Accomplishing Course Goals

Every year more than one million students take introductory psychology in North America. That makes intro psych (and many other of our introductory courses) worth taking a look at, which is just what researchers Benjamin Miller and Barbara F. Gentile decided to do. "To assess the state of the course, we surveyed instructors of introductory psychology, asking about the structure and content of their courses, their goals for the course, how well they think students achieve those goals, and about perception of their students' expectation for the course. We also asked students about their expectations of the introductory course and, later, about their experience in the course." Researchers had respondents rate the importance of nine potential course goals. The highest-rated goal was to "engage students in scientific inquiry about psychological processes." Interestingly, when asked to rate how well their course achieved each of the goals, instructors indicated that what they believed their intro course did best was to provide a "comprehensive survey of the field" and an introduction to the "different approaches psychologists take."

The researchers tried to understand the relation between instructors' goals and what they did in class by looking at highly rated goals in terms of activities and assignments associated with them. Instructors who rated the "engage" goals highly were "more likely than others to include in-class experiments, and demonstrations with humans and, to a lesser extent, animals in their courses." They were also more likely to assign lab reports.

In their survey of students done at the beginning of the course, researchers asked about 14 different course expectations. Eighty-six percent of the students expected "to increase your understanding of people and relationships," and 65 percent expected "to gain knowledge that could help you in your personal and professional [life]."

At the end of the course, students were asked about expectations in light of what had in fact transpired in the course. The researchers summarize the differences: "Few had expected the course to be easy, but more found that it was; more than a third expected an intellectual challenge, but few found it. The biggest change...was in the proportion of students who expected a comprehensive survey. Forty-eight percent had this expectation at the beginning of the course, but 69 percent described the course this way at the end."

The study design did not allow for direct comparison of faculty and student data. However, indirect comparisons intimated more interesting results: "Most instructors believed that a majority of students come to the introductory course expecting to learn what they need to go on in psychology, but only a third had that expectation."

Again, we are highlighting findings from a discipline-specific survey. We do that in the interest of a larger point: What expectations do faculty generally and you in particular hold for the introductory course in your discipline? Are they the expectations students bring with them? How successful, from the faculty and student perspective, is the course in achieving these goals? Are these questions about goals and expectations being asked about the introductory course in your field? If no, why not? How would the results in your field compare to the findings for introductory psychology?