1990). This provides an opportunity for in-depth study about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research. Merriam (1998) states, “the most appropriate sampling strategy is nonprobabilistic” (p. 60) which includes choosing a sample from which the most amount of information can be learned. In the case of this study, using students, faculty, and administrators or student support services personnel operating in an online learning environment was most appropriate and yielded information best suited to answer the research questions posed. Findings are not meant to be generalizable to larger populations but to help inform theory building and promote insight into similar situations which is described by Yin (1993) as “analytic generalizability” or transferability. By providing thick, rich description and detailed accounts of the case, others can determine transferability and generate hypothesis testing questions for further study.

Three types of student participants were targeted for interviews. First, two to three (2-3) students entering the academic program and attending online will provide a fresh perspective of the organizational and institutional systems in place. Second, two to three (2-3) students who attended online and had been operating within the academic program for at least a two semesters provided a variation since they have had a longer time to experience the organizational and institutional systems present within the environment.

Third, two to three (2-3) students who were enrolled in the academic program and attended in a face-to-face modality were included to help the researcher identify issues that were related and unique to the online environment compared to those in the face-to-face environment. All types of student were currently enrolled in the academic program. Next, two (2) faculty members were identified to interview who were directly involved in the teaching, designing, and facilitation of the academic program (online and face-to-face). Lastly, one to two (2) administrators or student services personnel involved with the organizational management of academic program (areas such as admissions, advising, recruitment, graduation, or policy compliance) were interviewed. The faculty interviewed were asked to identify administrators or support personnel who worked regularly and were familiar with the academic program.

Setting

The study took place at a large community college located in the south over the course of several months, including the month prior to the first day of classes. The academic program selected for this study prepares students to be opticians and is facilitated completely online which allowed the researcher to directly holistically explore issues related to hidden curriculum in a distance education setting. For a detailed description of the institution and academic setting, please review Appendix F. Paper-based materials, institutional websites, and an asynchronous learning management system, Blackboard, were also observed in this study, as needed and appropriate.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The researcher solicited participation from students, faculty, and administrators or student support personnel who were associated with an online academic program at a

local community college in person and through email. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a 3-4 month period to gain insight into the ways hidden curricular issues manifested. A series of questions related to student and faculty expectations, perceptions, and experiences within the environment were explored, compared, contrasted, and analyzed for themes, differences, and similarities. Separate but related interview protocols were given to each population (see below) to allow the researcher to discover differences and similarities between each group. Interview protocols were created based on the themes, factors, and conclusions seen in the hidden curricular and ecological literature. To help increase the standardization of the interview process for all participants, the researcher first attempted to interview participants face-to-face. Failing that, synchronous video (e.g. video conference) was used. Lastly, synchronous audio (e.g. phone or Skype) was used. Using a semi-structured interview approach allowed the researcher to build on new findings, explore emerging themes, and ask follow up questions by continuously redesigning the questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Data collection points for students originally were to occur at three to four week intervals to allow for prolonged engagement in the field and to give students time to reflect upon the questions being asked in relation to their experiences in the environment; however, time concerns on the part of the student participants prevented this strategy from being employed. Student interviews were conducted through the telephone or Skype (internet voice over IP) and asynchronously through email due to the geographical disbursement of the participants in relation to the researcher. Telephone or Skype conversations were recorded using an audio-recording device and translated. Email communication was sent from the researcher's secure university email address containing

an invite to participate, the document outlining the consent to participate, and the interview protocol questions (see appendix A). Follow up emails transpired if clarification or further probing was needed. An incentive was offered for student participation in the form of an iTunes gift card or fast food gift card.

Interviews with faculty and administrators were conducted face-to-face and recorded using an audio-recording device (see appendix A). This also allowed for consistency, integrity, and effectiveness of data collection. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed and all data collected was secured for confidentiality. Follow up interviews were scheduled, as needed, based on emerging themes and points of clarification.

Non-Participant Observation

Non-participant observations were conducted and the researcher will provide thick-rich description of the online learning environment in which the participants operate and navigate. Aspects such as physical and online layout/set up, administrative policies/procedures, screen-shots, printed documentation, online documentation, and other features relevant to the institutional and organization focus of the study were reviewed to determine transferability and and strengthen validity of the researcher's observations and reports.

Researcher Reflective Journal

In qualitative research, the researcher is widely considered a data collection instrument. To this end, the need for transparency was necessary to make the constructed nature of the research visible to the reader. Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton (2001) suggest that qualitative research is increasingly:

...presented in ways that make it clear how the researcher's own experiences, values, and positions of privilege in various hierarchies have influenced their research interests, the way they choose to do their research, and the ways they choose to represent their research findings (p. 325).

I kept a reflective journal and reported personal background information, presuppositions, choices, experiences, and actions that transpired through the research process (Janesick, 2007; Mruck & Breuer, 2003). I am currently employed as a computer science instructor at a large community college creating and teaching face-to-face and online courses in web design, multimedia design and software, and computer basics. Additionally, I teach student development theory at the graduate level in both face-to-face and online modalities. I hold an undergraduate degree in music, a master's degree in college student affairs, and two graduate certificates in instructional technology. I am enrolled at a large research university in a doctoral program studying Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Instructional Technology. My previous vocational and professional endeavors have been in the realm of higher education in various student affairs and administrative support services roles including online program involvement, academic advising, residence life, student activities, and orientation. Additionally, I have been trained in qualitative research methods through my doctoral study course work and participated in the data collection and analysis phases of two qualitative research projects.

Data Reduction, Coding, and Analysis

Qualitative research is an iterative process that transpires throughout the study from beginning to end (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Questions are refined, approaches are

modified, and positions changed based on emerging themes, patterns, and findings. The data collected was analyzed by the researcher through a reductive process by looking for patterns and themes, establishing codes, and drawing conclusions (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). An initial review of the information determined which data was related to the research questions and theoretical constructs explored previously.

To assist in the coding and analysis of the data, Auerbach and Silverstein's (2003) systematic approach to qualitative data analysis was utilized. Acknowledging that researcher conclusions and themes must be supported by textual accounts, raw text (the lowest level of coding) was reviewed and reduced into manageable segments. Reoccurring ideas were identified in the raw data by making note of repeated phrases or words both within and across groups (students, faculty, administrators, environmental elements and observations, researcher's reflections). Themes were then established and included if any of the following is found: 1) reference made by multiple individuals and concurs with previous research; 2) significance was indicated by a majority of participants; or 3) in-depth responses from key participants display thematic significance (Oliver, 2004). Figure 3.1 depicts Auerbach and Silverstein's (2003) six-step procedure for coding and constructing a narrative from text.

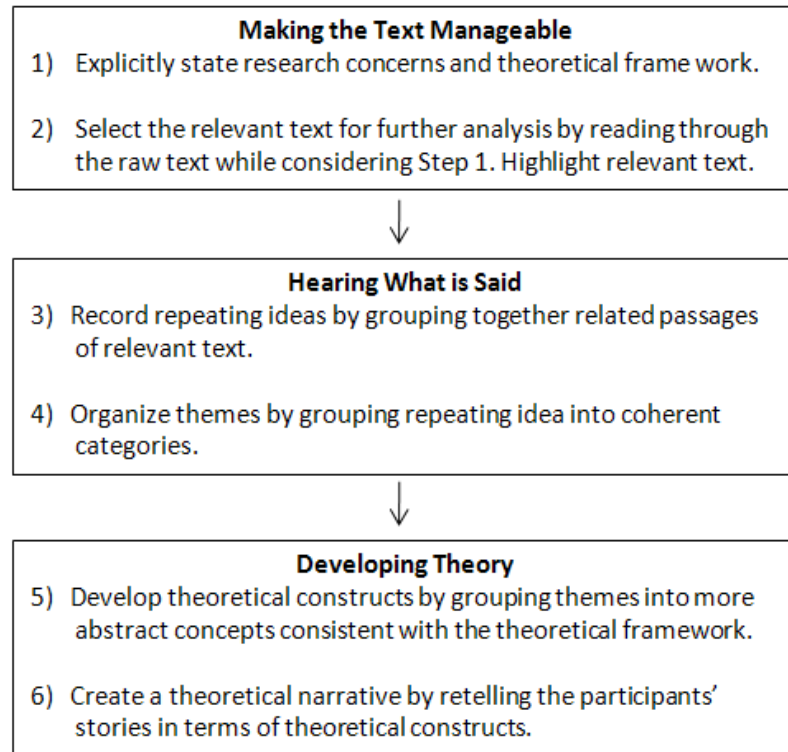


Figure 3.1. Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) Six Steps for Constructing a Theoretical Narrative from Text.

A narrative was then constructed to illustrate the significant findings and convey the participants lived experiences and stories as related to the research questions being explored and literature presented in the previous chapter.

Validation

To ensure validity of the findings, the following strategies were employed as identified by Creswell (2007): 1) the data was triangulated using the student interview data, faculty interview data, non-participant observations, and researcher reflective journal; 2) rich, thick description was used to allow readers to make decisions on transferability and establish conclusions separate of the researcher; 3) the researcher was engaged for a prolonged amount of time in the field; 4) interviewees were asked to check

and verify transcripts of the interview for accuracy (see appendix D); and 5) themes and conclusions were externally audited by an expert in qualitative analysis and validation for inter-rater reliability (see appendix E).

Ethics

Qualitative research, particularly those that employ interviews as a means of data collection, requires the researcher to establish and maintain a trustworthy relationship with the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The researcher treated participants with respect and reported any questionable issues that arose during the data collection process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants (see appendix B) and confidentiality was maintained at all times. All participants were given the option to use a pseudonym in place of their real names. The researcher shared all data and results with the participants and made it clear that participation in the study is strictly voluntary. Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before the collection of data will begin to ensure the humane and fair treatment of subjects.

Research Plan

Participation was solicited through email to all incoming and returning students of the program with the assistance of the program's faculty coordinator in July and August 2009. The researcher approached and worked with the faculty and administrators associated with the academic program to gain permission and solicit participation in July 2009. New and returning students in the program were emailed throughout August and September 2009 to solicit participation and set up interviews. Faculty and student interviews were conducted through August, September, and October. In October and November 2009, student, faculty, and member checking was performed and follow up

interviews were conducted, if warranted. All member checking was completed by mid-November 2009. The researcher will then wrap up and provide closure correspondence with participants at the end of November 2009. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the estimated research timeline and tasks list.

Table 3.1

Research Timeline and Tasks

July 2009
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consulted with faculty and academic program • Emails sent to solicit participation in study
August 2009
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student solicitations send • Faculty interviews conducted
September 2009
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student solicitation and interviews performed; followed up, as needed • Administrator/support personnel interview conducted • Follow up interviews with faculty conducted, as needed
October 2009
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student interviews performed; followed up conducted, as needed • Follow up interviews with administrators/support personnel conducted, as needed
November 2009
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member checking completed • Wrapped up and closed experience with participants

Conclusion

This section provided an overview of the methodology utilized for this research. A qualitative research design that incorporates a phenomenological approach situated within a case study was used to investigate the research questions. Data collection methods included interviews with students, faculty, and administrators associated with an online opticianry academic program at a large community college. Non-participant observation and a researcher reflective journal were used to provide rich, thick data,

transparency, and to ensure triangulation of data. A systematic coding procedure was used to reduce the data, establishes themes, and present the findings. The proposed data collection timeframe transpired between July 2009 and ended November 2009.

Chapter Four

Results

Introduction

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach situated within a case study context which aims to describe and explain an in-tact academic program being facilitated through an online and/or distance learning modality. The researcher conducted interviews over the course of a semester with three populations: faculty, staff, and students (distance/online and on-ground). Students classified as online Questions were asked related to how hidden curricular issues may manifest in an online and/or distance learning environment. The complexity and cultural press of a learning environment were examined including subjective views, climate, and rule/procedures. Additionally, several general open ended questions were asked to allow for other issues that may not have been asked to arise. Furthermore, non-participant observations of the online and web spaces and a researcher reflective journal were used to help triangulate the data and provide further insight. This chapter will present the result of common themes in addressing the research questions:

- How do organizational and institutional systems contribute to the manifestation of hidden curricular issues?
- How do differences and similarities in perceptions between students, faculty, and administrators contribute to hidden curricular issues?

- How does hidden curriculum manifest in online and distance learning environments?

Participant quotes and thick, rich descriptions are used heavily throughout the chapter to support conclusions and observations made by the researcher. Additionally, readers can draw their own conclusions based on the data presented. The quotes presented are nearly verbatim from the transcriptions of the recorded interview sessions to preserve the authenticity of each participant's voice and lived experiences. In cases where identifying information was mentioned in a response or transcript, some aspects have been changed to generic terms or labels to preserve confidentiality and to clarify or provide context for the quote.

This chapter is organized into four major sections that correspond with the research questions. First, an overview of the setting, data collection procedure, and sample population is described including demographic information. Next, organizational and institutional systems, as outlined in the literature, such as subjective views, environmental press, social climate, college and program cultures, rules, and procedures are used as a framework to help categorize and present the themes. The major themes related to these area and the first research question were: 1) Accessibility/Flexibility Differences; 2) Disconnect in Conveying and Perceiving the Professional Culture; and 3) Disconnected from College; and 4) Differences in Website Usability.

The third section of the chapter corresponds with the research question pertaining to differences and similarities between student, faculty, and administrators (staff) perceptions. The themes from each population are presented, followed by a comparison between groups. Themes in this area for the faculty group included: 1) Workload and

Time and 2) Lack of Support for Online/Distance Learning Processes. Emergent staff themes for this question included: 1) Lack of Resources, 2) Preference for Face-to-Face Interaction, 3) Academic Program Disconnect, and 4) Faculty Interference. Lastly, student themes for this area included, 1) Student Services, 2) Faculty Assistance, and 3) Limited Interaction.

The final section summates the major themes that emerged in the study as it relates to the global research question of how hidden curriculum manifests in online and distance learning environments. Global themes associated with institutional and organizational systems were identified as: 1) Support Functions, 2) Advocacy, and 3) Conveying the Profession. A summary concludes this chapter.

Case Setting

This study took place over the course of four months of one academic semester at a community college located in the southeast. The academic program under study was an opticianry program located in the division of Health Sciences of the institution. Students enrolled in this program complete a two-year Associate of Science or Applied Science (AS or AAS) degree in Opticianry. The academic program offers a variety of ways to take courses and earn a degree including face-to-face (all on-ground instruction), hybrid (mix of on-ground and online/computer-mediated instruction), and online (all online/computer-mediated). For a detailed description of the setting, see Appendix F. This program met the criteria for the needed population for the study and allowed for comparison and an in-depth understanding of the differences and needs of each group.

Data Collection and Analysis

Faculty, staff, and students were contacted by the researcher via email soliciting interest to participate (see Appendix B). Students were offered an incentive of a \$25 gift certificate to participate in the study. Out of 20 interested respondents, a total of 14 (n=14) interviews were set up and completed. Participants included two faculty members from the program, three staff members from student services who were identified by the faculty as being regular contacts for their program, and nine students (four being new online/distance students, two being returning online/distance students, and three being on-ground/hybrid students). Faculty and staff interviews were conducted face-to-face on campus. Student interviews were conducted via telephone and through online video conferencing due to location and time. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. While a metered interview approach was proposed (contacting students two-three times over the course of the four month period with two-three questions at a time), time constraints and willingness of participants to be contacted multiple times over the course of a semester prevented this strategy from being implemented; however, single interviews with an additional follow-up question/clarification opportunity is a long standing qualitative practice. New students had been sufficiently exposed to the institution and program to allow detailed responses, which resulted in the collection of rich data. Furthermore, a follow-up email was sent in the fourth month asking participants to review the interview questions asked previously, review their transcribed conversation with the researcher, and to add any additional comments or information.

Themes were identified by reading through the interview transcripts, researcher reflective journal, and using Oliver's (2004) criteria for data selection. A theme was

included if: 1) reference was made by multiple individuals and concurs with previous research; 2) significance was indicated by a majority of participants; or 3) in-depth responses from key participants display thematic significance. Relevant passages of text were grouped by the researcher to lay the basis for naming themes. Themes were then categorized into larger abstract groups as they related to this study. An outside reviewer/code-checker analyzed the transcripts and researcher reflective journal using the same process. Minimal differences were found between the researcher and the outside reviewer results. Adjustments were made to some thematic titles to more concisely express the essence of the theme. A third global theme was added due to its uniqueness and inability to be collapsed into the two originally identified by the researcher. Furthermore, additional quotes were added to some passages to strengthen support for and solidify understanding of the theme. All perceived differences between the code-checker and researcher were reconciled to 100% agreement. Passages from transcripts are used heavily to help support thematic findings and provide a deeper understanding into the lived experiences of the participants; however, passages were not used from every respondent for every question or theme.

Sample

Participants fell into one of five different classifications depending on their relationship with the college and status in the academic program. Faculty members (n=2) were those who had instructional and curricular responsibilities with the academic program. Both faculty members were full-time and taught both face-to-face and online student populations. Staff members (n=3) were those who work in student services area. One staff participant worked in academic advising, another in admissions/records, and

the third in graduation. All staff members who were interviewed were full-time and worked not only with the opticianry program but with all students at the college.

Students fell into one of three different categories. *New online/distance students* (n=4) were those in their first semester of their first year of study, resided a significant distance away from the college (two hours or more), and do not attend classes at the main campus. New online/distance students take classes online but participate in a face-to-face lab to fulfill apprenticeship requirements and gain hands-on experience in the field of opticianry. Labs were completed at an approved private optical company (n=1) or through a partnership with a sister college two hours south of the institution (n=3). *Returning online/distance students* (n=2) were those who had at least one semester of classes in the program, resided a significant distance away from the college (two hours or more), and do not attend classes at the main campus. Returning online/distance students also take classes online but participate in a face-to-face lab to fulfill apprenticeship requirements and gain hands-on experience in the field of opticianry. Additionally, labs were completed at an approved private optical company (n=1) or through a partnership with a sister college two hours south of the institution (n=1). Lastly, *on-ground students* are those who primarily take face-to-face classes at the main campus and live in close proximity to the college (less than two hours). All desired participant numbers were met as proposed (two faculty members, two staff, two-three new online students, two-three returning online students, and two-three on-ground students) and in several instances exceeded the desired range of participants for each category.

The vast majority (86%) of the participants identified as female (n=12) while 14% identified as male (n=2). Ethnicity/race was reported by all participants who self-

identified as being 78% White/Caucasian (n=11), 7% African American (n=1), 7% Hispanic (n=1), and 7% Asian (n=1). The average age in years of the participants was 40.7 with a range of 23 to 57. Participant names were replaced with pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. Table 4.1 depicts a breakdown of the participant sample by type, age, gender, and ethnicity.

Table 4.1

Sample Population by Type, Age, Gender, and Ethnicity/Race

Type	Age	Gender	Ethnicity/Race*
Faculty Member A	38	Male	W
Faculty Member B	46	Female	W
Staff Member A	36	Female	W
Staff Member B	31	Female	W
Staff Member C	48	Female	W
New Online/Distance Student A	36	Female	H
New Online/Distance Student B	29	Female	W
New Online/Distance Student C	47	Female	W
New Online/Distance Student D	57	Male	W
Returning Online/Distance Student A	47	Female	W
Returning Online/Distance Student B	55	Female	AA
On-Ground Student A	30	Female	A
On-Ground Student B	47	Female	W
On-Ground Student C	23	Female	W

*AA=African American; A=Asian; H=Hispanic; W=White

Compared to the actual population of the program, the participant demographics were fairly similar. Males were underrepresented in the participant sample and some ethnic/racial groups were not present. Although qualitative data does not seek to generalize findings, and while the purpose of this research was not intended to look for trends between certain demographics, a comparison is provided for informational purposes.

A total of 148 students were enrolled in the academic program in 2008. Of those, 102 (69.4%) identified as female and 45 (30.6%) identified as male with one not responding regarding gender. The mean student age was 32.3 and the median age was 28.9. 55 (37.2%) are full-time students while 93 (62.8%) part-time students. Ethnicity/race was categorized as follows: 10 (6.8%) identified as African-American; six (4.1%) identified as Asian; 34 (23.3%) identified as Hispanic; two (1.4%) identified as Native American; 94 (64.4%) identified as White; and two did not respond regarding race/ethnicity.

A total of 1116 full and part-time faculty were reported for the 2007-2008 academic year of which a total of 262 were full-time and 853 were part-time. There were no demographic data by gender, age, or ethnicity/race available for full-time faculty only. 527 (47%) identified as female and 587 (53%) identified as male. The mean faculty age was 48.2. Ethnicity/race was broken down as follows: 106 (10%) identified as African-American; two (<1%) identified as American Indian/Alaska Native; 31 (3%) identified as Asian; one-two (9%) identified as Hispanic; and 873 (78%) identified as White.

A total of 1121 full and part-time staff were reported for the 2007-2008 academic year of which 625 were full-time and 496 were part-time. There were no demographic data by gender, age, or ethnicity/race available for full-time staff only. 659 (59%) identified as female while 462 (41%) identified as male. The mean staff age was 43.6. Ethnicity/race was broken down as follows: 247 (22%) identified as African-American; 13 (1%) identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native; 40 (4%) identified as Asian; 186 (17%) identified as Hispanic; and 635 (57%) identified as White. Table 4.2 outlines a

Table 4.2

Comparison of Sample Population to College and Academic Program Population

Sample Population	N	%*	College and Academic Program Population	N	%*
Faculty (full & part-time)	2			1116	
Gender					
Female	1	50%		527	47%
Male	1	50%		587	53%
Age (mean)	42.0			48.2	
Ethnicity/Race					
African-American	0	0%		106	10%
American Indian/AK Nat.	0	0%		2	<1%
Asian	0	0%		31	3%
Hispanic	0	0%		102	9%
White	2	100%		873	78%
Not Reported	0	0%		2	<1%
Staff	3			1121	
Gender					
Female	3	100%		659	59%
Male	0	0%		462	41%
Age (mean)	38.3			43.6	
Ethnicity/Race					
African-American	0	0%		247	22%
American Indian/AK Nat.	0	0%		13	1%
Asian	0	0%		40	4%
Hispanic	0	0%		186	17%
White	3	100%		635	57%
Not Reported	0	0%		0	0%
Students	9			148	
Gender					
Female	8	89%		102	69%
Male	1	11%		45	31%
Not Reported	0	0%		1	<1%
Age (mean)	41.2			32.3	
Ethnicity/Race					
African-American	1	11%		10	7%
American Indian/AK Nat.	0			2	1%
Asian	1	11%		6	4%
Hispanic	1	11%		34	23%
White	6	67%		94	64%
Not Reported	0	0%		0	0%

*Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding

basic demographic breakdown of the sample participant population to the academic population according to the most recent college records available.

Question #1: Organizational and Institutional Systems

The first research question was designed to determine at how organizational and institutional systems contribute to the manifestation of hidden curricular issues; specifically, how do organizational and institutional systems contribute to the manifestation of hidden curricular issues? Participants were asked a series of questions related to how the institution and academic program functions, is perceived, and conveys its cultural press. This section presents respondent answers and themes related to recruitment and admission; accessibility and flexibility; professional culture and practices; subjective views and connection; rules and procedures; and the online/Web space. The major themes related to this question were: 1) Accessibility and Flexibility Differences, 2) Disconnect in Conveying the Professional Culture, 3) Disconnected from the College, and 4) Differences in Website Usability.

Recruitment and Admissions

All participants were asked a question related to the recruitment and admissions practices of the college and academic program (see Appendix A). Widely, participants became aware the program through word of mouth and Internet searches from various sources including program alumni, optical retail businesses, and government listings. Faculty reported recruiting students through professional associations, conferences, word of mouth, and reputation of the program (n=2). Additionally, all students (n=9) reported applying through the college website via an online form. Faculty Member A described recruitment efforts as follows:

As far as recruitment, the Opticianry Faculty travels for seminars and conventions throughout the state and nation. We promote the program as much as possible. The Opticianry Program is a member of the National Federation of Opticianry Schools. The NFOS promotes formal Opticianry educational throughout the nation.

Faculty Member B stated that the program relied mainly on word of mouth but also used conventions and seminars as opportunities:

We recruit mainly by word of mouth, optical conventions – we give seminars and people who know people who know people who may want to get into the field... Our students tend to be the non-traditional type, more so, not all. And it's really word of mouth.

Additionally, both face-to-face and online/distance students learned of the program largely through associates and some publicity. Returning Student A and New Online Student D both saw a newspaper article in a local paper discussing available government financial assistance for enrolling in the program and access information via the Internet, phone, and/or in-person through a program representative or informational session. On-Ground Student A described finding out about the program through a neighbor:

So, my parents, their neighbor is a guidance counselor and she suggested the [college's] opticianry program, because it's, you know, quite a reputable program here in the... area. So, I decided to go on the website and I took a look, and then I got into contract with [Faculty Member A],

and, you know, he directed me to all the links on the website, and that's how I applied to the opticianry program.

The staff interviewed reported not being fully aware of the current recruitment practices for the program (n=3). Additionally, staff mentioned not being a part of the recruitment and admission process for the opticianry students (both on-ground and online/distance). Staff Member B described the circumstances as follows:

As far as the recruitment, we don't really deal with that, you know, because we're a community college and, the opticianry program is not a limited access program, so everyone who applies is automatically admitted into the program. So they submit an online application. Within seven to ten days of their acceptance, they receive a welcome letter in the mail. Now, the welcome letter is a form letter that everyone receives and it tells them steps that really kind of differ a little bit from the opticianry program, because opticianry, they do their own orientation and they, you know, do their own advising and things like that. So it's not necessarily the same as the students who are going to come in and go through advising, through testing, orientation and then register for their classes.

Accessibility and Flexibility Differences

All participants were asked questions regarding the level of accessibility students had to college personnel and the level of flexibility of the institution (see Appendix A). Themes emergent from this line of questioning revealed a polarization of accessibility and flexibility; one whereby the academic program was perceived to have a high level of accessibility and flexibility while the college had a low level of accessibility and

flexibility. A total of eleven (n=11) participants identified accessibility and flexibility in this manner.

Both faculty members discussed how access and flexibility of the faculty and program were high while issues with student services were persistent which limits access and flexibility. Faculty Member A characterized the level of institutional accessibility for services as being limited to face-to-face interactions which causes issues for online/distance students stating:

For the most part [the college] requires students to be present in-person to obtain any information regarding their status as [a college] student or to receive assistance... [student services] continually ask students to come to campus. Some are out of state and many live hours from [the college]. I say it is manageable by other means, email, phone calls, etc. but emails and phone calls are rarely answered.

Faculty member A stated that access to the program and faculty was “excellent” that they “take every opportunity to help our students in any way”. Faculty Member B went on to comment, “They have great accessibility to us. We’re crazy maniacs about emails... certainly, the financial aid, the admissions and records areas are, are tough. Especially eLearning students, ‘cause they already feel disconnected.”

For staff, no real distinction was seen between the needs of a face-to-face student and an online/distance (n=3). When asked if the level of accessibility to services were easier or harder for online/distance student compared to their face-top-face counterparts, Staff Member A stated:

I think it's about the same. I mean, we have this general email in our, in our office, that each month a different person in our office takes care of – like, this month, it's me. And I probably spend close to two hours in the morning just answering emails from students and trying to get to it quickly. But, you know, like I said, I think we try, with what resources we have, I think we try our hardest to be there for everyone.

Staff Member B characterized the level of accessibility as being prohibited by policy, law, or procedure, especially for online/distance students. She stated:

It's a little bit more difficult. And the students that I primarily work with in the opticianry tend to be the ones who are in [a remote city in the state], because, you know, they don't really have hands-on access to the staff. So, they're calling and they're asking for things that sometimes we may or may not be able to give them between [the college] policies and the FERPA regulations. For example, the student calls in and they ask for their student ID number. That's not something we can give over the phone. We ask the students to either come in with a photo ID or we'll resend their welcome letter that has that information. So, it can be a little bit more difficult. The students have to be a bit more proactive, more responsible to do things in a timely manner, so that they're not delayed in their process. But, as long as they're on top of everything, they should be okay. It's just, you know, if there's an error on [the college's] part, it makes things a little bit more difficult for the wheels to turn.

Furthermore, Staff Member B states that student services attempts to be flexible to

student needs:

From the admissions' side, we try to be more flexible with the opticianry students, especially the ones who are in [a remote city] and can't just drop by the campus, so, you know, if they're asking us to do something with regards to registering, I mean, their classes, you know, we'll make exceptions for them where we wouldn't make exceptions for students in other programs.

However, when asked about specific accommodations or services designed for online or distance students, no distinctions were made from local or face-to-face students. Staff Member B responded:

The way the process works, you know, like students don't necessarily come and sit down and have appointments, you know. We've got the windows, so students are corralled through the lines, they come to the window, they ask their questions. You know, so it's not necessarily because of the volume, a high level of customer service for students from other programs, either. So, in that way, I supposed they're not receiving a disservice that would be any different from the general population.

Staff Member C also indicated that contacting staff was difficult through telephone, making access more challenging for online and distance students:

They [online students] try to do it by phone, and I'm sure you've experienced calling in here and trying to get somebody to answer the phone. And a lot of times, there is a large group that do answer their

phones, that do return their phone calls, but like myself, if I have a student in front of me, I can't stop what I'm doing to pick up the phone.

Additionally, Staff Member A characterized the flexibility of the institution as flexible but only as far as policy and procedure would allow:

Actually, I think that we maybe are kind of, a little bit more flexible than we should, 'cause a lot of our clerks in the office, they, they wanna go out of their way to help people but sometimes, it's just with deadlines and policy, it restricts us a lot... Like a lot of students, they try to, you know, they wanna get in late and like, well, if we don't set deadlines, what's the use of them, you know. But, you know, it's just, it's just... We can only do what the policy allows us to do, but with me, I'd like to try to go out of my way to help students if I can, but there's just so much we can do 'cause our hands are tied.

Lastly, Staff Member C characterized the admissions and registration process for online and distance students as more difficult compared to face-to-face students. She advocated the need for a direct point of contact or specialized staff who only deal with online and distance student so as to mitigate issues. She stated:

We need a specific department that if they want to continue to do this online... Opticianry, they come from [a remote county], they come from [a remote county], they come from [a remote city]. They need a direct contact so that the information can be put in properly from the very beginning, so that as they enroll in their classes, they don't get hit with all

the bad things. They don't end up talking to ten different people and getting ten different answers.

Online/distance students described the academic program as being flexible, mainly due to their ability to access content and faculty when they needed to and the options related to attend labs sessions (n=6). New Online student C stated:

I, actually, that's one of the reasons that I enroll is because they were very, very flexible. When I went to the orientation and I said, "I'm working. I don't know if I can do that," they said, "Oh, that's okay. You can do it online." Then he said, uh, "You have to come Tuesday and Thursday mornings for the lab," and I said, "I can't. I'm working on those mornings." And he said, "Oh, don't worry, you'll go to a lab in your town, and this is not a problem," and that was really good.

Returning online Student A also mentioned the flexibility of the program positively:

I work fulltime and I have a family, and I'm able to still attend classes fulltime without really feeling as if I'm stretched too thin, and that's because you can take your, you know, be in class at midnight if you wanna be.

New Online student D described the academic program as flexible but the college as not:

Okay, I feel that the Opticianry is flexible and that we can do it during our own time. We can watch the videos several times, review, take the test when we want to – or the, the quizzes, rather. That's very flexible. The [college] has been nothing but dealing with stonewalls. You know? I, I, just, I couldn't get a response from day one to today about anything, on

any subject. I still haven't gotten a response from anybody at [the college] about anything I've ever inquired about.

The face-to-face student participant responses did indicate a somewhat higher level of flexibility with the academic program and lower frustration with student services; however, not to the same extent or in the exact same manner. On-ground students indicated they were able to easily speak with college personnel before or after classes in regarding to flexibility and accessibility. Online/distance students reported a higher level of challenge when trying to reach or communicate with staff/administrators to resolve issues and convey need.

Professional Culture and Practices

All participants were asked a question regarding the ways in which the academic program helped students understand what it meant to be an optician (see Appendix A). A disconnect was found between the ways faculty and students perceived how professional culture and press are communicated and exposed. Faculty (n=2) identified seminars, conferences, and personal example as being the primary ways students are exposed to the field and conditioned to understand the profession. Students (n=8), however, expressed that labs and course content were the primary avenues and methods used to communicate and promote exposure to the field. Faculty Member A described modeling and events a significant ways to convey cultural expectations and practices:

Our academic program helps students understand what it means to be an optician in many ways. We lead by example. Not only do we present information in class regarding the culture of Opticianry but all [college] Opticianry Faculty live it. We speak at education seminars locally,

statewide and nationally. We are members of many professional organizations; some of us are executive officers on many Opticianry boards. The [college] Opticianry Faculty coordinate manage and participate in many charitable events. We strive to lead by example and report all our activities to our students and encourage them to participate with us in the events.

Faculty Member B identified conferences and personal example as the primary ways students are exposed to the culture and press of the field:

We heavily advertise whenever there's an optical conference, and [our state] has one of the largest organizations in the county, and we have three large conferences – one in [town A], one in [town B], and one in [town C] – so we heavily advertise that and we have, um, registration fees are waived for students. We invite them to participate, to participate to see the world of opticianry, if you will... We've stressed that, and I bring a lot of my personal experience into my teaching. And I talk about real things that happened with real people and then the optical people.

Students did not recognize conferences as a primary means for exposure to the industry or to learn more about the opticianry field; however, most of the student interviewed were new students and might not have been informed or encountered these opportunities. Most online/distance and on-ground students (n=8), even the returning students, identified content, curriculum, and labs as the primary ways they learned what it meant to be an optician. New Online Student A talked about learning content and the

various courses required when asked how the program helps her to understand what it means to be an optician:

Well, I mean, when you take all these courses, they give you all these... I have taken like four of 'em. And each one has a separate, you know, like anatomy and physiology, you learn something different. You learn the diseases and... You know, I never knew there was so many layers to the eyeball and I was like, "Oh, this is gonna be easy." But it's not. There's a lot of information.

New Online Student B identified what was taught and learned through course work as the primary way the program transmits professional expectations:

Going into it, I really didn't know the difference between an optician and an ophthalmologist and an optometrist and now we do know of the difference and what I'm responsible for and what they're responsible for... just through the courses and teaching and learning and then describing things to us, I guess.

Additionally, Returning Online Student A stated:

I think the lab is really important in helping all of us to understand, because you're able to work hands-on, and you are face-to-face with others, and, you know, it provides a setting for discussion and, uh, to really understand exactly what you're doing and how and why and the importance of, of it, and of the entire service that you're gonna provide.

It may appear that this disconnect is not unique to online/distance students since all students expressed course content and labs as the primary way to gain insight into the

profession and understand the norms and cultural practices to be successful. On-Ground Student A also identified course content and labs as being the primary ways in which the academic program helps to convey the professional culture and press:

Everything that they teach is geared to prepare us to take the Florida State Boards, so I'm sure they don't add anything else that we don't need to know, so, I guess everything that we're taught is just very relevant to what we're gonna do in the future, 'cause our goal is to become licensed, licensed opticians, so, basically, everything that we learn is relevant. Well, I guess the lab course... I've only taken one lab so far... and it, so the lab is actually more of a hands-on, so that would probably be a class taken that would kind of correlate the real world, and also tie in the theories. 'Cause like now, since I'm only in the first semester of the first year, like I have no idea like what real opticians do, so a lot of the courses are just, like anatomy and physiology, are just laying the groundwork. So, they're just teaching like, the parts of the eye and stuff like that.

Subjective Views/Connection

The differences in accessibility between the program and the college carried through to online/distance student subjective views. A distinction was seen in how connected a student was to the institution and to others in associated to with the program (student, etc.) based on academic program versus the college. Most online /distance students (n=5) expressed feeling more disconnected compared to their on-ground counterparts. Faculty and staff (n=5) also perceived a limited connection to the college but not to the academic program. Faculty Member A states:

As much as the Program tries to facilitate the connection of the student to the college, many of our Distance Learning Students report little to no feeling of connection from the institution to the student. They report almost a lack of concern for the distance learning student in comparison to the on-campus student. [As for the academic program,] we find the students feel very connected to the Opticianry Program once they get through the red-tape of the college and actually start our program. I feel we may do too much sometimes to involve all students in our thoughts, processes, and activities.

Faculty Member B also discussed the limited connection that online/distance student have compared to on-ground students:

They're very connected to us [academic program]... The campus-based students definitely do [feel connected] who participate in student government and things... The [off-campus] group, they feel disconnected more and that's a goal of, not to tell our family secrets, but it's a goal of mine [to increase the connection]... I thought that the Internet students would connect to each other more, and that hasn't happened.

Staff Member B perceived that online/distance students were connected to the academic program but not as much to student services due to their location:

For the opticianry students, I think on the department side, they're really well connected. I mean, I think they're constantly in contact with [Faculty Member A], and his staff via email, primarily, but on the student services

side, I wouldn't say the same thing is true for them because they're not physically here.

Staff Member C expressed the need to work to improve the admission and administrative processes student encounter because it can shape their subjective view of the college:

They start off on the negative and they just kind of go through the system, unless they get lucky and they happen to come across the right person, the right faculty member, or the right staff, the right, just the right person that can kind of try to help to turn it around... Everything else is done through the computer. If there were more attentiveness to them – a phone call, during the middle of the semester. Do a survey. What about the process in the beginning did we miss? Because if you can fix the beginning, then the distance learning and all that, the opticianry program, it just goes back to having someone go to the different areas and, and scheduling a meeting.

The online/distance students' comments reinforced the perceptions of the faculty and staff. New Online Student B characterized her connection to the academic program and college in the following manner:

On like a scale of one to ten, I would probably say seven. I feel semi-connected. I definitely feel more connected with the people that I'm taking this lab class with. We have like study groups, so we go over all of our courses together. So, with that part, I feel connected with these people. But I also, I don't know, I feel like you kind of build a relationship watching the videos, even though they're not directly talking to me, you still kind of feel like they are a little bit, you know?

Returning Online Student A described her connection to the program and institution as very low in the beginning but stronger after having completed four semesters:

The first semester, not at all. In fact, the first semester, I really thought it wasn't gonna work for me. But now that I'm really kind of used to their program and the process and, also, attending the lab where I'm able to talk to other students face-to-face... because you don't really know what to expect and there's not a lot of clear communication regarding that, so you're just kind of muddling your way through, through the process...

Some students expressed the lack of connection between students, as well, in light of some effort on the part of faculty and other students to make connection. Some online/distance student expressed that those with face to face interaction might have higher connection levels compared to those who did not interact. New Online Student B stated:

I think because of the distance thing, I think that, that's probably as much connected as, as we could be. We do occasionally get like emails that there's like, Professional Opticians of Florida is having a meeting. But it's usually like a weekday between six and eight or something up in Tampa, so... I mean, if, if I had the time and whatever, I would definitely feel more connected if I could make it to those meetings and stuff, but just because of our location.

New Online Student C attends lab at a private company and has little face-to-face interaction with anyone from the program outside of traveling in for exams. She expressed a limited feeling of connection with others associated with the program and felt

that there may even be an advantage on the part of those who do attend college-run labs and classes:

I said that sometime if you go to the lab with the teacher, you get a few more information than going to lab with professional. And I, I kind of felt the difference a little bit on the, on the midterm, that they knew those few details that I wasn't aware of... Because the instructor, I think he does more than just the lab.

Returning Online/Distance Student A stated that she didn't have any much contact with other online students her first semester and no contact with any face-to-face student through labs. Returning Online Student B also described her connection to the college and program as low during her first semester:

No, at first, I kind of just felt so, I was... I even explained to the instructor, I say, "I'm feeling so left out." And they was, they tried their best to make me feel like, "Hey, this happens" and it all like happens at the, probably around about the end, then comes together.

Additionally, New Online Student C described her interaction with other students as minimal, only seeing or communicating with other student during face-to-face examinations:

No. It was really nice when I... I did my, my midterm in [remote city], so I got to meet some of the students but I, as far as online, I sent an email asking, "If you're in the area and you're going to the program, let's get together and meet." "Let's have coffee at Starbuck's, or meet at the library and study together," and try to meet, and I didn't get one answer.

However, she did feel connected to the faculty:

I will say that the relation with the instructor seems to be a little more closer and more comfortable than I anticipated it. They seem to be more friendly, you know. It's only through email, but it's a little bit more friendly than I, well, anticipated, and it makes me more comfortable. They encourage you, they're very positive... If you ask the question, they don't just send you an answer, like, matter-of-fact, like make you feel that, you know, it's not a great question or whatever. It's very... They seem to be very open and very flexible.

New Online Student D characterized his connection to the college as being more committed to seeing the work through than a true relationship:

How connected? Well, I guess I'm... What can you say? I am, I guess I'm as connected as you can be. I'm... What's the word I'm looking for? I'm committed...[but] somewhat connected... I just don't feel connected to [the college] proper.

Conversely, on-ground students (n=3) reported a higher level of connection to the college and academic program. On-ground students reported being able to participate in organizations and see college personnel face-to-face, which allowed for additional opportunities to connect, bond, and establish a relationship. On-Ground Student A discussed the extra-curricular activities she was involved in and the desired to stay connected the program after graduation when asked about how connected she felt:

I know that it's very important to stay active, so they have an association for the students, opticianry students, and I joined that, and there is a lot of,

um, different charity events across Tampa Bay that that association participates in. So, in the future, I wanna be, like what these people are doing now. I hope to hold an office position next year, and then even after I graduate and get my license with the State of Florida, I still plan to stay active with HCC, because it's such a great program.

Rules and Procedures

When directly asked, students stated that they had no issues or concerns regarding the rules and procedures associated with the academic program. The characterized them as being reasonable and fair; however, students both online/distance and face-to-face largely associated rules and procedures only with the academic program, not the college (n=7). Almost all participants expressed problems with admissions, financial aid, and other college procedures but the students didn't seem to connect them as being rules and procedures. New Online Student B stated, "I'd describe [the rules as] pretty straightforward. They let us know at the beginning, this is what's expected of you. This is what you should learn and it, this is what you need to do to accomplish it." New Online Student C related rules to the academic program, stating:

It's, I think it's very good. It's, all the rule and procedure are good and we have an instructor that really is behind us for that. So, if we don't understand something, or if we miss something, he'll tell you what to go back and read and what to do.

Returning online Student B also characterized the rules as acceptable in terms of the academic program but did not associate the administrative processes with them:

I, as far as the rules, I think they're great. I mean, I haven't had any problems with any of the rules, any of the procedures, because I think they really work. And they know what they're doing to get you prepared to pass the exams and to know what you need to know as an optician.

On-Ground Student A described the rules and procedures as follows:

Well, they have specific things that they want each student to follow.

When we have different assignments and, like we just had midterms, or this is our midterm week, we're supposed to follow specific rules and, you know, like studying for it, and like the coursework. So, I'd say they have a pretty clear direction. So, I'm really appreciative of that, too.

As evidenced in the previous section, faculty, staff, and students all mentioned issues with the administrative processes associated with admissions, financial aid, and records.

When follow up and probing questions were asked to attempt to make the connection, most acknowledged them as being relevant and related to rule and procedures but did not elaborate.

Differences in Online/Web Usability

Two distinct representations emerged regarding the Web space frequented by the population: the academic program's website and the college website. The academic program website was described as being organized and easy to navigate. The college website did not receive as favorable of comments. Both on-ground and online/distance students characterized the Web space in these ways, as did faculty. At the time of writing, a notification was posted that the academic program website was going to be overhauled and changed to be even more user friendly and helpful. Returning Online Student A

characterized the academic program positively and stated that she had not encountered problems using it. New Online/Distance Student A stated:

That is the worst website to work with. I don't know if you get [another school's] website, but it is so user-friendly in its website. I love [that school]. It's so nice. And then you have, and then I went to [this institution], and I had so much problems with them.

Additionally, New Online Student B mentioned that the college website was challenging at first but after time it becomes easier:

Well, the first few times, like a little bit confusing, just because I didn't really know exactly what I was looking for and how to get to where I was going. But I've been on it, I don't know, a handful of times, and it's easier every time.

New Online Student C characterized the college website as “overwhelming” and that “there are a lot of, a lot of things. I mean if I, if I didn't go to the orientation before to tell me where to go for the opticianry program, I would have been lost.” On-Ground Student A described the two websites in a dichotomous manner in terms of ease and navigation:

The [college] website isn't that user-friendly, but the opticianry section is pretty user-friendly, because it gives you all of the links in the process in which you have to register to become enrolled in the program. So, that part of it was very easy. You can see – like, there's a section for current students and, at the time, I was a prospective student, so they had a

different link for prospective students, and all you had to do was click on it and then everything was right there.

Lastly, Faculty Member A reinforced the problematic design and structure of the college website with his comments, “We can sit down and go through the [college] Website. It’s a disaster. Students are asked to “go to the website” for information. I know what I am doing and cannot find the information students are responsible to know.”

Question #2: Differences and Similarities in Perceptions

The next research question sought to understand how differences and similarities in perceptions between students, faculty, and administrators contributed to hidden curricular issues; specifically, how do differences and similarities in perceptions between students, faculty and administrators contribute to hidden curricular issues? Themes related to this question from the faculty group included: 1) Workload and Time and 2) Lack of Support for Online/Distance Learning Students. Emergent staff themes for this question included: 1) Lack of Resources, 2) Preference for Face-to-Face Interaction, 3) Academic Program Disconnect; and 4) Faculty Interference. Lastly, emergent student themes included, 1) Student Services, 2) Faculty Assistance, and 3) Limited Interaction. Participant responses were then triangulated for similarities and differences in an effort to reveal possible areas of misunderstanding and misinterpretation that would contribute to hidden curricular issues. Issues discovered during comparison included, 1) awareness of issues with student services but a lack of forewarning; 2) perception of faculty interfering in administrative processes when faculty felt that they were advocating for online/distance students; 3) a lack of understanding of online/distance student needs and service avenues compared to on-ground students; 4) lack of resources to support

online/distance learning student initiatives and processes; and 5) agreement across all groups that the academic program was flexible and accessible toward their online/distance students.

Faculty Themes

Time.

Both faculty members (n=2) mentioned workload and amount of time involved as being aspects that were not expected when they started to translate and teach courses online and at a distance. Faculty Member A gave the following response when asked about unanticipated facets of online/distance learning:

The amount of work it took/takes to manage a large online program such as the [the college] opticianry program. Managing a course online takes a 24/7 commitment. No longer do today's students come to class, leave, and be done until the next class. Email and other online communications tools allow for communication all day, every day and that communication must be managed all day, every day.

Faculty Member B discussed the high level of work and expectations of students to respond to inquiries and grade:

So, there's, there's that one dynamic which we're still learning how to, how to have realistic expectations, in my opinion of the faculty and the student... Pushing me into presbyopia too soon, needing reading glasses because of all of the time I spend on the computer... we took in eighty freshmen, which is wonderful and, therefore, every time we open our in-

box, you know, so there's the challenge of, you know, just keeping up with the workload.

Lack of Support for Online/Distance Learning Processes.

Furthermore, both faculty members discussed the lack of support for online/distance learning processes in areas of student services and instruction technology/design. Faculty Member A discussed the need for the academic program to create an orientation module for online/distance students due to resource issues:

To combat the lack of resources HCC has for distance learning students, we require our students complete an online orientation. This orientation was created by the opticianry program to address the admissions requirements of [the college] and to present important information about the opticianry program to interested prospective students.

Faculty Member B mentioned the need for more support in the area of instructional technology and design from the institution:

We definitely need more support. We have [Faculty Member A], which, which makes our department thrive. But quite frankly, his job is a faculty member, not an IT... because what he should be doing is, is focusing on developing his, his lectures and his teaching methodologies. I think all the colleges who expect that the faculty will do it without a heavy, heavy IT support presence and we don't have it.

Additionally, Faculty Member B spoke about the need to improve the admissions process for online/distance students:

If, if the whole thing, could be mainstreamed online. Absolutely. It and a staff, with one or two or however many our budget allows with, our FTEs, if we track online versus face-to-face FTEs who's devoted only to e-students, because their needs are different.

Staff Themes

Four major themes emerged from the staff interviewed for the study. These themes included: 1) lack of resources; 2) preference for face-to-face interaction with students; 3) disconnect from the academic program's inner-workings; and 4) faculty interference in student services procedures.

Lack of Resources.

All staff (n=3) interviewed indicated that a lack of adequate resources their ability to fully serve their student population. Staff Member B discussed the limited ability of staff to address all student demand by stating, "But, I mean, in [the college], in general, it's difficult, because there are not enough staff resources to meet the student needs." Staff Member A stated that there was a limited number of staff available to serve students which interferes with being able to provide assistance when needed:

I mean I know our office is, I would say, it's, it's not always staffed properly. I mean, we are a little understaffed, and I know that sometimes it may be hard to get a hold of us, because, not because we, we're not ignoring people, but because our window customers are our priority. So, if, if they... I mean not saying that we don't try our hardest, like I said... and I like to try to take care of them, but, I mean... But, yeah, I mean, like I said, it is a little tough, because we, we don't, we don't have enough

manpower, like we would like to have. I mean if we had a little, just twice the staff that we have, I would say that, yes, we would have a great, you know experience for the students.

Lastly, Staff Member C mentioned the recent growth in enrollment and its limiting effect on their ability to serve students by stating, “We’ve grown so much and even just this past registration, even though we have seven advisors right now, we can barely handle what’s going on... It would help our students to bring more bodies in.”

Preference for Face-to-Face Interaction.

All staff members (n=3) interviewed also mentioned a preference for working with students face-to-face interaction versus online or through other electronic means.

Staff Member B stated:

It makes them more successful, as long as you’re not enabling and going too far, you know, it can, help them to have somebody to touch base with on a regular basis in person, as well, because sometimes people just don’t get the same experience over the phone or online... I mean on the one hand, sometimes I think, “Well, if it’s something really major and you’re only three or four hours away, you can get in your car and drive here,” but I understand people have lives and other things going on so, you know, that would be one of the biggest challenges.

Staff Member C also mentioned the use of face-to-face meetings to help resolve online and distance student issues:

And if the college isn’t gonna offer [beginning and end year meetings with students], then the college needs to use one of the recruiters to go

wherever they need to go, and sit down, schedule a meeting with ten of the students, fifteen of the students, sit down with them, go through their records. That'll help smooth it out. Make sure that they have all their opticianry classes, that they don't have "I"s [incomplete grades] sitting there, that kind of stuff.

Finally, Staff Member C later stated that face-to-face meetings and interactions were a better way of working with and resolving online and distance student issues:

It goes back to the basic, it's kind of like a hospital. You can have all the computers in the world that you want, but if you don't have human contact, a person's really not gonna get better. It's kind of like the distance learning. We have a lot of knowledge within the institution, you can try and talk to somebody on the phone, but typically that one-on-one contact is what helps. You know, it makes everybody's life better.

Academic Program Disconnect.

When asked about the academic program and how it functioned or helped to teach students what it meant to be an optician, all staff members interviewed (n=3) communicated that they were not involved and did not have insight into the inner-workings of the program. Staff Member B stated:

I just really haven't been involved enough with the program. That's more something that they handle on the departmental side, so I mean, no, I wouldn't say that I've heard anything negative about the program, so that's good. But I just don't have a sense of that.

Another participant talked more in general about what attending college can do for someone by the way of self-discipline but didn't provide insight into how the program conveys what it means to be an optician. Staff Member A stated:

With any program, when they come here and they're learning something, it, it teaches 'em... discipline. You know, it, it's, it's a form of boundaries, and that's really good in the outside world, is to learn boundaries and procedures and how to deal... And, and college can, in a way, kind of help you deal with those things. I mean, it gives you structure. And I think being in opticianry or any program, you know, college, all about it, is learning how to stay focused and to achieve a higher goal in life and not just, you know, wander around aimlessly, so I think that helps.

Lastly, when Staff Member C was asked how the academic program conveyed professional standards and cultural practices to students, she responded, "Honestly, I don't think I could answer that for you because mine's more the academic side. And, again, I don't have contact with them until something happens. So, that's, that wouldn't be a good a question for me."

Faculty Interference.

Finally, all three staff member participants (n=3) made reference to the high level of involvement the faculty from the academic program and how that has led to tension and restricted access between the academic program and the administrative department. Staff Member A stated:

And, [Faculty Member A] would come in a lot, at least we don't let him come in anymore, because [Faculty Member A] is a real supporter of his students. He wants to get them in and out, so they've, they've not let him come in any more about that... I think that, um, the overall is, well, communication, at the same time, not try to take advantage of you know, the position. I mean, 'cause you have to... I mean, I think if everyone realizes that it's hard all the way around, and that are willing to work together, then I think it works smoothly. Now, if, if someone tried to, you know, bully, because they think that they're, the opticianry program is better than the other, other programs we have... that causes a problem.

Staff member C discussed another instance how faculty will attempt help minimize issues with the student services process by conducting their own orientation and gathering admissions documents:

I know that [the faculty] does orientation, but not all of [the students] get into orientation on time. And even when he does orientation, it's really not his responsibility to make sure they have their transcripts so that they don't get these holds put on them. And, in fact, I wish he wouldn't take their transcripts. I wish he would let it go through the normal process, through the admissions office.

Additionally, staff member C expressed how the program's faculty have come to promote themselves as the primary point of contact for any questions which limits access to assistance and can cause confusion:

I would say [access is] limited at this point, because they believe their point of contact is the two of them [faculty members], and they're very busy people and if they can't get back to them right away, that's when the student typically starts calling around and looking for an advisor. More communication needs to happen on that.

Finally, Staff Member C expressed the desire of those involved with the academic program to shadow staff during heavy student-traffic time and eluded to tension that has been created between the program and department:

Most importantly, I would love one time during heavy registration to have the administrators and faculty come into our area, sit at our desks for several days just to get the feel of what it's really like, to understand that it's not always necessarily the employee that is wrong; so that they can understand when someone takes a book and throws it at you. To hear what these people are saying. Just to have that experience. They think it's very easy.

Student Themes

Three themes emerged from the student participants: 1) Student services; 2) Faculty Assistance; and 3) Limited Interaction.

Student Services.

All online/distance students (n=6) interviewed referenced issues with student services processes. New Online Student A described student services as being challenging for students:

I see people in my class that they don't even know if their credits are gonna transfer over and stuff, because no one gets a hold of them, they don't tell anyone there. So, I had a, you know, a bad experience with that. And I had to, I just had to keep calling people to make sure they got my diploma and anything else that they needed.

Additionally, New Online Student B also described issues with student services, particularly with financial aid and communication from those in the department:

Yes, and I did not have a good experience with that, and I'm still dealing with [financial aid]... like two months ago, they sent me an email that they needed a student acknowledgement form from me. I scanned it back to them, emailed it to them, probably three or four times. No response, and so I got the Dean's email address and he still hasn't even responded to my email. And I'm to the point, like, it's been two months now, they could at least respond and tell me my status. Am I in a waiting line, or, you know, what's going on?

Furthermore, New Online student C mentioned having problems communicating with the financial aid department and identifying staff members who can provide assistance:

You get no answer back, no nothing. You have to call them a hundred million times before you can go through somebody. You don't know who's taking care of you. This is really bad, and so that part was really bad.

Returning Online Student A noted problems with student services receiving transcripts which caused a delay in registration and starting her coursework:

I've had to mail college transcripts several times, the high school transcripts were lost and both semesters – I'm in my second semester – but both semesters, it was hard to actually register for classes and get my books, because they, you know, kept losing that paperwork. So, it puts you behind, essentially, when you start class. I think I started this time four weeks' behind.

New online Student D expressed issues with the college admissions process:

So, it, there was one delay after another, after another, as they went round and around and around. "But you need to this." "No, but you don't need to do that." "Oh, but you checked with this person?" "Oh, oh, well, you've already done that. Oh, you already have this. Oh, you don't..." Round and around and around for weeks, to the point where I thought I was really gonna lose the whole thing. I was gonna lose it just by, just incompetency.

Furthermore, New Online Student D discussed a situation with student services that was still ongoing at the time of the interview:

So, I've called them. I've left messages on their phone. I've emailed them. And I get no response. I've gone through [email] system to email them; I get no response, saying, "I, this was a mistake on my part. I am not financial aid. I am Rapid Recovery, one hundred percent. Please erase this from my record, because it doesn't apply," so that, you know, I don't, when I go through two years of this schooling, at the end, I'm not

prevented from graduating due to some bureaucratic faux pas. And they just don't take it down, and they don't respond.

Lastly, Returning Online Student B talked about how physical distance from the institution made it difficult to resolve issues with student services. Ultimately she was required to drive several hours on a couple of occasions to work out problems:

It was, it was crazy because of the simple fact that I'm in [another part of the state] and I was trying to sign up for classes for that fall, and I had all my funds there ready to be used, but it was like certain papers that I had to sign. I couldn't do the online signing thing... I had to make a trip there before I could get everything finalized... But it was just the fact that I gotta go all the way to [the college], I gotta stay in a hotel the next, you know, and then drive back.

Faculty Assistance.

The second student theme involved assistance from the academic program's faculty. Five online/distance students (n=5) referenced ease of communication and times when a faculty member from the program intervened on their behalf to help resolve problems. New Online Student A stated:

So, I just called one of the guys [faculty] in charge over there [with the opticianry program]... And he's the one that got me my ID number, because I didn't get it... And then, once I got admitted, I was supposed to wait for that number to come, and then apply for the optician program. That never came about. So, I called [a faculty member] and, right away, he got me my ID number.

New Online Student B explained how accessible and easy it was to reach faculty when they have questions or problems:

Well, we have the email through each course that goes directly to the instructors, so, any time that I've emailed with a question or a problem, I've gotten response, like the next day if it's a weekday, you know; if it's like the weekend, then Monday I'd get response, so, it's, I think, really easy. [Faculty Member B] has given us her direct office line and told us when she's in the office. I personally haven't had to call her yet, but I know other students that just call her and she's there to answer questions and walk you through things over the phone, and I think that they're there for you as much as they can be, as far away as they are.

Returning Student A also reported an instance regarding faculty assistance by stating, "[Faculty Member A] really has been the, the primary one to, you know, be helping in any way... he helped with the transcript issues and the password issue and, whatever. So, he's been the one to iron things out." Lastly, Returning Student B stated that the faculty would help out when online/distance students had issues with administrative processes:

Yes, that's what I was saying, in the beginning, the administrative part, getting signed up there they were very, very helpful... They were very helpful and they, they would go, actually, and I got an email, "I'm going to go and speak with the financial aid department to find out," you know, "why they're making you do this, because you shouldn't have to do this." "You're, the way this is set up is that you don't have to come here for this."

Limited Interaction.

The final student theme identified was limited interaction. Three online/distance students (n=3) reported limited interaction with other online/distance students in the program. When asked if she felt connected to others in the program, New Online Student A stated:

When you go on the discussion board, somebody who wanted to email, like have a conversation with me, so I answered their questions. But that was only like twice. No one really uses that anymore since from the beginning, 'cause I think everyone knows basically what's going on and we don't have to use it.

New Online Student B also mentioned limited contact with other students but cited discussion boards as an avenue for interaction:

No... Well, we have like with discussion boards in our classes that are all online people. I guess those would be an interaction. 'Cause like if someone needs help with something or for example, there's a girl that's trying to get more information on pediatric opticians, so, there's like a few blogs and discussion boards going on about that, that type of stuff.

Finally, New Online Student C reported attempting to connect with other student through email but without response:

Not really. I don't know. I sent an email, tried to get in touch with other students and it doesn't really, you know, I don't know... Now, I, sign up for the student opticianry thing, also, so, I don't know. We'll see when I

get, if I get an answer from that, and if I'm a little bit more, because being so far from [the college], I don't really feel too connected.

On-ground students did not report having concerns related to interaction with other students in the program. While some on-ground students also mentioned problems with student services, themes related to frustration with having to travel hours to campus and the need to utilize faculty to resolve issues were not expressed.

Differences and Similarities in Perceptions.

Based on a triangulation of emergent themes between all three groups, five intersections linked to hidden curricular issues regarding differences and similarities in perceptions surfaced. These included: 1) not communicating negative information regarding student services; 2) differences in perceptions regarding faculty involvement in administrative processes; 3) lack of knowledge regarding online/distance learner needs; 4) agreement across all groups that the academic program is open and flexible; and 5) that a lack of resources exist regarding online/distance learning initiatives.

All groups experienced issues or expressed concern with student services, but those aware of the existence of these issues did not convey them to parties ahead of time. All faculty and staff (n=5) interviewed reported being aware of problematic trends and practices related to student services prior to new students encountering them such as difficulty with communication, lost paperwork, and delays in financial aid. Students also reported experiencing these problems; however, they were not told ahead of time of any possible issues they may encounter and/or were not given a strategy by staff or faculty regarding how to handle issues should they transpire. In follow up and clarifying questions by the interviewer, all online/distance students (n=6) stated they were not told

of any foreseeable issues related to the admission, financial aid, and other administrative processes associated with student services ahead of time. New Online Student B stated, “As the problems are here now, when I talk about it with people in class, there’s a few other girls that are having problems with financial aid as well, but beforehand, no, we weren’t forewarned about anything.”

The second area discovered involved faculty involvement in administrative processes. Faculty (n=2) reported trying to help online/distance students when they encountered problems with various administrative procedures. This was verified by all online/distance students (n=6) through them conveying experiences that depicted faculty taking active roles in resolving problems. Students also expressed high levels of appreciation for this intervention on their behalf. Conversely, student services staff (n=3) characterized faculty intercession as problematic and a disruption in their processes. As a result, accounts of faculty being restricted or prevented from approaching student services staff to reconcile issues for online/distance students were reported by staff members interviewed.

Thirdly, the staff members (n=3) who were interviewed all expressed a lack of understanding into the needs of online/distance students. Suggested avenues for online/distance students to resolve problems all resulted in face-to-face exchanges or meetings. Technologically facilitated solutions were not identified by staff and when asked about possible alternatives from face-to-face interaction, no practical suggestions were offered. Based on the staff interviews, student services approach online/distance student in the same way face-to-face students are provided service. While some services and processes involved online delivery such as the application process, more face-to-face

avenues for on-ground students existed for the resolution of issues due to their close proximity to the college.

Next, all groups, faculty, staff and students, interviewed (n=14) agreed that the academic program was highly accessible and flexible to student need. Both faculty perceived themselves and the academic program to be highly accessible and flexible. This observation was supported by the online/distance students who were interviewed. They expressed being able to easily contact and receive fast replies from faculty through email and phone. Additionally, online/distance students expressed gratitude and appreciation when faculty assisted with problems. Staff members also communicated that the faculty in the academic program were very helpful and champions for their students even though it would create frustration and tension between the staff and faculty in the academic program.

Lastly, faculty and staff expressed a lack of resources for online/distance learner initiatives and processes. Both faculty (n=2) expressed limited resources for assistance in helping with the development and facilitation of course materials. A need for instructional technology support was communicated. Additionally, due to the lack of support for online/distance learners in student services, faculty reported being highly involved in assisting students through the administrative process and expending time and effort that could otherwise be devoted to instruction. All staff members interviewed (n=3) conveyed a lack of resources and staff to address the high demand placed on them by serving all students at the college, both on-ground and online/distance. Although these issues are known, none reported seeing any change or movement to improve support services for online/distance learning. As of the writing of this paper, the college did move

to create a center for teaching and technology to better assist faculty with the design and development of hybrid and online courses. The research was not aware of any plans to address concerns communicated by faculty related to student services for online and distance students.

Question #3: Manifestations of Online Hidden Curriculum

The final research question explored in this study sought to understand how hidden curriculum manifests in online and distance learning environments; specifically, how does hidden curriculum manifest in online and distance learning environments? While this question is broader in scope and is limited to institutional and organizational systems, two global themes were identified: 1) Support Functions (Student Services and Instructional Technology), 2) Advocacy, and 3) Conveying the Profession.

Support Functions

As evidenced previously, issues related to student services and instructional support for faculty were expressed by students, faculty, and staff. Faculty reported issues gaining assistance with online course development and problems with student services processes for their online/distance learning student population. As presented earlier, Faculty Member B discussed concerns with the lack of technical/development support followed by the need for improved student services processes. She stated that a faculty member in the department handled a lot of the instructional technology and technology support issues in the department (see previous section for full quote).

Staff expressed the lack of resources to handle the volume of work from all students, both online and on-ground. Also presented earlier, Staff Member A helps to summarize this theme through her statement regarding the understaffing of the office in

which she works (see previous section for full quote). She also described the problems students faced getting a hold of them because of staffing issues and acknowledged the frustration and challenges it caused for students.

Finally, online/distance students also communicated the need for better support from student services staff when they encounter difficulty. Again, as stated by New Online Student B in the previous section, she helps to convey the essence of this theme from the online/distance student perspective through her statement related to financial aid. She expressed a lack of instruction and communication with the department in light of having attempted to reach staff and the Dean on several occasions (see previous section for full quote).

Advocacy

A theme of advocacy was present throughout the interviews from all groups. Faculty members explained their efforts to help students work through administrative and logistical hurdles, often going beyond what is normally required of a faculty member. Faculty Member A's statements help to illustrate his ongoing efforts

The [college] offices continually ask students to come to campus. Some are out of state- many live hours from [the college]. I say it is manageable by other means (email, phone calls, etc) but emails and phone calls are rarely answered. I am just today going back and forth with Student Services about emails being forwarded to me that were not answered for more than a month.

Students frequently discussed how faculty assisted them through issues and problems that arose and their appreciation for intervening. Advocacy, on the part of the

faculty member, led to the resolution of dilemmas that students may or may not have been able to reconcile themselves at a distance. Returning Student A also reported an instance regarding faculty assistance by stating, “[Faculty Member A] really has been the, the primary one to, you know, be helping in any way... he helped with the transcript issues and the password issue and, whatever. So, he’s been the one to iron things out.” Additionally, Returning Student B stated that the faculty would help out when online/distance students had issues with administrative processes. She expressed gratitude for the faculty member intervening on her behalf so she didn’t have to drive several hours to campus to resolve the issue in person ((see previous section for full quote).

Staff also expressed the desire to provide a high level of service to all students but limitations in resources seem to tarnish the department’s efforts. Staff Member C, however, provided a good summation of how advocacy can shape the experience of an online student. She stated:

If the program manager or the faculty members are really involved people that, you know, really care about their students; I’ll hear wonderful things. And then there are some that are just here, you know, for the paycheck or they’ve been here for a period of time, they’re tired, they’re burnt out.

While on-ground students made limited references and also spoke positively about the efforts of faculty to assist them, the extent to which they relied on such advocacy was seemingly less compared to the online/distance learning students.

Conveying the Profession

Unrelated to support and advocacy was the theme of conveying the profession. Faculty felt they presented professional expectations through seminars, personal example,

and conferences. Student expressed a different perspective by identifying labs and course content as the primary means by which they would learn what it meant to be an optician. Furthermore, staff did not express any insight or understanding into how the academic program conveyed the profession to student. This theme is unique from support functions and advocacy due to its focus on academic program culture versus the institutional culture. As referenced prior, Faculty Member A described modeling and participating in outside events as the primary avenues to convey the profession (see previous section for full quote). Conversely, online Student A identified course content and labs as being the primary ways in which the academic program helps to convey the professional culture and press (see previous section for full quote).

Conclusion

This chapter provided an account of participants lived experiences as related to the research questions being explored in this study. Fourteen participants were interviewed over the course of four months (August 2009 to November 2009) to discuss their perceptions and experiences as they related to hidden curricular issues that manifest in online learning environments. Data was then analyzed and presented in a narrative format to answer the following research questions:

- How do organizational and institutional systems contribute to the manifestation of hidden curricular issues?
- How do differences and similarities in perceptions between students, faculty, and administrators contribute to hidden curricular issues?
- How does hidden curriculum manifest in online and distance learning environments?

A detailed overview of the setting, data collection procedure, and sample population was described. Next, the emergent topics related to various organizational and institutional systems were presented such as subjective views, environmental press, social climate, college and program cultures, rules, and procedures. Themes related to this line of questioning and research question were: 1) Accessibility/Flexibility Differences; 2) Disconnect in Conveying and Perceiving the Professional Culture; 3) Disconnected from College; and 4) Differences in Website Usability.

Results related to the second research question were then reported by participant type: faculty, staff, and student. Themes from the faculty group included: 1) Workload and Time and 2) Lack of Support for Online/Distance Learning Processes. Emergent staff themes for this question included: 1) Lack of Resources, 2) Preference for Face-to-Face Interaction, 3) Academic Program Disconnect, and 4) Faculty Interference. Lastly, student themes for this area included, 1) Student Services, 2) Faculty Assistance, and 3) Limited Interaction.

Themes from all groups were then triangulated to investigate hidden curricular issues regarding differences and similarities in perceptions surfaced. These included: 1) not communicating negative information regarding student services; 2) differences in perceptions regarding faculty involvement in administrative processes; 3) lack of knowledge regarding online/distance learner needs; 4) agreement across all groups that the academic program is open and flexible; and 5) that a lack of resources exist regarding online/distance learning.

Finally, global themes that emerged from the interviews were presented in response to the final research question: 1) Support Functions, 2) Advocacy, and 3)

Conveying the Profession. The next chapter will conclude the dissertation by providing reflection on the results revealed in chapter 4 and presenting implications for practice and future research.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the study and discusses the results presented in chapter four regarding hidden curricular issues in online and distance learning environments using an ecological perspective. This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach situated in a case study to gather the lived experiences of fourteen participants (faculty, staff, and students) associated with an online academic program. Interview transcripts and the researcher reflective journal were analyzed, coded for themes, and then presented in narrative form organized by the three research questions. The frequency of participants referencing each theme along with direct quotes were used to support the validity of the themes discovered and provide a thick, rich account of the phenomenon in the participant's own words.

Chapter five is organized into six sections. A summary of the study is presented first, followed by a discussion of each research question and their themes. Related literature is tied back in to strengthen validity and better illustrate the conclusions and overall dialogue. Next, various limitations associated with the study are presented, followed by implications for practice, questions raised as a result of thematic discovery, and future research. The chapter is concluded with closing thoughts.

Summary of Study

Hidden curricular issues have been characterized in the literature as unspoken or implicit norms, values, expectations, skill sets, knowledge, and social processes that have an impact on the experiences of those operating within a learning environment. For distance and online learners, hidden curriculum can take on new or varied concerns as compared to their on-ground counterparts due to the uniqueness of the environment, tools, and resources involved such as multimedia, computer-mediated environments, learning management systems, and electronic communication modes. Coupling this perspective with an ecological approach allows for greater understanding of the full range of potential factors that distance and online students may encounter as they navigate their educational experience. To this end, this study explored hidden curriculum in the broader sense as seen in the literature to include issues and factors from the entire educational environment. Using an expanded, holistic framework allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the implicit challenges that online student may face both in and out of the classroom.

Various theories and lines of research from the literature on hidden curriculum and campus ecology, as outlined in chapter two of this study, were used to help formulate the questions and guide the analysis of the interviews. Specifically, issues related to institutional and organizational systems such as press, climate, rules, regulations, and processes were focused on due to the likelihood of a student to initially encounter them as they gain entry into the academic environment. Recruitment, admission, and advisement into the program must transpire before a student will interact with a learning management system or encounter assignments. The various agents, structures, and players that

function in the environment all have the potential to act upon and influence the experiences of a student.

Three research questions were explored in this study:

- How do organizational and institutional systems contribute to the manifestation of hidden curricular issues?
- How do differences and similarities in perceptions between students, faculty, and administrators contribute to hidden curricular issues?
- How does hidden curriculum manifest in online and distance learning environments?

Three groups of participants associated with and involved in an online academic program were interviewed to provide insight into their lived experiences and perspectives surrounding various issues related to hidden curriculum. A total of fourteen people were interviewed including three staff members, two faculty members, and nine students.

Transcripts were analyzed and themes identified using Oliver's (2004) criteria for data selection (e.g. presence of multiple references made across individuals concurring with previous research, majority indicating significance, or in-depth responses indicated thematic significance). Themes related to the first research question emerged as: 1) Accessibility/Flexibility Differences; 2) Disconnect in Conveying and Perceiving the Professional Culture; and 3) Disconnected from College; and 4) Differences in Website Usability. Themes related to the second research were reported according to each participant group (faculty, staff, and student) then compared for similarities and discrepancies. Themes in this area for the faculty group included: 1) Workload and Time and 2) Lack of Support for Online/Distance Learning Processes. Emergent staff themes

for this question included: 1) Lack of Resources, 2) Preference for Face-to-Face Interaction, 3) Academic Program Disconnect, and 4) Faculty Interference. Lastly, student themes for this area included, 1) Student Services, 2) Faculty Assistance, and 3) Limited Interaction.

Finally, global hidden curricular issues associated with institutional and organizational systems related to this case study manifested in the forms of *support functions, advocacy, and conveying the profession*. Faculty and staff reported the need for institutional support mechanisms to assist in executing services and creating course content for distance and online learners. Gaps in support services were confirmed by the student participants, as well. Furthermore, the presence of strong faculty advocacy for distance and online learners resulted in positive student experiences, especially in times of distress associated with institutional processes and procedures. This is in contrast to a lack of advocacy from student support personnel who did not exhibit or showed limited understanding into the needs of distance and online learners. These themes are related to hidden curriculum through their ability to effect the experiences of distance and online students in an implicit manner. The lack (or presence) of support functions and advocacy can create a campus press/culture and shape the experience of the student which in turn can influence outcomes such as success, attitudes, behaviors, and persistence.

Research Question #1

The first research question sought to understand how various organizational and institutional systems contribute to the manifestation of hidden curricular issues. This question was addressed through the interview protocol by asking open ended questions related to admissions and recruitment processes, perceived level of institutional/program

accessibility, perceived level of institutional/program openness, perceived level of institutional/program flexibility, experience with institutional/program rules/procedures, and perceived conveyance of the professional culture by the program (see Appendix A). Other general open ended questions were also asked to allow for issues or topics to emerge not anticipated by the researcher. Emergent themes related to this question included: 1) Accessibility/Flexibility Differences; 2) Disconnect in Conveying and Perceiving the Professional Culture; and 3) Disconnected from College; and 4) Differences in Website Usability.

Accessibility/Flexibility Differences

Themes related to perceived levels of accessibility and flexibility of the institution were found in the results. Strange and Banning (2001) described this aspect of a campus's ecology as the *organizational environment* which involves such matters as rules, processes, procedures, and the overall climate created through the intersection of these variables. Institutions can be perceived as flexible or rigid, fixed or fluid, and/or dynamic or static depending up on how the organization conducts itself. The social climate found within an environment has also been found to effect behavior, mood, health, well-being, and the overall development of a person (Moos 1974, 1979). Factors such as mutual support, involvement, opportunities for personal growth, and the extent to which the environment is orderly and clear can all influence those who operate within the environment. Furthermore, the effects an educational environment has on shaping learning and development, both in and out of the classroom, have also been examined (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991/2005). Classes and student services that are intentional and systematically structured to actively engage and support students will result in higher

levels of achievement, learning, and persistence. This includes areas such as advising and admissions (Margolis, 2001; Margolis & Romero, 1998).

Faculty and online students reported having systematic problems navigating and gaining access to various student services functions. Even staff members loosely admitted to having limitations and restrictions on how well they can serve online and distance students. Accessing services related to admissions and financial aid at the institutional level often required students to come to the college face-to-face which caused difficulty for students taking classes online or at a distance from the college. Additionally, staff members did not make a distinction between the needs of face-to-face students and online/distance students. Students who lived hours away were expected to drive in and meet with staff to resolve issues.

Conversely, faculty, students, and staff all described the level of accessibility and flexibility on the part of the academic program to be very high. Faculty characterized their level of accessibility and flexibility to student need as being excellent. Students reported being able to email faculty with questions with quick response rates and indicated the willingness of faculty to offer a diverse range of lab practical opportunities to meet student schedules. Additionally, staff members associated with the academic program described them as being open and supportive of their online students.

This dynamic illustrates how a positive, accessible, and supportive environment can foster openness and success compared to those which are closed, cumbersome, and restrictive. In this case we saw a higher level of awareness related to online and distance student need on the part of the faculty compared to the staff which resulted in more positive comments and overall perception of the academic program compared to the

institution. Often times the culture of an institution is not apparent to the players who come into contact and operate within it beforehand, especially students since they cycle through the system at faster rates than faculty and staff. This can be compounded for online and distance students since they rely heavily on electronic and computer-mediated means to interact and communicate with the institution and/or academic program.

According to related literature on the topic, making those who have control over the various institutional and organizational processes, procedures, and rules more aware of their ability to shape perception and success could result in higher achievement rates, increased levels of persistence, and positive perception.

Disconnect in Conveying and Perceiving the Professional Culture

Educational environments have been shown to have influence over how students view themselves in terms of social relationships and identity by way of unofficial expectations, unintended learning outcomes, and implicit messages (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1980, 1982; Dreeben, 1968; Eisner, 2002; Giroux, 1978, 1981; Grant, 1992; Portelli, 1993; Thorne, 1993). Hidden curricular research focused on higher education environments has also studied the manner in which an academic field or discipline conveys their practices, expectations, cultural norms, and other nuances can impact and shape students. Biglan (1973) outlined a taxonomy that describes how academic disciplines approach looking at issues and research similarly and differently. This is echoed in Donald's (2002) work on how each academic field promotes different thinking practices, knowledge paradigms, and general characteristics. Bergenhenegouwen (1987) advocated that part of the hidden curriculum of higher education was to convey how the profession of an academic discipline operates, including cultural expectations, concepts,

and conduct. Ahola (2000) later refined this concept as *Learning the Profession*, discipline-specific expectations and nuances that students must come to understand and model.

Related to this study, faculty reported one perspective on how the professional culture is conveyed while students stated another perspective. Primarily, faculty identified seminars, conferences, and personal example as the primary ways students came to understand the professional culture while students named labs and course content. This disconnect supports previous research and suggests the presence of a hidden curricular issue; specifically, that one group (faculty) feels that another group (students) is receiving information or guidance in a certain way (seminars, conferences, personal example) when in reality it is contrary to the way that group feels it is experiencing a phenomenon (labs and course content). Furthermore, for the purposes of this research, it could be suggested that the conveyance of professional culture does play a part in the global category of institutional and organization hidden curricular issues outlined in the literature review as evidenced by the discrepancy between these two participant groups (faculty and students). While the effects of such a disconnect were not studied here, related research would suggest the possibility of outcomes could include misshapen identity, skewed social/relational understanding, lower performance, and/or failure to persist.

Disconnected from College

The ways in which an organization or institution interfaces with a student, by way of rules, procedures, values, and assumptions, can create a lasting impression. Subjective or perceived views about an entity or organization can be just as powerful and influential

as actual reality. Strange and Banning (2001) discussed how one's *constructed meaning* can effect students. Based on their interactions and experiences with all elements within an educational environment, learners create a reality. Pressures, demands, values, assumptions, and rituals culminate to create an environmental press that is promoted and maintained by administrative, academic, and student sources. This concept is related to Bronfrenbrenner's (1977, 1995) ecological systems theory which describes how the interactions between various subsystems, including social patterns and cultural entities, can influence a person's behavior, beliefs, and development. Phenomenon like culture and environmental press are challenging to explicitly see but are often very easy to experience. Establishing a connection with an institution, even before a student enters into a classroom, is often a critical variable in seeing positive outcomes. Noddings (1992) argued that schools should use their influence to promote a sense of caring through systematically connecting personally with all who operate and come in contact with the institution. By doing so, students would not only succeed but leave the educational experience with a positive and caring disposition. If an institution provides motivation, aspiration, and support, students will demonstrate higher levels of success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991/2005).

Online and distance learning students expressed feeling less to connected to the college compared to their on-ground counterparts. They cited distance from the campus, unclear communication, and the inability to easily drop in or participate in campus organizations as the main reasons for feeling disconnected. Conversely, online and distance students did report feeling connected to the faculty and the academic program as a whole. Students cited faculty's caring attitudes, encouragement, and responsiveness as

factors contributing to their higher level of connection with the academic program. Faculty and staff also communicated having this perception of the students not being connected to the college but feeling connected to the program. Hidden curricular issues associated with this topic arise when the institutional press creates a feeling of being left out. Many students are drawn in to online and distance learning because of professed convenience and access but, as evidenced here, were faced with lack of support and attention from the institution. In this case, staff and the institution could create better avenues to communicate and respond to student need which in turn could create a better connection with online and distance students, as seen with the academic program.

Differences in Website Usability

Online and distance learners often rely on computer mediated environments and the Internet to communicate, obtain information, and interface with educational environment for instructional and administrative processes. Usability and accessibility issues related to an institution and academic program's web space/presence becomes critical for online and distance education students. The functionality and organization of a web site or portal can positively or negatively influence the experience a user (student) will have (Alessi & Trollip, 2001; Chandler, 2002; Luke, 2005; and Nielsen, 2000). Additionally, a website is an extension of an institution or organization. Care must be taken to ensure that the navigation of the site is as easy and simple as possible, particularly for students who are at a distance and rely on accessing information remotely through such avenues (Strange & Banning, 2001).

Online and distance students reported having a positive experience interfacing and navigating the academic program's website. Faculty also characterized the program's

website as being organized in a fashion that was accessible, easy, and tailored to user needs based role (prospective student, current student, and alumni). At the time of writing, a notice was posted that the academic program website was going to be overhauled based on user feedback to increase efficiency, organization, and access. This indicates a greater awareness of and response to the needs of the population the website serves.

The institutional website was described as being confusing, complex, and difficult to find information through. Some students communicated relying on others to help them find information while faculty expressed frustration with the organization because online and distance students are often referred to the website for forms, online processes, and information. A hidden curricular issue arises when an authoritative entity is either unaware of the issues associated with their website's organization/presentation or is not responding and adapting to user needs which results in negative perceptions. In this case, online and distance students are referred to a site (institutional website) that creates a barrier due to its complex layout and organization. Conversely, this case illustrated that websites which are organized and adapted based on user feedback and usability needs create friendlier environments that are easier to navigate and higher levels of positive perception.

Research Question #2

The second research question sought to understand how differences and similarities in perceptions between students, faculty, and administrators contribute to hidden curricular issues. Themes from each group were compared between one another and conclusions were drawn. Faculty themes in this area included: 1) Workload and Time

and 2) Lack of Support for Online/Distance Learning Processes. Emergent staff themes for this question included: 1) Lack of Resources, 2) Preference for Face-to-Face Interaction, 3) Academic Program Disconnect, and 4) Faculty Interference. Lastly, student themes for this area included, 1) Student Services, 2) Faculty Assistance, and 3) Limited Interaction. Triangulation of the themes between each group yielded the following intersecting issues related to hidden curriculum: 1) not communicating negative information regarding student services; 2) differences in perceptions regarding faculty involvement in administrative processes; 3) lack of knowledge regarding online/distance learner needs; 4) agreement across all groups that the academic program is open and flexible; and 5) that a lack of resources exist regarding online/distance learning initiatives.

Faculty Perceptions

Faculty participants expressed a higher than expected workload and time comment regarding the facilitation and management of their online program. One participant stated that the increase in access to course content has resulted in an increase in student expectations for faculty to be available and responsive 24/7. A hidden curricular issue related to this theme may involve faculty not being aware of the time commitment needed to properly support and facilitate an online course or program. Prepping or training faculty to understand the demands of facilitating online learning courses could help to alleviate this issue.

The other theme expressed by faculty was the lack of support for their online/distance learning efforts. Faculty communicated the need for greater assistance in the creation and maintenance of their online courses. Resources such as instructional

designers and technology support were top items in need of being implemented.

Adequate support must be given to assist faculty execute successful online courses.

While many faculty are being asked or even required to offer classes online, many are not versed in the variety of pedagogical and multimedia skills needed to create and facilitate an online course. Again, proper training and support could help to set good expectations and prepare faculty for the demands of online courses.

Staff Perceptions

Several themes emerged among the staff participants. First, they expressed a lack of resources to properly address the needs of their students, both on-ground and online. Mainly, they felt that more personnel should be added to meet the needs of student demand. Online and distance students were not viewed as having different or unique circumstances compared to on-ground students. Most students likely assume that staff will be available to help them through the administrative process, particularly when issues arise. Not having access to staff and personnel for students taking courses or completing a degree at a distance can create a frustrating experience, contribute to a sense of negative environmental stress, and negatively affect outcomes for online and distance students. In times of budgetary limitations it may not be realistic to hire more personnel, other technological means could be implemented to alleviate the workload and increase efficiency.

Second, the staff members interviewed also communicated a preference for face-to-face interaction. Online or other electronic means were not seen as viable or desirable avenues to address student inquiries or problems. In fact, a couple staff members did not see an issue with an online or distance learning student driving in to the campus to meet

with them. Others thought that face-to-face interaction was superior and the only way that students should seek assistance. This can create a significant unforeseen barrier for online and distance students who are assuming they will be able to conduct business with the institution at a distance. Leadership is needed to educate or train staff in the various technologies that could be used to assist online and distance students. Additionally, as mentioned by one of the staff members, dedicating specific staff to assist online and distance students could provide a consistent point of contact with student services.

Next, a disconnect with and general unawareness of how the academic program worked was expressed by all staff members. Some stated that contact with the academic program did not occur unless a problem arose and required communication with a faculty member. Others stated that they didn't need to have insight into how the program worked. As advisors and admissions counselors, students will approach such staff with questions about academic programs. It would seem helpful if the personnel would possess some basic information and understanding into the program to avoid referring the student solely to faculty additional runaround. This increases the complexity and rigidity of the learning environment. Conversely, by not having knowledge of the academic program, it could reduce any misinformation by directing students to the ultimate source of information. Ideally, advisors and counselors would possess a basic understanding of the academic programs for which they assist students.

Lastly, staff saw the efforts of faculty to assist online and distance students through administrative problems as interference. As a result, a greater amount of tension transpired between the academic program and student services. One faculty member was even restricted from approaching staff members for assistance, claiming that it gives that

program's students unfair access. Another staff member didn't feel that the faculty fully understood the demands of their position and welcomed faculty to shadow them in hope they would realize the limitations and pressures with which staff are faced. The dynamic between faculty and staff has created an apprehensive working environment in various ways which contributes to a negative environmental press that can influence the perceptions and effectiveness of those who operate within it.

Student Perceptions

Several themes emerged from the online and distance student participants. All reported issues with student services in some capacity ranging from lost transcripts to a lack of communication/response. Most participants stated that they were not able to contact student services staff to assist with and resolve questions. Even though emails and phone messages were sent, most did not get replies and were still wondering if their issue got resolved. Other students reported delays in being able to register and start classes due to missing transcripts and financial aid holds. When online students did receive a response, they were often told they had to come to the campus to resolve the issue in person; that staff could not assist them over the phone or through other electronic means even though they lived hours away or out of state. Students who are completing a degree online often do not expect to be required to come to campus to resolve administrative issues. By doing so, this creates an unexpected barrier for online and distance students.

Another theme that surfaced from the student group involved faculty assistance. Students characterized faculty as being accessible and easy to contact. When emails or phone calls are initiated by students, the faculty were quick to respond. Furthermore, students discussed numerous accounts of faculty intervening when administrative

problems arose. Some students discussed how a faculty member helped them with paperwork such as transcripts and financial aid forms when student services was unresponsive. Another student had problems with her college identification number which was preventing her from registering. After attempting to speak numerous times with a student services representative, she contacted a faculty member in the academic program which helped resolve the problem. In this case we see faculty members who are advocates for their students, going far beyond their normal academic responsibilities. This approach has contributed positively to the environmental press of the academic program and the overall experience for the students.

The last theme from the student group was limited interaction. Most of the online and distance students reported having limited dealings with other online students. Those who had face-to-face lab experiences reported higher levels of interaction, but for students who attend a lab at a third party company or facility, they expressed even higher levels of isolation. While some avenues existed for online and distance students to communicate with one another such as the discussion board and email, most students did not use them. This can contribute to a lack of connection to the program and institution as a whole. Student activities were offered in a face-to-face modality, but there were no online meetings or remote options to reach out to the online and distance learning students. Looking into how student services could expand activities and club involvement for this population could assist in decreasing feelings of isolation and separation from others at the institution.

Triangulation of Perceptions

Based on the triangulation of themes between the three groups (faculty, staff, and students), five intersections surfaced. First, all of the groups interviewed discussed experiencing and knowing about issues related to student services; however, those concerns were not communicated to students ahead of time. The negative information regarding student services was held back and not exposed until an encounter had occurred. While sometimes politically difficult, exposing these issues ahead of time with online and distance students could help to set up better expectations and mitigate feelings of negative environmental press. Since students are at a distance, there is a possibility that they could internalize the issues they encounter with student services which could influence their perceptions, persistence, and achievement. Ultimately, the negative issues should be rectified so online and distance students have a smooth and easy experience.

Second, differences in perceptions regarding faculty involvement in administrative processes were found between staff and faculty. As a result of the problems with student services, faculty took on a higher level of involvement in the administrative processes associated with admissions, advising, and financial aid in an effort to help their students successfully matriculate into the academic program. Staff characterized this involvement as being problematic and disruptive to their processes. Faculty felt they had no other choice but to increase their participation in order to resolve problems on behalf of students who could not otherwise contact or physically stop in to see a staff member in person. This dynamic can contribute to negative environmental press for online students and effect their experience and attitude about the institution.

Optimally, faculty and staff should work together to resolve the issues between them and collaborate together to best serve their students.

Third, a lack of knowledge regarding online and distance learner needs was seen on the part of staff interviewed. The predominant solution suggested to online and distance students who were experiencing issues was to come to the campus for a face-to-face meeting. When asked if they were aware of other means or modalities to assist in serving online and distance students, little to no insight was provided to accomplish it. This resulted in some students having to drive long distances and rent hotel rooms just to resolve an issue while others were still trying to find a fix through remote means and were unclear if the issue was resolved. For students completing a degree or certification online, there is an expectation that most, if not all, of the processes associated with program will allow them to be completed remotely. When this is not possible, an unexpected barrier or requirement occurs that students were not anticipating which can have negative consequences. Again, to mitigate the effects of this hidden curricular issue, staff and faculty must either expose to online students the possibility of having to come to campus beforehand or resolve the issues that result in a student having to come to campus altogether.

Next, agreement was seen across all groups that the academic program is open and flexible. Students reported receiving fast replies to inquiries from faculty. Even though staff had the perception that faculty interfered in their administrative processes, they were viewed as advocates for their students. While this is not particularly an issue related to hidden curriculum since all groups are aware, it was an emergent intersection regarding a similarity between groups. There is an opportunity for staff to model the

practices of the faculty to increase and rectify the current problems in student services. This intersection could also be viewed that by having knowledge of the needs and requirements associated with online and distance students, the implicit result is one of a more positive online student experience and possible higher levels of achievement, persistence, and understanding.

Finally, faculty and staff both communicated that a lack of resources exist regarding online/distance learning initiatives. Faculty expressed concern regarding limited assistance to develop and maintain course content creation. The desire for access to instructional designers and technology support was communicated. Additionally, faculty felt that the student services systems and processes in place for online and distance learning students were not adequate. This resulted in increased time devoted to resolving issues and problems that should otherwise be spent toward their classes. Staff members also communicated a lack of resources, including personnel, to address the needs of online and distance students. Although both groups are aware and attempted to communicate their concerns, higher level administration had not acted upon or addressed the issues. As noted previously, this can create a negative environmental press which affects the climate and culture of the institution as a whole.

Research Question #3

The final research question sought to understand how hidden curriculum could manifest in online learning environments. Themes across all research questions and sub-topics were analyzed and collapsed into broader categories. Three global themes associated with institutional and organizational systems were identified as: 1) Support Functions, 2) Advocacy, and 3) Conveying the Profession.

Support Functions

As evidenced in previous sections of this chapter, the level of support afforded to all groups (faculty, staff, and students) can have a significant effect not only the environmental culture, press, and expectations, but also perceptions, persistence, and achievement of those who operate within the environment. Faculty referenced issues related to course creation and design, technical support, and student services. The addition of instructional designers would provide them the assistance needed to create and facilitate their online courses in a more efficient and time-saving manner. Furthermore, if the issues related to student services were rectified, they would have more time and energy to devote towards managing their classes. Staff discussed the need for more personnel to aid in providing services to all student populations. It is also apparent that a better technical infrastructure is needed to alleviate the overload staff are experiencing which would in turn assist online and distance students. Students reported frustrations with administrative processes and procedures that were not online-friendly. Additionally, students discussed how strong levels of support from faculty can result in positive experiences and easier navigation through the educational experience.

Advocacy

The theme of advocacy is illustrated through the willingness and ability of different groups who were involved with the online program to put forth extra effort to insure that online and distance students needs were met, particularly when a student was facing an administrative challenge. This theme can also be seen as a hindrance when advocacy is not present. In this case, faculty expressed efforts to help online and distance students through unfriendly processes and issues that were related to institutional and

organizational practice, procedures, and rules. They would advocate on behalf of their students to help them navigate the system. Students reinforced the validity of these efforts by speaking about specific times when faculty assisted them through problems related to admissions, financial aid, and registration. Gratitude and relief was also expressed by students regarding the efforts of the faculty to intervene. While staff expressed the desire to advocate for online and distance students, little evidence was found to support this claim. Mainly, face-to-face meetings were required if an online student needed assistance. This solution was not viable for most online and distance students due to geographic proximity, and other approaches were not explored by staff. Staff felt that limitations in numbers of personnel prevented them from assisting in a more helpful manner; however, other avenues to increase access to staff support such as electronic mediated were not seen as favorable or preferred.

Conveying the Profession

The themes uncovered in the first and second research questions (e.g. recruitment and admission, rules and procedures, accessibility and flexibility, web space, etc.) could be collapsed into the areas of support functions or advocacy. The theme related to how the academic program conveys the profession's culture and practices did not and warranted its own theme on a global level. Faculty will communicate discipline-specific expectations and nuances that student must come to understand and model (Ahola, 2000; Bergenhenegouwen, 1987; Margolis & Romero, 1998). In this case, a discontent was seen between the faculty and students interviewed regarding how professional standards and practices were expressed. Faculty felt that students became aware of the profession and academic field through seminars, conferences, and everyday personal example.

Students expressed that labs and course content were the primary methods and avenues used to promote and communicate exposure to the field. Staff reported having no insight into how the academic program conveyed professional expectations and cultural norms of the opticianry field. Although both on-ground and face-to-face students expressed the same themes, attention should be paid by faculty to how an e-learner comes to understand the norms and values of the field they are studying (Anderson, 2001). If such practices and expectations are not explicit in nature, misunderstanding can occur and important information could be missed, as could be the case in this study.

Limitations

As with any study, various limitations are present. As mentioned in chapter 1, the findings are not generalizable to larger populations. Since the participants were purposefully selected based on their involvement with an academic program facilitated online/at a distance, the findings are only specific to that population. Other voices could have been left out of the sample despite the efforts of the researcher to ensure a diverse range of students.

While the demographics of the participants were close to the actual population, there was underrepresentation of males and some ethnic groups. Male faculty comprised 50% of the participant sample which was in line with the college and academic program population (53%). Male students made up 11% of the participants compared to 31% of the actual population. Additionally, male staff members were not represented at all in the sample even though they made up 41% of the college staff overall. Some ethnicities were also underrepresented including Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian/Alaskan Native. Again, the purpose of this research was not to study demographic information or

variables so they were not controlled or considered; however, consideration should be made.

Even though every effort was made to identify hidden or implicit issues within this particular case, there is a possibility that other issues may still exist in relation to institutional and organization systems. As mentioned earlier, the very nature of hidden curriculum poses a challenge to identifying and revealing hidden curricular issues. Additionally, academic environments are organic and evolutionary in nature which means the institutional culture, press, processes, and so on will change causing the possibility of new and different hidden curricular issues to emerge later.

Furthermore, this case entailed a vocational academic program that required lab experiences and other technical aspects for the purpose of preparing their graduates to be practitioners. The presence of this aspect may have yielded different themes compared to an academic program that did not require labs such as history, mathematics, and language. Academic fields that require a high level of practical or hands-on experience may have different manifestations of hidden curriculum. A comparison of these two kinds of online programs would be needed before general transferability could happen.

Lastly, uncovered in this case was a fairly diminished level of support for online and distance education at the institutional level. It is possible that different themes could have emerged from a case whose infrastructure was stronger and more supportive for online and distance students. However, there was a polarization seen regarding the level of support and advocacy offered between student services and the academic program which could imply that the lack of support, regardless of area, can cause issues for online and distance students.

Implications

Practice

The findings have several implications related to practice. The issue of proper support for faculty and staff was seen throughout the themes of this study. It is important that institutions invest properly into adequate resources that can be used to assist those who work with online and distance learning students. Procedures should be analyzed to see if online and distance learner and faculty needs are being met. Campus climate and satisfaction surveys could be used to assess student perception and gain insight into issues such as flexibility, access, and barriers. This would also increase staff awareness and understanding into the needs of online and distance students. Resources should be available to assist faculty in the creation and maintenance of online courses such as access to instructional designers/technologists and training opportunities. Online and distance students should be able to conduct regular administrative business with the institution without the need to physically come to campus. Investment in technologies that allow for electronic signature and enhanced communication would assist staff in serving the needs of this population.

As seen in the results, online and distance students could be at higher risk for not feeling connected to the college and other students. Institutions and academic programs have an opportunity to create different avenues and try new ways to make online and distance student feel more connected. Increased contact and attentiveness can have a significant effect on how and if a student feels connected, as seen with this case. Faculty and staff who interact and serve online students could increase ownership and follow up when issues present themselves. Additionally, the creation of online student activities or

other support functions that on-ground students have regular access to could also help foster feelings of connection and improve the perceived environmental press and culture of the institution.

Faculty should be explicit about how the disciplinary and professional culture is conveyed to students. Important norms and expectations should be outlined and worked into course content/documentation as they are revealed or discovered. Conversations could take place making greater connections between how what transpires in the classroom will connect to practical settings. Lastly, the web presence should be easy to use and clear for the intended users on both the institutional and academic program level. Regular reviews should take place and feedback collected from those who frequently use the site. Adjustments and modification should then be made to better organize and structure the website.

Questions Raised

While this study did not aim to measure outcomes related to the uncovered themes, it is prudent to highlight the resulting questions provoked by the discoveries. The literature on hidden curriculum provides insight into some of the outcomes and conclusions possible as a result of exposure to an implicit force or factor; however, there is the possibility that online students may have unique or varied results. Based on the themes unearthed in this research, one could formulate various conclusions and questions. First, what was learned (and not learned) by the students as a result of the hidden curriculum present in this case? For example, if the level of support, advocacy, and flexibility provided by a program or student services division is diminished, will students feel a greater level of frustration that would in turn shape their opinion of online

and distance learning in general? Students who have negative experiences can form negative perceptions which can result in them avoiding taking future online courses (or vice versa positive experiences which increase likelihood of taking online courses). Perception of an institution or of higher education in general can also be effected based on experience (either positive or negative). The academic program in this study worked with a high number of adult students who were returning to gain more skills or change their profession. The level of access, support, advocacy, and flexibility experienced by these students could have an effect on how they perceive higher education and if they persist to graduation.

Second, what does the lack of support from the institution implicitly communicate to those working with, taking courses, and facilitating academic programs through an online and distance learning modality? Additionally, what other factors or services are insufficient or absent? In this case, the procedures and rules in place often created barriers for online and distance learning students. Communication with support staff was restricted largely to face-to-face interactions and electronic paperwork processes were unreliable. Faculty expressed a need for increased instructional design and general technology support. Other areas of potential concern related to online and distance learning support mechanisms may include technical infrastructure (streaming servers, digital storage space, learning management platform down time, etc.), opportunities for online student activities, library resources, and faculty workload/time commitment. Furthermore, faculty could face burn out and/or develop a negative opinion of online and distance learning classes if workload, course development, and time on task are overwhelming.

Lastly, how does the gap between the ways in which faculty feel they are conveying professional expectations compared to how students feel they are receiving them shape knowledge, skills, and abilities needed post-degree? For example, faculty felt that professional conferences and their everyday example helped students understand the culture of the opticianry field while students emphasized labs and course content. It is conceivable that students will lack certain insights into the field upon graduation. What aspects of a professional conference are seen as being uniquely learned in that arena versus being learned in the classroom or lab setting? Also, what aspects of the lab experience and course content communicate professional standards to students that faculty are not seeing? Students may begin work post-degree without strong networking skills or the understanding of why it is important to stay current within the field (and the avenues through which to do so) that are often a result of attending conferences. Faculty may be missing out on opportunities to communicate professional standards and practices through labs and course content.

Future Research

The ability to generalize findings to other populations would require expanding the population and creating an instrument that could inventory and assess a larger population based on the themes and topics discovered. While the lived experiences and perceptions of those working in this learning environment were unearthed and provided important insight, outcomes were not measured or explored in this research. Previous literature would suggest that negative hidden curricular and ecological factors would result in lower achievement, diminished chance of persistence, and skewed opinions or perceptions. Some students expressed delays in registration while others mentioned

frustration with communication; however, it is not clear how hidden curricular issues influenced factors such as achievement, persistence, and attitudes/beliefs.

While this study was limited to the institutional and organizational systems, exploration other areas outlined in the literature review is needed. The three domains posited that are unique and/or related to online and distance learning include: 1) learning environment functionality and architecture (metaphoric symbols, layout, design, appearance, computer skills/proficiency); 2) communication modes and messages (verbal, non-verbal, and textual messages); and 3) learning content and materials (images, animation, video, illustrations). A similar approach to this study could be used to explore the manifestations of hidden curriculum related to these areas. Additionally, the outcomes of the themes/inciting agents discovered in this research are also in need of further exploration. For example, how do varied levels of services, advocacy, and flexibility effect the connection an online student feels to the program and institution? What other services are insufficient to support online and distance learning endeavors, and how do the effect those working with such students and programs? How does the disconnect between students and faculty in conveying the profession effect or shape achievement, performance, behaviors, and attitudes? What specific knowledge, abilities, and skills are omitted? Do the omitted professional practices put students at a disadvantage once in a “practical” setting? What hidden curricular differences exist between a vocational/technical online program and a non-technical online program? Lastly, the intersection of how all of these domains influence, overlap, and interact with one another should be studied to provide a comprehensive framework for hidden curricular issues that manifest in online learning environments.

Conclusion

Institutional and organizational systems act on students in an implicit manner which can have the ability to shape outcomes such as achievement, persistence, and attitudes (Ahola, 2000; Anderson, 2001; Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1995; Moos, 1974, 1979; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991/2002; Strange & Banning, 2001; Thorne, 1993). As seen in this study, various conditions and inciting factors were present that could lead to negative or positive results. Through proper support and advocacy, the probability of negative or lower outcomes based on how a student interfaces with the various institutional and organizational systems could be diminished; the reverse could also be said. Opportunities arise for all those involved in the learning environment to ensure that proper support is in place and that effective levels of advocacy exist for online and distance learning students. This will require flexibility and willingness to adapt the various procedures to meet the needs of the student population in question.

Furthermore, the needs of online and distance students could be better heard and solutions implemented. Even through faculty and students communicated having raised issues with administrators and staff, in this case, little was done to make changes in the policy and procedures. This caused barriers unique to online and distance students and contributed to a rigid, inflexible educational learning environment. Websites provide a critical link for many online and distance student since they house important information and resources. Ensuring the web presence is organized and easy to navigate is critical in reducing barriers and increasing access to resources. Lastly, faculty should understand how they communicate discipline-specific expectations, norms, and values and if student

are also receiving and understanding them in the same manner. Failure to do so could lead to misunderstanding and under preparedness.

Hidden curricular issues will continue to manifest in learning environments, both on-ground and online, due to the organic nature of culture, communication, policy, and meaning making. Additionally, as new technologies are created and introduced into learning practices, the implications of their use must be evaluated on a hidden curricular level. Educators must take a proactive role to seek out the implicit and unspoken curricular issues transpiring within their educational environments in order for them to be interpreted, negotiated, and changed for the positive.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocols

Student Interview Protocol - Institutional/Organizational Systems Focus

- 1) Describe the recruitment and admissions process for your program.
- 2) Describe the level of accessibility you feel you have to college personnel.
- 3) How flexible do you feel the institution and program is to your needs?
- 4) Describe how connected you feel to the program and the college.
- 5) How would you describe the rules and procedures in place for this program?
- 6) Can you describe aspects of the program or educational experience that you did not anticipate?
- 7) Were there aspects of the course that you anticipated happening but did not experience?
- 8) If you could change anything about the academic program or college, what would it be?
- 9) How does your academic program help you understand what it means to be an optician?
- 10) What are the major challenges you faced or are facing in your program?
- 11) Reflect over all of the questions asked so far. Is there any further information you'd like to add or clarify?
- 12) Is there anything else about your academic experiences with this program that you'd like to share with me?

Faculty Interview Protocol - Institutional/Organizational Systems Focus

- 1) Describe the recruitment and admissions process for your program.
- 2) Describe the level of accessibility your students have to college personnel.
- 3) How flexible do you feel the institution and program is to student needs?
- 4) Describe how connected you feel your students are to the program and the college.
- 5) What are the major challenges or issues your students face in your program?
- 6) Can you describe aspects of the program that you did not anticipate?
- 7) How does your academic program help students understand what it means to be an optician?
- 8) Were there aspects of the course that you anticipated happening but did not experience?
- 9) If you could change anything about the program or college, what would it be?
- 10) What are the major challenges you faced or are facing in your program?
- 11) What differences do you see in the overall experiences between the face-to-face students and the online students?
- 12) Is there anything else about your academic experiences with this program that you'd like to share with me?

Administrator Interview Protocol - Institutional/Organizational Systems Focus

- 1) Describe the recruitment and admissions process for your program.
- 2) Describe the level of accessibility your students have to college personnel.
- 3) How flexible do you feel the institution and program is to student needs?
- 4) Describe how connected you feel your students are to the program and the college.
- 5) What are the major challenges or issues your students face in your program?

- 6) Can you describe aspects of working with the program that you did not anticipate?
- 7) How does this academic program help student understand what it means to be an optician?
- 8) Were there aspects of working with the program that you anticipated happening but did not experience?
- 9) If you could change anything about the program or college, what would it be?
- 10) What are the major challenges you faced or are facing when working with this program?
- 11) What differences do you see in the overall experiences between the face-to-face students and the online students?
- 12) Is there anything else about your professional experiences with this program that you'd like to share with me?

Appendix B: Email Solicitation for Participation

Faculty-Instructor Participant Solicitation

My name is Barry Hubbard and I am a doctoral candidate in the Instruction Technology program in the College of Education at the University of South Florida. I am conducting my dissertation study on *manifestations of hidden curriculum in online learning environments: An ecological approach*. I would like to ask you, your students, and administrators associated with your academic program to consider participating in my study.

I would require an hour of your time to conduct an interview with the possibility of a follow up interview after several weeks for any clarification. I would also seek your assistance in soliciting participation from your incoming (new) students, existing students, and administrators or support services personnel.

Please contact me at bchubbar@mail.usf.edu should you need more information and/or be interested in participating in the study.

Sincerely,
Barry Hubbard

Student Participation Solicitation

Hello! My name is Barry Hubbard, and I am a doctoral student in the Instructional Technology program in the College of Education at the University of South Florida. I am conducting my dissertation study on the ways online learning environments influence and create unexpected expectations

To participate, I would ask you to speak with me via phone or Skype a couple times and email back and forth with me over the course of three to four months (August-November) and answer questions related to your online and academic experience at Hillsborough Community College and the Opticianry program. All correspondence will be strictly confidential; I will not disclose your name to any college faculty or staff members. I am also happy to share my observations and results with you when I am finished.

Participation is voluntary and you do not get paid. However, for those who do participate, you will receive a FREE iTunes gift certificate OR a fast food restaurant gift certificate.

If interested, please email at bchubbar@mail.usf.edu with the following information:

- 1) Gender
- 2) Age
- 3) Ethnicity
- 4) Number of online courses taken previously
- 5) Any other previous institutions of higher education attended

It is my hope that through this research we can make your and future HCC online students' experiences better! Please email me back with any questions and/or if you are interested in participating in the study.

Sincerely,
Barry Hubbard

Appendix C: Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Study Name:

Manifestations of Hidden Curriculum in Online Learning Environments: An Ecological Approach

Researcher: Barry Hubbard

Participation: The research will be done face-to-face, through phone, and email correspondence.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this research is to learn how hidden curriculum issues (such as unexpected outcomes, implicit expectations, unspoken requirements, and environmental factors) occur in distance and online learning environments.

Study Procedures:

If you take part in this study you will be asked to speak via phone and/or email back and forth with the researcher and answer questions related to your experiences at Hillsborough Community College and with the Opticianry program. You will receive a phone call or email from my university email account roughly every month beginning in August 2009 with 2-3 questions. It will take you approximately 20-25 minutes to complete answering the questions, depending on how detailed you'd like to be. If I have questions about your answers or would like to follow up with you, I will email you back with a follow up question. All responses are confidential and you may use a pseudonym (different name), if you'd like.

Participation:

Your participation is strictly voluntary and you have the right to stop participating at any time.

Benefits:

The potential benefits include making a difference in the way online courses are delivered at HCC and other colleges/universities.

Risks or Discomfort:

There are no known risks to those who participate in this study.

Compensation:

Participation is on a volunteer basis and you will not be paid for your time; however, all participants will receive an iTunes gift certificate OR a fast food restaurant gift certificate, if they choose. This will require the disclosure of personal mailing information.

Confidentiality:

All records and responses are kept confidential. All transcripts, communications, documents, and emails will be kept on a secure server and your names will be changed or not used in the final report. You may assign yourself a false name during the interview and email discussions. Nothing you say in the interviews or emails will be tracked back to you by anyone on the research team in any way. The information will be used in a doctoral dissertation and may be used in subsequent articles for academic purposes. I may publish what we learn from this study. If I do, I will not let anyone know your name. I will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are.

The researcher will do everything possible to keep emails from being accessed by outsiders. However, due to emails traveling across the internet there may be minimal risk to confidentiality.

However, certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.) These include:
 - The University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the staff that work for the IRB. Other individuals who work for USF that provide other kinds of oversight may also need to look at your records.
 - The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

Voluntary Participation/Withdraw:

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study from the researcher, your program, or college. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty, influence on your academic standing, or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study. Decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your student status.

Questions, Concerns, or Complaints

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or if you experience an unanticipated problem related to the research call Barry Hubbard at 813-253-7000 x5689.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, general questions, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-9343.

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please sign the form, if the following statements are true.

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

Signature of Person Taking Part in Study _____
Date

Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands:

- What the study is about.
- What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used.
- What the potential benefits might be.
- What the known risks might be.

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent _____
Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Online Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Study Name:

Manifestations of Hidden Curriculum in Online Learning Environments: An Ecological Approach

Researcher: Barry Hubbard

Participation: The research will be done face-to-face, through phone, and email correspondence.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this research is to learn how hidden curriculum issues (such as unexpected outcomes, implicit expectations, unspoken requirements, and environmental factors) occur in distance and online learning environments.

Study Procedures:

If you take part in this study you will be asked to speak via phone and/or email back and forth with the researcher and answer questions related to your experiences at Hillsborough Community College and with the Opticianry program. You will receive a phone call or email from my university email account roughly every month beginning in August 2009 with 2-3 questions. It will take you approximately 20-25 minutes to complete answering the questions, depending on how detailed you'd like to be. If I have questions about your answers or would like to follow up with you, I will email you back with a follow up question. All responses are confidential and you may use a pseudonym (different name), if you'd like.

Participation:

Your participation is strictly voluntary and you have the right to stop participating at any time.

Benefits:

The potential benefits include making a difference in the way online courses are delivered at HCC and other colleges/universities.

Risks or Discomfort:

There are no known risks to those who participate in this study.

Compensation:

Participation is on a volunteer basis and you will not be paid for your time; however, all participants will receive an iTunes gift certificate OR a fast food restaurant gift certificate, if they choose. This will require the disclosure of personal mailing information.

Confidentiality:

All records and responses are kept confidential. All transcripts, communications, documents, and emails will be kept on a secure server and your names will be changed or not used in the final report. You may assign yourself a false name during the interview and email discussions. Nothing you say in the interviews or emails will be tracked back to you by anyone on the research team in any way. The information will be used in a doctoral dissertation and may be used in subsequent articles for academic purposes. I may publish what we learn from this study. If I do, I will not let anyone know your name. I will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are.

The researcher will do everything possible to keep emails from being accessed by outsiders. However, due to emails traveling across the internet there may be minimal risk to confidentiality.

However, certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.) These include:
 - The University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the staff that work for the IRB. Other individuals who work for USF that provide other kinds of oversight may also need to look at your records.
 - The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

Voluntary Participation/Withdraw:

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study from the researcher, your program, or college. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty, influence on your academic standing, or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study. Decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your student status.

Questions, Concerns, or Complaints

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or if you experience an unanticipated problem related to the research call Barry Hubbard at 813-253-7000 x5689.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, general questions, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-9343.

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please email Barry Hubbard at bchubbar@mail.usf.edu, if the following statements are true.

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received an electronic copy of this form to take with me.

Appendix D: Member Check Form

Dear _____,

Thank you for an enjoyable and insightful interview. Attached please find a draft copy of the verbatim transcripts of the interview. Please review the transcription for accuracy and completeness of responses. Please feel free to contact me at (813-253-7000 x5689) or via email at (bchubbar@mail.usf.edu) should you have any questions. If I do not hear from you by _____, ____2009, I will assume that you agree with the attached draft of the transcription.

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in this study.

Barry Hubbard

**This form was adapted from a sample member check from Janesick (2004, p. 227).*

Appendix E: Peer Reviewer/Outside Reviewer Form

I, _____, have served as a peer reviewer/outside reviewer for Manifestations of Hidden Curriculum in Online Learning Environments: An Ecological Approach, by Barry Hubbard. In this role, I have worked with the researcher throughout the study in capacities such as reviewing transcripts and assisting in identifying emerging issues.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

**This form was adapted from a sample member check from Janesick (2004, p. 228).*

Appendix F: Description of Institution and Academic Program

The study took place at a large, multi-campus urban community college in the south and is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The college has 1,116 full-time and part-time faculty with forty-seven percent identifying as female and fifty-three percent identifying as male. Additionally, the college employs 1,121 staff members of which fifty-nine percent are female and forty-one percent are male.

The college has an approximate annual enrollment of 44,598 students across over 150 degree programs including 18 associate in art degree programs, 64 associate in science (or applied science) degree programs, and 85 certificate and PSAV programs. Fifty-five percent of the students are female (22,677) while forty-five percent are male (18,556). Twenty percent of the student body identify as African-American (8,456) and 22% identify as Hispanic (9,062).

A schedule search of Fall 2009 revealed 256 course offerings through distance or online learning means and 285 for Spring 2010. Courses offered online or through distance learning must have 80% or more of the course content delivered outside of face-to-face meetings. Hybrid courses are also offered whereby between 50-79% of the instruction transpires outside of face-to-face meetings (exact number of these courses were not available).

The academic program used for this study offers both face-to-face and distance learning modalities for degree completion. As of the most recent college fact book, the

program has a total of 148 students enrolled in the program. Sixty-nine percent identify as female and thirty-one percent as male. The mean student age is 32.3. The opticianry faculty describe their program as only being one of two in the nation to offer the degree at a distance and has a near 100% job placement rate for graduates.

Appendix G: Researcher Reflective Journal Sample (Edited)

Interviewee: Online Student Date & Time: 10/7/2009, 2:00pm Location: Phone

Observation	Description
Interior Design	A creative type of person; interesting choice to take on opticianry
Positive	She comes across genuinely happy and positive about every
Edison College	She is part of the off-site program that partners with [deleted] College
Job loss	Funding through the government stimulus recovery bill
Instructors	Very positive things to say about the instructors; this matches what the faculty stated; she states they help a lot with the admin processes
Face to face Meetings	Has met the faculty from the opticianry program; they came to [deleted]
Orientation Class	Introduces them to the field, tools they will be using, etc.; great way to acclimate
Transcripts	Negative experiences with student services; references transcripts
# of students	She thought there would be less based on a conversation with a previous graduate
Connect with field	Orientation activity that required her to interview someone in the field
Job	Her motivation comes from being retrained to get a different job; worried about the number of students vs demand
<p>Overall this student seemed very pleased with the academic side of things. There were some comments about her frustrations with the student services; this is a reoccurring theme across all groups. She did mention that the faculty help with the admin process but that she wasn't told ahead of time that there may be issues with student services (no mention of anyone from student services helping them before the fact either). Again, there weren't many references to specific technological approaches to help staff work with DL students. She mentioned anticipating having to come to campus at some point to work out administrative related issues and processes.</p>	

This is the first I have heard about the orientation class all new students must take in the program. It helps with acclimating students to the program and the field. I will send a follow up to [the faculty member] about this class to see why they implemented this course.

On a different note, I did not get through to my earlier interviewee this morning even after we set the time. I got the person's voice mail. This makes me nervous that I won't get the people I need for the study. I only had 5 people respond so far to my solicitation. I will send out a second call for participation the beginning of next week. Also, I hope that [the faculty member] comes through for me and let's me come to one of her hybrid classes to solicit participation. I feel like I am going through some highs and lows through this process. I know I want them to be completed as soon as possible but when working with other people's schedules, that doesn't happen.

Appendix H: Interview Transcription Sample (Edited)

New Online Student C

Date: October, 13 2009

Time: 3:35pm

Interviewer: All right. Well, first, um, tell me a little bit about yourself and how you got interested in the opticianry program at HCC?

Respondent: Well, actually, um, this is my third career.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: Yeah, I, you know, I started in the fash...uh, well, I, I have a science degree. Then I went to the fashion industry for ten years. And then I had kids. So, having kids, it's not easy to work. So, I, I was a preschool, I'm still a preschool teacher, um, so I can take care of my kids. And, um, now, with the economy and everything, I decided I want to go back to a real job...

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: ...what I call a real job. So I wanted to use my science degree and I did a search on the Internet and, um, I didn't want to be a nurse. I, so, I just, you know, check see of the avail...availability of all the jobs, um, besides the nursing. You know, like the radiology, the dental assistant, and I came across the opticianry program and I check it out, and, and it looked very interested to me, so that's how I decided to do that.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you go through, [College A] or were you looking at [College B]? How did you find out about the HCC program?

Respondent: Well, what I did is I, you know, when I look at what I wanted to do, I called Edison in Naples to find out if they have anything. And the one in [City A] told me, "No, you have to go to [City B]," so, I went to [City B] to the orientation with, uh, [Contact A] and that's how I found out it was mostly on line with [College A].

Interviewer: Okay. Great.

Respondent: So...

Interviewer: Did you visit the [College A] website at all?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. How did you find that experience?

Respondent: Uh, it's, uh, overwhelming.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: There are a lot of, uh, a lot of things. I mean if I, if I didn't go to the orientation before to tell me where to go for the opticianry program, I would have been lost. I mean it's very – it's pretty complete, but there are a lot, a lot of things, so...

Interviewer: Okay. And how did you, once you got to the opticianry website, how did you find that?

Respondent: Oh, then, that's fine.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: Um, I just think they should maybe update it a little bit more, because when I tried to go like for the, um, the exam, they don't update it until the really last minute...

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: ...and, so, when, if you try to know like, you know, I'm online and I need to plan on everything, and every time I try to go to, um, to find out, I have to wait until the last minute to find out where, when I can pass my exam, what's the, the dates and stuff.

Interviewer: Sure. Sure.

Respondent: But, other than that, um, it's pretty good.

Interviewer: Great. Um, now, you, you applied to [College A], is that correct, for the admissions?

Interviewer: Uh, could you talk to me a little bit about that experience?

Respondent: Uh, well, that was every easy, because I did it online. So, that part was very easy. Now, as far as feedback, I pretty much never got anything. Um, to this day, I, I'm, you know, I'm assuming they receive all my transcripts and everything, because I got enrolled, but I've never heard anything about, you know, if everything was fine if they received my transcripts, so...

Interviewer: Okay, so no feedback or confirmation?

Respondent: ... feedback.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah. Sylvie, how would you describe the level of accessibility that you have to HCC college personnel?

Respondent: Uh, well, I'll say that the, um, like all the people in the opticianry program, like James Reese, is excellent. I mean, he'll return my call, my email, ASAP, this is excellent. And, um, even the enrollment, when I call, I can go through somebody. Now, the financial department is terrible.

Interviewer: Yeah, like financial aid?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: This is terrible, terrible. You get no [pause] no answer back, no nothing. You have to call them a hundred million times before you can go through somebody. You don't know who's taking care of you. Um, this is really bad, and so that part was really bad.

Interviewer: Yeah. Um kay. How flexible do you feel that the institution and the program is to your needs? So, anytime that you've expressed concern or need for something, how, how responsive or flexible do you think that they are?

Respondent: Um, I, actually, that's one of the reasons that I enroll is because they were very, very flexible. When I went to the orientation and I said, "I'm working. I don't know if I can do that," they said, "Oh, that's okay. You can do it online." Then he said, uh, "You have to come Tuesday and Thursday mornings for the lab," and I said, "I can't. I'm working on those mornings." And he said, "Oh, don't worry, you'll go to a lab, you know, in your town, and this is not a problem," and that was really good.

Interviewer: Great. So, they gave you options in terms of...

Respondent: Gave me options and so, like, really, you know, that's, make me sign up, because I see that I had option and I still can do it, even though I'm working.

Interviewer: Great. Great. Now you go to... Is that Lens Crafters, is that correct?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. And you do all of your other coursework online?

Respondent: Yes.

About the Author

Barry Hubbard grew up in the small farming town of Centerburg, Ohio. He completed a Bachelor of Arts in Music from Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia, a Master of Education from the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida, and two graduate certificates in Instructional Technology from the University of South Florida. Barry has been working in higher education for the past 12 years in various capacities including student affairs staff and faculty. Currently, he works full-time as a Computer Science Instructor at a community college in Tampa, Florida and teaches both face-to-face and online courses in computer science, web design, multimedia, and student development theory.