



What Makes an Upper-Division Course Upper-Division?  
Differing Perspectives of Students and Faculty

*By Mary Pritchard and Lindsey Lee*

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare faculty and student expectations of course content, structure and requirements of lower and upper-division courses. Two groups of participants were recruited: 1) undergraduate psychology majors, and 2) Social Sciences faculty. The survey consisted of a series of questions regarding expectations and perceptions of upper and lower division classes. Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. As hypothesized, students and faculty expected upper and lower division courses to differ in a number of ways and faculty expectations differed from student expectations in a number of areas.

*Keywords:* upper division courses, student/faculty expectations, course content, structure

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For the past decade, scholars in education have become increasingly concerned about the “shrinking divide” between upper and lower division courses (Townsend & Missouri Univ, 2001). But this then begs the question: what is an upper division course and how does it differ from a lower division course? While the standard response seems to center around class size and junior-level instructors (Brinkman, Jones, & National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 1985; National Center for Education Statistics, 1995), as well as a belief that upper division courses should somehow be more difficult than lower division courses (Ambrose, 2004; Manogue et al., 2001), clearly there should be more to it than that.

Dreisbach (1989) suggested five key points that may help in creating, understanding, and defining the gap between upper division and lower division courses. Namely, upper division courses should: 1) show an increase in both quality and quantity of course contents and requirements as compared to lower division courses, 2) require some sort of prerequisite knowledge built on lower level courses, 3) require students to analyze, synthesize, interpret, make distinctions, and use critical thinking, 4) require students to be more independent and responsible for their learning, and 5) focus on content and not study tips. Manogue and Gire (2009) further argue that rather than an abrupt change between upper and lower division courses, courses should be scaffolded, such that students develop cognitively each year in courses designed to augment student knowledge and problem-solving skills. Other academics (Cole & De Maio, 2009; Sanders-Dewey & Zaleski, 2009) suggest that as students move from lower division to upper division courses, the percentage of students meeting the learning objectives of a department should increase, as should their work quality.

Unfortunately, that may not always happen (Cole & De Maio, 2009;

Sanders-Dewey & Zaleski, 2009) . Even where there is consensus about fundamental principles of curriculum development, room for interpretation concerning the nature and application of these principles discourages any quest for the definitive upper-level course. According to Townsend (Townsend & Missouri Univ, 2001), the upside down degree is a contributing factor in the blurring of lines between lower and upper division courses; in other words, the purpose of general education courses is to provide a broad foundation of knowledge and skills for specific majors to build upon. In the case of an upside down baccalaureate degree, students receive specific training to their major prior to their foundation of general education courses. This is being caused by the increasing number of students earning Associate's degrees, who then transfer to 4-year colleges, only to find their community college courses being counted as upper-division transfer credits, when in reality, the courses were not taught in an upper-division fashion (Deutch, Jurutka, & Marshall, 2008; Townsend & Missouri Univ, 2001) .

The gap between upper and lower division courses has been further blurred by the increased pressure on universities to 'frontload' their courses. That is, universities are being urged to move away from the large classroom environment offered in most general education courses to a small, more active learning environment, similar to those offered in upper-division courses (Brinkman et al., 1985) in an effort to increase student learning and retention in their first two years of college (Sanders, 2005; Soderdahl, 2011) . Finally, as increasing pressure has been placed on instructors to improve their teaching evaluations for tenure and promotion purposes, many instructors have responded by 'dumbing down' their upper division course content due to a belief that grade inflation and lowering of expectations leads to improved course evaluations (Dhooge & Eakin, 2007; Thornton, Adams, & Sepehri, 2010) . In fact, some universities are even encouraging this practice as another way to enhance student retention (Haggis, 2006).

Regardless of the reasons for the shrinking gap between upper and lower division courses, anecdotal evidence suggests that it has been noticed by both students and faculty. In fact, student expectations of grade inflation and dumbing down may have led to unrealistic expectations for how much study time students need to earn a certain grade (Ansburg, 2001; Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Deutch et al., 2008) . Students entering college straight out of high school expect college to be an extension of high school (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Strage, 2008) . Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that there is often a mismatch between student learning styles and professors' expectations (Ansburg, 2001; Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Mather & Champagne, 2008; Strage, 2008) .

So what do students expect from upper versus lower-division courses and how do these expectations compare with professors' expectations? Few studies have addressed this issue. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine faculty versus student expectations of the course content, structure and requirements of both lower and upper-division courses. We hypothesized that both students and faculty would expect upper and lower division courses to differ in a number of ways. We also expected that faculty expectations would differ from student expectations.

## Method

### Participants

Two groups of participants were recruited for this study. First, all psychology majors were emailed a link to the survey asking for their participation. Second, all full-time faculty members teaching in the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs, in which the Psychology major is housed, were emailed requesting their participation. We choose to email all Social Sciences faculty and not just Psychology faculty to increase our faculty pool of respondents. In the student group, there were a total of 135 participants (102 female, 33 male). The ages ranged from 18 to 53 ( $M = 24.73$ ,  $SD = 7.39$ ). Of the student participants, 108 (72.5%) reported being enrolled as full-time students and 27 (18.1%) reported being enrolled as part-time students. The second group consisted of a total of 13 faculty members: 5 assistant professors, 4 associate professors, 3 full professors, and 1 special lecturer. The Institutional Review Board approved all study procedures before data collection began.

### Materials

The student and faculty participants were presented with a series of questions regarding expectations and perceptions of upper and lower division classes. The instruments were adapted from the PEEK – Perceptions, Expectations, Emotions, and Knowledge about college – assessment tool (Weinstein, Palmer, & Hanson, 1995). Following the general demographics, the participants responded to a series of questions on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Questions were arranged such that participants were first asked about lower division course expectations and then about upper division course expectations. The same question was repeated (e.g., “The lecture material in my lower division course / upper division course will simply repeat what is in my text books,” “It will be more important to memorize what is being presented in my class then to think about it in my lower division courses / upper division courses,” “I expect my lower division courses / upper division courses to be more structured.”)

### Procedure

The questionnaire responses were procured through an email solicitation. Participants were provided with a hyperlink to the questionnaire. Responses were anonymous. Participants were given a 2 week window to complete the survey.

### Results

Item pairs were analyzed in 2 (upper division versus lower division questions) x 2 (faculty versus student) repeated measures ANOVAs. Means and standard deviations for each item pair by rater are presented in Table 1. Students and faculty were more likely to agree that, “The lecture material presented by my instructors in lower division courses will simply repeat what is in my textbooks,” than for upper division courses,  $F(1, 144) = 16.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ . Students were also more likely than faculty to agree that lectures would repeat text material in both types of courses,  $F(1, 144) = 31.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .18$ . There was a trend for an interaction between course level and rater,  $F(1, 144) = 2.12$ ,  $p < .10$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ , with faculty displaying much less variability in their ratings for upper and lower division courses than students (see Table 1).

Students and faculty were also more likely to agree that “It will be more important to memorize what is being presented in my class than to think about it in my lower division courses,” than for upper division courses,  $F(1, 142) = 6.52, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$ . In addition, students were more likely to agree that it was important to memorize the material in both course levels than were faculty,  $F(1, 142) = 27.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$ . However, there was no interaction between rater and class level,  $F(1, 142) = 0.51$ .

Students were more likely than were faculty to expect that courses would be structured regardless of level, “I expect my lower/upper division courses to be more structured,”  $F(1, 141) = 4.20, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$ . In addition, there was an interaction between rater and course level, with faculty rating lower division courses as more structured and students rating upper division courses more structured,  $F(1, 141) = 4.66, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$ . However, there were no differences in perception of structure between upper and lower division courses overall,  $F(1, 141) = 0.17$ .

Both groups “expect[ed] my lower division classes to offer more guidance for assignments, how to study and prepare for tests,” than their upper division courses,  $F(1, 142) = 15.68, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$ . In addition, there was an interaction between course level and rater, with faculty having more variation in their course ratings than students,  $F(1, 142) = 3.87, p \leq .05, \eta^2 = .03$ . However, there were no significant differences between students and faculty in their overall ratings,  $F(1, 142) = .07$ .

Students were significantly more likely than faculty to “expect to receive detailed instructions and grading criteria from my instructor for every assignment in a(n) lower/upper division course,”  $F(1, 143) = 3.87, p \leq .05, \eta^2 = .03$ . However, there were no differences between expectations in lower versus upper division courses,  $F(1, 143) = 0.20$ , or an interaction between rater and class level,  $F(1, 143) = 0.20$ .

Both groups were significantly more likely to “expect that I will do group projects at some time in an upper level course,” than in a lower division course,  $F(1, 143) = 7.50, p < .01, \eta^2 = .05$ . There was a trend for students to expect group projects at either course level more so than faculty,  $F(1, 143) = 3.48, p < .10, \eta^2 = .02$ . However, there was no interaction between class level and group,  $F(1, 143) = 0.91$ .

Raters agreed that they “expect[ed] to write research papers in my upper division courses,” more so than in their lower division courses,  $F(1, 141) = 79.89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .36$ . In addition, there was an interaction between rater and class level,  $F(1, 141) = 3.88, p \leq .05, \eta^2 = .03$ , with more variability in faculty expectations than in student expectations. However, there was no effect of rater,  $F(1, 141) = .37$ .

Finally, both groups “expect[ed] to spend more time in class discussion than in lecture in my upper division courses,” than in lower division courses,  $F(1, 143) = 42.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$ . However, there was no effect of rater,  $F(1, 143) = .01$ , and no interaction between group and class level,  $F(1, 143) = .96$ .

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine faculty and student

expectations of the course content, structure and requirements of both lower and upper-division courses to see if they differed. As hypothesized, we found that students and faculty expected upper and lower division courses to differ in a number of ways. We also found, as hypothesized, that faculty expectations differed from student expectations in a number of areas. Results will be discussed below.

Academicians (Dreisbach, 1989) have suggested that upper division and lower division courses should differ in a number of ways, ensuring that upper division courses are more difficult than their lower division counterparts (Ambrose, 2004; Manogue et al., 2001) . For example, Dreisbach argues that upper division courses should require students to be more independent and responsible for their learning. In fact, we found both students and faculty expected that upper division courses would display less overlap between the text and lecture material, and involve more group projects. Similarly, Dreisbach stated that upper division courses should require students to analyze, synthesize, interpret, make distinctions, and use critical thinking. Our raters agreed that upper division courses should focus more on critical thinking than on memorization, involve more class discussion, and require more research papers. Finally, Dreisbach suggested that upper division courses should focus on content and not study tips. Both groups were less likely to expect upper division courses to offer guidance for assignments, how to study and prepare for tests than they did for lower division courses.

Even though both groups agreed that upper division courses should differ from lower division courses, as expected, there were cases of mismatch between faculty and student expectations (Ansburg, 2001; Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Mather & Champagne, 2008; Strage, 2008) . For example, students entering college straight from high school expect college to be an extension of high school (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Strage, 2008) . This might explain why students were more likely than faculty, regardless of course level, to expect their courses to be structured, their lecture material to simply repeat the textbook, and that they would receive detailed instructions and grading criteria for every assignment. It might also explain why students were more likely to agree that they would need to memorize material rather than think about it in both upper and lower division courses.

### Limitations

Research was only conducted at one university using only one major. In addition, for sample size reasons, we included faculty from all social sciences, not just psychology. It is possible that faculty expectations may differ between the social sciences, however. Future studies should examine the differences between student and faculty perceptions at a school with a larger number of psychology faculty to ascertain whether our differences were the result of student versus faculty expectations or psychology versus all social sciences. In addition, studies should examine whether the differences are more or less pronounced in other major disciplines.

### Conclusion

As hypothesized, faculty and students did expect that upper division courses would differ from lower division courses in a number of ways. In addition, faculty and student expectations differed in some cases as well,

as students seemed to expect more help from faculty than they may actually be receiving at the collegiate level. It is interesting that though students do expect upper division courses to be more demanding than lower division courses, they seemed to expect faculty to provide similar resources (e.g., study guides) to ensure their success regardless of course level. Thus, what we may be facing is not a shrinking divide between upper and lower division courses (Townsend & Missouri Univ, 2001) as much as a shrinking divide between high school and college. Previous research suggests that student life experiences may change their perceptions and expectations of course content (Graman, 1987). Future studies should investigate whether college students who have had a more diverse pattern of life experiences are more realistic about their collegiate course expectations because of it.

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Table 1 *Survey Items with Means, Standard Deviations and Confidence Intervals*

	Upper Division		Lower Division	
Item	Faculty	Students	Faculty	Students
Lecture repeats text	4.92 (.29)	3.76 (.99)	4.50 (1.17)	2.72 (1.15)

Important to memorize	4.75 (.62)	3.48 (1.12)	4.42 (.79)	2.89 (1.08)
Courses more structured	3.36 (1.12)	2.32 (1.09)	2.64 (1.12)	2.81 (1.16)
Courses offer guidance	3.27 (1.19)	2.76 (1.07)	1.91 (.54)	2.30 (1.02)
Expect grading rubrics	1.64 (.81)	2.16 (.98)	1.64 (.67)	2.12 (1.00)
Expect group projects	2.45 (1.44)	2.21 (.96)	3.27 (1.49)	2.60 (1.07)
Expect to write papers	1.45 (.52)	1.70 (.80)	3.64 (1.43)	3.10 (1.14)
More class discussion	2.36 (1.36)	2.13 (.91)	3.55 (1.29)	3.73 (.89)
Note: *** $p < .001$ ; items were rated on a 5-point scale where 1= <i>strongly agree</i> and 5= <i>strongly disagree</i>				

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