

Guidelines for Independent Studies

(Based on the Academic Staff discussions of February 11 and May 13, 2000)

Basic definitions of XX371/372: Independent Study:

- A semester's course of study for the relatively sophisticated student who clearly can work "independently," not a "tutorial" for a student who will need regular, ongoing guidance from the faculty. In nearly all cases, the student engaging in 371/372 should be a junior or senior, nearly always a major in the department or an interdepartmental major or self-determined major.
- Independent Study is an option only for the student who has performed well academically, not for the student who has experienced uneven or moderate levels of success. Independent Study should not be used as a convenient means for students to fulfill requirements that might have been anticipated through regular course offerings, or for the under-qualified student who simply wants to graduate "on time."
- Independent Study is for the student who has a compelling interest in the proposed area of study, has completed the courses that provide appropriate background to the independent study, and who proposes, in writing to a faculty sponsor, a detailed, articulate, and coherent plan of study. (The student whose talents and motivation are appropriate for independent study work must have the capacity to define a focused area of inquiry and to describe, with clarity, appropriate methodologies and resources.) The independent study will nearly always result in a major research or creative project.
- The proposed focus of the Independent Study must clearly lend itself to the "independent study" format: for example, pursuit of the topic should depend largely on the student's own initiative, the availability of resources to which the student can have independent access, and should not require ongoing monitoring or instruction from the faculty member.
- The Independent Study should cover areas of student and faculty interest not typically included in regular course offerings, or take the student's experience into a greater depth of study and into a more sophisticated engagement with course-related topics.
- While several variables affect the amount of time a student should commit to independent study work, the general expectation is that the student should invest 9-16 hours each week in his or her project (assuming 3-4 hours of credit, and based on the assumption that faculty expect students in lecture/discussion/laboratory/studio courses to attend each scheduled class hour and to engage in 2-3 hours of additional study and preparation for each

hour of classroom time). In the case of variable-credit independent studies, the typical expectation will be 3-4 hours of student work each week for each semester hour of credit.

- While it is up to the sponsoring faculty member (or in some cases the department) to determine how much time the faculty member will spend in advising the student on his or her independent work, it is recommended that faculty not meet more than once a week (for one hour or less) with an independent study student and not less than once every two weeks.

Other considerations:

- Independent Study is a special, privileged opportunity for well qualified students, not a student entitlement. Faculty are not obligated to support any independent studies and are encouraged to take on only those that will likely meet high levels of academic standards and expectations. (There may be exceptions to this principle if a major program requires independent study work for degree completion or for departmental honors eligibility.)
- The sponsoring faculty member should clearly be qualified by his or her teaching and scholarly experience to guide the student in the proposed topic and to assess the results.
- The topic of the proposed Independent Study should have clear and credible connections to the sponsoring discipline. Studies that are more cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary in nature should consider using the rubric ID271/272 or ID371/372: Interdisciplinary Independent Study. (The faculty might want to propose to Curriculum Committee the redefinition of these rubrics, which were originally designed for self-determined majors.)
- Departments and programs are encouraged to develop or refine guidelines for the use of independent studies in their discipline, and to publish criteria that make the application process clear to interested students. The departmental application process should make clear the nature and extent of the student's responsibilities, deadliness to be met, methods and resources for the project, and the criteria that the sponsoring faculty member will use for evaluating the project. The guidelines should also define any departmental requirements for second readers or dual faculty sponsorship of projects. It is suggested that the student take primary responsibility in developing this plan of action, which can then be modified by the faculty member during the application process.) Students should submit proposals well before the registration period and according to departmental deadlines: this will both help prevent last-minute patching of course schedules and encourage students to plan their proposed study carefully.

- The Dean of Studies and the Registrar will modify the current Independent Study (blue) form to reflect the central guidelines for proposing an Independent Study. When the sponsoring department has its own forms and criteria, these will be attached to the blue form and submitted to the Office of the Registrar during the registration process (and retained in the student's main file for future reference).
- Note that departments should develop clear distinctions and application processes for such activities as "senior research," "directed study," and "thesis."
- It is the responsibility of the department or program chair to review and approve all proposals for independent study (perhaps in consultation with a department curriculum committee). While the chair is responsible for honoring the academic freedom of the sponsoring faculty member, the chair is also responsible for making certain the proposal meets the criteria described above (and any other criteria outlined by the department or program). The chair must also be concerned about the balance of faculty workloads as they are affected by requests for independent studies.
- While the guidance of accomplished students in more advanced and independent work is an inherent, and usually very rewarding, part of a faculty member's professional responsibilities, the Dean of the Faculty is encouraged to consider ways in which independent studies (as well as thesis supervision and the sponsorship of internships) might in the future be considered in relation to faculty work loads more generally. Faculty are also encouraged to consider how independent study responsibilities might be more equitably shared among members of the department or program.
- While faculty workload issues in relation to independent studies remain to be resolved, we should at least find means of providing recognition for faculty who engage successfully and regularly in independent study work with students. The Dean of the Faculty is encouraged to explore this issue further with Academic Staff and with CAPT. We should at the same time consider ways in which students can assess the value of their independent study work (somehow protecting confidentially). This would allow the students to provide useful feedback to the faculty and, in some cases, to provide evidence useful to tenure and promotion considerations for faculty who sponsor a number of successful independent studies. Another criterion of success for the student and the faculty member is the independent study work that results in a publication or presentation at a professional conference.

- According to current policy, there is no cap on the number of independent study credits a student might earn toward the degree. Whatever individual faculty and departments are willing to sponsor sets the limits. (We have not become aware of any dramatic overuse of independent studies, but perhaps individual departments, or faculty as a whole, would want to establish a maximum number of credits. We could, for example, say that three independent studies is generally the limit toward the degree plan, and that any use beyond that limit will require an especially compelling case from the student and the sponsoring faculty members. As a point of comparison, the maximum number of internship credits that may be applied to the degree is twelve.)
- “Unsatisfactory work”: once a clear agreement has been established between the independent study student and the sponsoring faculty member, it should be easier to determine when the student’s “progress” in his or her work is unsatisfactory. It is suggested that the faculty member should expect some number of meetings within the first four or five weeks of the independent project and should see some evidence of tangible progress by the student no later than the fourth or fifth week of the term of study. The faculty member should not hesitate to alert the student to a perceived problem and, if appropriate, alert the Dean of Studies Office through an Unsatisfactory Work Notice. The main effort will be not to let independent projects drift through misunderstood expectations, toward salvage efforts at the end of the term, and end up in grades of Incomplete or worse.
- Are there ways in which we could add a more public dimension to highly successful independent studies? Current college-wide avenues are the Academic Festival, the Periclean Scholar Awards, and some number of the prizes at Honors Convocation, and some departments organize their own efforts to highlight exemplary student work. It is also common for the Student Opportunity Funds to provide monetary support to students’ research and creative projects, some of which lead to co-authored publication, exhibits or performances, or to presentations at professional conferences. Should we consider other ways of showcasing and honoring exceptional student work, perhaps through public presentations, a website which highlights especially fruitful independent studies, or an awards process?

~ Draft of May 14, 2000 ~
Dean of Studies