

Independent Study Task Force Report

April 20, 2017

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Administrative Support: Ben Haven (Undergraduate Curricula)

Meetings: January 24, February 6, February 20, March 6, March 20 and April 3, 2017.

Summary: We were charged with reviewing the policy for Independent Study courses as set forth by the most recent Independent Study Task Force in 2012. The purpose of this review was to determine whether any changes should be implemented in order to increase feasibility or to bring these courses into better accordance with the “current educational mission and culture” of UNC-Chapel Hill.

Procedure: We considered each of the questions listed in the charge individually and reached a consensus about a recommendation to change or not change the policy accordingly. Each question is listed below, followed by the task force’s recommendation. Additional documents are attached.

***Question 1.** Does the existing definition of an “independent study” (with its five subcategories) reflect the current educational mission and culture of UNC-Chapel Hill in 2017?*

The separate designation of a “Traditional Independent Study” course did not seem necessary, since it was unclear to us how this would be different from a Directed Readings course. Thus, we have removed this category and list, instead, four categories of independent study courses (Internships/Practica, Mentored Research, Directed Readings, and Honors Thesis).

We discussed at length the question of whether to separate Internships and Practica into distinct categories. The rationale for doing so would be that these independent study experiences have different definitions, and some departments make use of both types of courses. However, two considerations led us to keep them combined: first, some departments might not have enough open course numbers to create separate course numbers of internships and practica. Second, the exact implementation of internships and practica appears to vary quite widely across disciplines. In order to permit individual departments and majors the latitude needed to apply these terms as fits their discipline, we opted to keep them combined. Thus, both internship courses and practicum courses will remain with course numbers ending in 93.

See **Appendix A** to see how these recommendations will affect the language of the current policy (UPM #30).

Question 2. *Are the current limits/exclusions too restrictive or not restrictive enough?*

Examples include

- 12 hours of graded credit, excluding honors thesis courses, may be counted toward graduation
- Instructors may supervise no more than two students each semester.

We considered the two examples separately. For the question of 12 hours of graded credit being the maximum that can be counted towards graduation, we determined that this was appropriate. Given that professional schools are exempt from this restriction in the current policy, we felt that this restriction in the College of Arts and Sciences was reasonable. Individual majors may place a tighter restriction if they feel that 12 hours of independent study course work is too much.

As for the question of limiting instructors to 2 students per semester, we recommend changing this policy as follows. We recommend keeping the limit of 2 students in cases in which the instructor will work one-on-one with the student(s) on what is likely a research topic of the student's design and choice, or on a directed readings course in which one (or possibly two) students are reading an individualized list of books and/or articles. In other cases, where it is entirely feasible for several students to be working on the same project, such as part of an established research/lab group or a practicum course, or in an internship where the direct oversight is done by someone other than the faculty advisor, we recommend removing the limit of two students. In the case of established lab/research groups, students are often working on a project of the faculty member's design, and in such cases, it is not more time-consuming to oversee a handful of students than to oversee two students. However, we agree that faculty must be limited to overseeing at most two students in an individualized type of research project plus at most two honors thesis students.

See **Appendix B** for a table with definitions, limits, and restrictions. See **Appendix C** for additional rationale provided to support maintaining the 2 students per semester policy for individualized research and directed readings.

Question 3. *Should internships/practica be considered a form of independent study, particularly with the current limits/exclusions?*

Related to our answer to question 2, we determined that internships and practica should be exempt from the 2 student-per-semester limit for faculty, for the reasons given above. However, since many internships and practica are not courses taught in a lecture format, we still recommend that these courses be considered a type of independent study course. In particular, unless a practicum is taught as part of a lecture course with its own syllabus, we recommend that Learning Contracts be required for these courses. However, in cases where the practicum *is* part of a lecture course that has a syllabus, we recommend that

instructors be able to request an exemption to the Learning Contract requirement. (Essentially, the syllabus substitutes for the Learning Contract.)

The division between internships and practica appears to be highly discipline-specific (see above); however, our understanding is that internships are very likely to involve students completing individual projects. Thus, a Learning Contract would be most appropriate for internship courses.

Question 4. *For fall and spring terms, the current registration deadline for independent study courses is the end of the first week of classes. The registration deadline for all other courses is the end of the second week of classes. Should the registration deadline be aligned?*

Yes.

Question 5. *A new online form with workflow for Independent Study Learning Contracts is being developed by the College of Arts and Sciences. What are the key features that should/must be included in the new online form? (A separate consultation with the program developer may be helpful.)*

At our last meeting, we met with Kathy Vreeland who is developing this workflow program. We recommended the following components:

- Uploading of materials that specify the work plan and/or any requirements should be done by the faculty member, not the student. This ensures that the exact requirements for the independent study course originate with someone who is qualified to specify the requirements for an undergraduate course.
- The student should initiate the workflow by filling in their information (onyen, PID, GPA, major, prerequisites, etc.) and then send it to the faculty advisor who will upload the required documents for course requirements. The Learning Contract should then go back to the student who must indicate that they understand the requirements and agree to them. The Learning Contract can then be approved by the IS coordinator, DUS, department chair, or other appropriate approver.

Question 6. *Should elements be added or removed from the learning contract template?*

We have amended the Learning Contract template in the following ways (new template attached):

- clarify the conditions under which the limit of two students per semester can be suspended
- clarify that the faculty advisor should complete the bottom portion of the first page, not the student
- list in a table format the additional materials that must be included for the four different types of independent study courses

- clarify the language on the second page regarding when the DUS, Chair or Dean must sign the learning contract
- add a check box for the instructor to verify that they are not supervising more than the allowed number of students (2 independent study students plus 2 honors thesis students, except where the above conditions are met for supervising more than 2 students in an IS course).

See **Appendix D** for a copy of the revised learning contract.

We recognize that if a workflow is implemented, the paper Learning Contract may be replaced with the workflow within the College.

Question 7. What should be the process for submitting, reviewing, and approving exceptions? Can exceptions be approved for multiple semesters, or for a single term only?

We recommend that exceptions be approved by the Senior Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education, and that exceptions apply for a period of three years. On a yearly basis, however, the Office of Undergraduate Curricula should provide department chairs with a list of courses that have received exceptions and ask whether any changes have occurred that might remove the exception. The chair can make any needed changes in consultation with the DUS and/or other Independent Study Coordinator.

Appendix A: Revised Independent Study Policy

UPM #30 – Independent Study Policy

Effective Date: February 2014 (~~revised, effective TBD~~)

Independent study offers undergraduate students an important opportunity to engage in research, to pursue areas of inquiry not regularly offered through courses, to participate in supervised internships and service learning, and to graduate with honors. Such courses build on students' knowledge and encourage undergraduates to apply their academic experiences to particular intellectual and practical concerns. Faculty members at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill also regard independent study courses as valuable forms of learning at the heart of a research university. Students who undertake independent study are expected to be self-motivated and largely self-directed.

This document lays out policies, defines various forms of independent study, and establishes guidelines for such courses. The purpose of this document is to promote careful planning, consistent expectations, and appropriate oversight for independent study courses.

The policy is based on the [2012 report of the College of Arts and Sciences Independent Study Task Force](#), which was adopted campus-wide on March 8, 2013, by Faculty Council as [Resolution 2013-06](#).

At UNC-Chapel Hill the term "independent study" defines ~~both a general category of courses as well as a specific type of course (here called "traditional independent study")~~. Over time "independent study" has come to mean different things in different disciplines. Consequently, working definitions are necessary. As a category, "independent study" denotes courses that provide a mechanism for a student to work on a specific topic with a faculty member for academic credit. Typically, the topic is focused rather than general and is not usually pursued in scheduled courses. At least three hours of independent work per week is expected for each unit of credit, and a final written paper, report, or artistic work is required.

The category "independent study" embraces ~~at least five~~ four types/categories of course work, each of which has a standard number assigned by the Office of the University Registrar (see [UPM #4 Standard Course Numbering System](#))

What Is Independent Study

~~**Traditional Independent Study:** The pursuit of a topic of interest by a student (generally in the major or minor), under the supervision of a faculty member with expertise related to the topic. Traditional independent study courses carry numbers ending in 96.~~

~~**Directed Readings:** The pursuit of a topic of interest by a student (generally in the major or minor), under the supervision of a faculty member with expertise related to the topic. This can involve a systematic analysis of an approved bibliography in the student's area of interest. Directed readings courses are identified by numbers ending in 96.~~ **Directed Readings:** Systematic analysis of an approved bibliography in the student's area of interest. Directed readings courses are also identified by numbers ending in 96.

~~Directed and/or Mentored Undergraduate Research:~~ Investigative, fact-finding work supervised by a faculty mentor and conducted outside a conventional classroom—in a laboratory, in field sites, in a library, or in other places in which research activity takes place. The research project may be undertaken as part of an established research group overseen by a faculty member, or as an individual project that is conducted one-on-one under the supervision of a faculty mentor. Such courses show numbers ending in 95.

~~Internships/Practica:~~ Internships provide students with an opportunity to gain experience working or conducting research in a business or organization not associated with an academic unit, but whose mission or domain of outreach is closely aligned with the student's major or minor discipline. Practica provide a supervised, reflective work experience designed to give students first-hand knowledge of the practice of a discipline. Students are encouraged to integrate classroom and work experience in ways that help them develop a professional identity. Internships and practica carry course numbers ending in 93. **~~Internships/Practica:~~** ~~Such courses provide a supervised, reflective work experience designed to give students first-hand knowledge of the practice of a discipline. Students are encouraged to integrate classroom and work experience in ways that help them develop a professional identity. Internships and practica carry course numbers ending in 93.~~

Honors Thesis: Two semesters of independent research for which the student, under the guidance of a full-time faculty supervisor, is responsible for designing and completing a research project or creative activity, in accordance with the guidelines jointly established by Honors Carolina and the academic unit. Honors thesis courses are numbered 691H, 692H, 693H, and 694H.

Requirements Concerning Independent Study at UNC-Chapel Hill

For each of the ~~five~~four types of independent study courses described above, the following requirements apply (*but see “Limits and Exclusions” below*):

1. UNC-Chapel Hill has adopted [the Federal Definition of a Credit Hour](#), which requires a minimum of 750 minutes (*12.5 hours*) of instructional contact time for one hour of course credit; 2250 minutes (*37.5 hours*) are required for a three-credit course. Though a precise number of contact minutes does not apply to independent study courses, instructors should meet periodically with students throughout the semester. Students should expect to devote a minimum of three hours each week for each credit hour of independent study, or at least nine hours per week for a three-credit independent study course.
2. A final assessment or examination is required in all undergraduate courses numbered 100 through 699, including independent study courses. However, the role of final examinations for independent study courses may vary based on the intended outcomes for the course. Heads of instructional units can approve a nontraditional final examination in such cases (*e.g., a portfolio of the student's work, a thesis or substantial paper, a take-home examination*).
3. Schools, departments, and curricula should create sections of a course for each faculty member supervising an independent study.
4. The number of students a faculty member may supervise in an independent study course during a semester or summer session should be restricted to no more than two students. Individual faculty members may supervise a maximum of two students pursuing an independent study and

two additional students ~~per semester or summer session~~ who are working on an honors thesis per semester or summer session.

5. For all independent study courses, including honors thesis courses that assign individual students to individual faculty advisors, a learning contract should be completed between the instructor and student.
 - The contract should stipulate the number of hours per week of work expected from the student; the number of required meetings between the instructor and student during the term; reading and writing assignments and due dates for them; assessment information specifying how the final grade will be determined; and a brief work plan.
 - Each unit must have a process in place for reviewing and approving the learning contracts, which should remain on file in the unit for a minimum of four years.
 - If the learning contract is between a student and the chair of a unit, the contract must be approved by the chair's dean.
 - A template for learning contracts that can be used University-wide is attached.
6. Registration for an independent study course must be completed after the learning contract has been approved and no later than the last day of "late registration" (*the end of the first-second week of classes in a fall or spring semester or the equivalent date in each summer session*).
7. Students may enroll in a maximum of twelve hours of independent study in a fall or spring semester.
 - No more than twelve hours of graded independent study credit may be counted toward graduation.
 - The six-hour registration (*two three-credit courses*) for honors thesis courses is excluded from these totals.

Limits and Exclusions

1. The restriction limiting to two the number of students a faculty member may supervise during a semester or summer session does not apply to the following courses:
 - Formal research methods courses taught according to the standard class format. A syllabus serves as the learning contract for these courses.
 - Capstone courses in which students working on an individual or group project are supervised by a faculty member teaching the course as part of his or her customary teaching assignment. A syllabus serves as the learning contract for these courses.
 - Faculty research laboratories, research programs, or established research groups in units in which students are part of a research team. However, individual learning contracts still apply in these situations.

- Directed readings courses, offered in addition to the faculty member's standard course assignment, for a small number of undergraduate students pursuing the same reading list. However, individual learning contracts still apply.
 - Situations in which mentored research is occurring outside the department or curriculum for more than two students. Individual learning contracts still apply, and faculty members from the students' department or curriculum must assign course grades.
 - Internships and practica ~~required by a professional school~~. Individual learning contracts still apply.
2. Offering active (*approved*) courses as an independent study should be restricted to unusual circumstances. "Tutorial Independent Study" arranged through the Friday Center may continue to be used for this purpose, provided that all approvals are obtained, including from the unit chair and, for the College of Arts and Sciences, the associate dean for undergraduate curricula.
 3. Although special topics courses are not considered to be independent study, there are restrictions on their use. While they allow faculty members to offer timely courses or develop new ones, the number of times that the same special topics course can be offered should be limited to no more than two occurrences. After that, the course should be submitted through the course request approval system for a permanent number.
 - Special topics courses should bear numbers ending in 90 (*or 89 if a first-year seminar*).
 - All special topics courses must have secondary titles when they are scheduled in the ConnectCarolina system, and units should make a course description and/or tentative syllabus available prior to the registration period so that students might make informed choices when selecting courses.
 - Special topics courses (*and other courses with variable content*) cannot fulfill General Education requirements and cannot be scheduled as combined sections.
 - Units should consider carefully the implications of including special topics courses in requirements for majors and minors.
 4. By action of [Faculty Council Resolution 2013-06](#), the following rules do **not** apply to appropriately supervised out-of-classroom internships/practica in undergraduate programs offered in the professional schools:
 - The limit of twelve hours of graded independent study credit, excluding honors thesis courses, that may be counted toward graduation.
 - The limitation that no more than twelve hours may be taken in any one semester.
 - ~~The two-student restriction on the number of students a faculty member may supervise in cases involving internships/practica required by the professional school.~~

Appendix B: Independent Study Criteria Table

Course Type	Definition	Delivery Method	Course Component*	Contributes Toward Graduation Unit Limit of 12	Contributes Toward Instructor Limit of 2	Learning Contract Applies
Internship or Practicum (X93)	Internships provide students with an opportunity to gain experience working or conducting research in a business or organization not associated with an academic unit, but whose mission or domain of outreach is closely aligned with the student's major or minor discipline. Practica provide a supervised, reflective work experience designed to give students first-hand knowledge of the practice of a discipline. Students are encouraged to integrate classroom and work experience in ways that help them develop a professional identity.	on or off-campus; site supervisor or faculty oversight (if student's primary work will be off-campus, will need preceptor)	Internship, Field Experience, or Cooperative Education OR Practicum	yes**	no	yes
Individual Mentored Research (X95)	A research project conducted one-on-one under the supervision of a faculty mentor.	one-on-one with faculty oversight	Individual Study	yes	yes	yes
Group Mentored Research (X95)	Investigative, fact-finding work led and supervised by a faculty mentor and conducted as part of an established research group—in a laboratory, in field sites, in a library, or in other places in which research activity takes place.	research environment with lab manager or PI oversight	Practicum	yes	no	yes
Directed Readings (X96)	The pursuit of a topic of interest by a student (generally in the major or minor), under the supervision of a faculty member with expertise related to the topic. This can involve a systematic analysis of an approved bibliography in the student's area of interest.	one-on-one with faculty oversight	Individual Study	yes	yes***	yes
Senior Honors Thesis (691H-694H)	Two semesters of independent research for which the student, under the guidance of a full-time faculty supervisor, is responsible for designing and completing a research project or creative activity, in accordance with the guidelines jointly established by Honors Carolina and the academic unit.	lecture OR one-on-one with faculty oversight	Lecture OR Individual Study	no	2 in addition to limit of 2	syllabus for lectures AND/OR learning contract for one-on-one

***Available component definitions:**

Lecture - a course requiring the extended expression of thought supported by generally-accepted principles or theorems of a field or discipline led by an expert or qualified representative of the field or discipline.

Practicum - a course requiring students to participate in an approved project or proposal that practically applies previously studied theory of the field or discipline under the supervision of an expert or qualified representative of the field or discipline.

Internship, Field Experience, or Cooperative Education - a course requiring students to participate in a partnership, professional employment, work experience, or cooperative education with an entity external to the institution, generally under the supervision of an employee of the given external entity.

Individual Study - A course requiring students to participate in individualized, independent, directed, or guided studies under the supervision of an expert or qualified representative of the field or discipline that cannot be otherwise classified as Internship, Field Experience, Cooperative Education, Practicum, Recital, Performance, or Ensemble.

**By action of Faculty Council Resolution 2013-06, the following rules do not apply to appropriately supervised out-of-classroom internships/practica in undergraduate programs offered in the professional schools:

The limit of twelve hours of graded independent study credit, excluding honors thesis courses, that may be counted toward graduation.

The limitation that no more than twelve hours may be taken in any one semester.

***If more than one student will be pursuing the same directed reading list, the limit of two students per instructor does not apply.

Appendix C: Independent Study Task Force Report Supplement

May 8, 2017

The purpose of this supplement is to explain the 2017 Independent Study Task Force's rationale for keeping the limit of two students in Independent Study courses where this limit applies.

There are two primary reasons we believe this number, set by the 2012 Task Force, should remain.

1. To achieve a successful educational experience for the student, the supervision of individual research projects and independent study courses requires a significant time commitment on the part of the faculty member. Given their other research, teaching, and service commitments, faculty members have limited time to devote to supervising independent study experiences. To guarantee that students receive the adequate individual attention needed for such experiences, we recommend this limit on the number of individual experiences a faculty member can supervise at one time.
2. According to our own experiences, and informal polling of colleagues, many faculty appreciate having this limit as a means of turning down requests to oversee multiple independent study projects which, as noted above, take a great deal of time and attention.

In addition, we note the following:

- An unscientific search of the websites of several peer institutions (UCLA, University of Maryland, University of Kansas, University of Texas, University of Florida, University of Illinois and University of Virginia) revealed that only one of them (U. Maryland) appears to have explicit limits on the number of IS projects a faculty person can oversee at one time (Maryland's limit is 7 per semester). However, given UNC's unique history with fake courses and the sanctions that ensued, we believe a limit is warranted, and that this limit should be stricter than the one imposed by U. Maryland.
- The number two is arbitrary. Another small number, such as 3 or 4 would also likely be fine. However, in view of the larger-scale undergraduate curriculum revision currently underway, we feel that it would be unwise at this moment to change the number to a different (and equally arbitrary) number, in case this change needs to be reversed or further revised when we discover what the new curriculum will require.
- In our report, we specified a number of circumstances under which this limit will not apply. If a given faculty person would like to seek an exemption to the limit for a case in which the limit would normally apply, the faculty person may provide a rationale and request an exemption from the Senior Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education.

Appendix D: Revised Independent Study Learning Contract
INDEPENDENT STUDY LEARNING CONTRACT

Department or Curriculum Name: [Click here to enter text.](#)

Course #: [Click here to enter text.](#) **Possible Credit Hours (e.g., 1-3 variable or 3 fixed):** [Click here to enter text.](#)

List prerequisites (if applicable): [Click here to enter text.](#)

Section to be completed by **Student**

APPLICANT INFORMATION:

Student Applicant's Name: _____ PID: _____

E-mail: _____

Date of Application: _____ Credit Hours Sought: _____

Major: _____

Class (current with the semester or session enrolled): SENIOR JUNIOR SOPHOMORE FIRST YEAR

Semester Requested: FALL SPRING SUMMER I SUMMER II YEAR _____

Current GPA: CUMULATIVE _____ MAJOR _____

Prerequisite(s) Fulfilled: COURSE# _____ SEMESTER/YEAR _____ GRADE _____

COURSE# _____ SEMESTER/YEAR _____ GRADE _____

Section to be completed by **Faculty Member**

INFORMATION ABOUT INSTRUCTOR:

Name: _____ E-mail: _____

Instructor's Independent Study Section # (scheduling officer can fill this in): _____

Check One:

- For this course the instructor has no more than two students per semester or summer session.
- For this course the instructor has more than two students per semester or summer session. The reason for the exception is (CHECK ONE):
- Internship/Practicum Lab/Research Group Shared Directed Readings List
- Other (please describe): _____

COURSE REQUIREMENTS. This document is considered a contract between the instructor (advisor/sponsor) and the student. Deviations from this contract should be updated and documented to the extent possible by the instructor and student. Students are expected to devote at least three hours of independent work per week for each unit of credit (e.g., nine hours per week for three credit hours of independent study).

(1) Indicate the type of Independent Study course and provide the necessary attachment(s) accordingly:

(a) Directed Readings	(b) Mentored Research	(c) Internship/Practicum	(d) Honors Thesis
- learning objectives	- learning objectives	- learning objectives	- meeting schedule
- meeting schedule	- meeting schedule	- schedule of activities/work plan	- work plan
- work plan	- work plan	- description of product (if needed)	- written requirements
- reading list	- written requirements	- roles and responsibilities	- method of assessment
- written requirements	- safety plan (if needed)	- written requirements	
- method of assessment	- method of assessment	- method of assessment	
		- site supervisor's signature	

(2) Provide a rationale for this independent study or include it in requirements attachment (100 words max):

Student, Faculty, and Administrative signatures

INSTRUCTOR RESPONSIBILITIES:

By checking this box, I confirm that I am advising no more than two students engaged in **individual** mentored research and/or directed readings and no more than two students engaged in senior honors theses this semester or summer session (see UPM #30 for limits and exclusions).

I have read the requirements expected of the instructor, agree to undertake these responsibilities, and will abide by the Honor Code's responsibilities of faculty.

Instructor's Signature _____ Date _____

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES:

I have read the requirements expected of the student, agree to undertake these responsibilities, and will abide by the Honor Code's responsibilities of students.

Student's Signature _____ Date _____

INDEPENDENT STUDY COORDINATOR:

This application for Independent Study has been reviewed. The proposal is

- APPROVED AS IS
 NOT APPROVED (provide rationale) _____

School/Department/Program Independent Study Coordinator's Signature _____ Date _____

If the Independent Study Coordinator is not the Department/Curriculum Chair, the Director of Undergraduate Studies (DUS), or another Faculty Designee of the Chair, then the Chair or DUS must also approve this contract.

This application for Independent Study has been reviewed. The proposal is

- APPROVED AS IS
 NOT APPROVED (provide rationale) _____

Chair or DUS's (whichever is applicable) Signature _____ Date _____

If the Chair is the student's independent study instructor, this form must also be signed by the Chair's Dean.

This application for Independent Study has been reviewed. The proposal is

- APPROVED AS IS
 NOT APPROVED (provide rationale) _____

Dean's Signature _____ Date _____

Note: Departments/Curricula must maintain a copy of this contract for a minimum of four years.