

By Janani Hariharan

Uncovering the hidden curriculum

walked up to the professor, heart pounding. “Could we talk about the group discussions?” I asked hesitantly. Much of my grade for the course, a prerequisite for my master’s degree, depended on my performance in those discussions. But I had a hard time speaking up, and when I did, everyone—including the instructor—seemed to disagree with me. I wanted to do better, but I didn’t know how. I had arrived in the United States from India just a few months earlier, and I did not know what was expected of me or how the academic system operated. I was confused and desperate for help.

“You’re too nice!” the professor said. “You’re very quick to agree with everyone, and you never stand up for yourself.” I was taken aback. Was I allowed to disagree with a professor? All my previous training had taught me otherwise. Clearly there was a whole set of rules I didn’t know. I wondered whether I ever would.

Since my arrival in the United States, my internal chatter had been a steady stream of uncertainty. When ordering food, what is “to go,” and is it different from a parcel? Which side of the road do I stand on to catch the bus? Oops, I called a cookie a biscuit again. Why would someone ask me how I’m doing if they don’t wait to hear my response? Am I speaking too fast? Too slow? How do I pronounce my R’s?

These struggles extended to the university. I didn’t understand the “shopping” or add-drop periods for classes and spent my first week stressed out about meeting the credit requirements of my university fellowship. I struggled with assignments that tested my thinking and presentation skills instead of asking me to memorize and regurgitate information. The approach to grading was peculiar and confusing. When I went to my first conference, I was convinced that I didn’t fit in.

I didn’t know there was a term for my confusion until a few months ago, when Twitter introduced me to the idea of the “hidden curriculum”—the social and professional norms in academia that are second nature to many but opaque to others, especially scholars from underrepresented groups and other countries, like me. Examples include knowing when it is appropriate to ask for mentorship, understanding research funding structures, and being familiar with standard language used in academic syllabi such as “office hours.” If you know these things, you barely notice them. If you don’t, they are completely bewildering. They usually aren’t



“I did not know what was expected of me or how the academic system operated.”

formally taught or explained, so it’s up to us to figure them out, one way or another.

For me, things started to take a turn for the better when I realized I could reach out for help, particularly from more senior international graduate students. Before my second conference, for example, another student advised me on issues including dress codes, networking, and how to navigate social events. I began to build up a compendium of information—rules of thumb that are obvious to students already familiar with the U.S. higher education system but invaluable for outsiders.

After I got my master’s degree, I worked in India for a couple of years before returning to the United States for my Ph.D. I still encounter the hidden curriculum. I only recently

realized, for instance, that what I learned about speaking up in class when I was a master’s student also applies to my relationships with my current mentors.

But I’ve come a long way. When I came back to the United States, I knew that I had to advocate for myself and purposefully build a community for support and advice. I got involved with a university organization for female graduate students in the sciences, and I represented the group at a welcome event for incoming students. As I answered their questions I suddenly realized that, even though I was still learning, I had knowledge to share that could help others navigate the hidden curriculum.

Entering an unfamiliar world brings challenges but also an opportunity: to create a community, almost a proxy family, to ease our academic journeys. We can thrive by seeking out “obvious” information, asking hard questions, and advocating for ourselves and everyone who comes after us. ■

Janani Hariharan is a Ph.D. student at Cornell University. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.