

Independent Study Policy

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 (<http://www.unc.edu/news/050412/Independent%20Study%20report.pdf>), which was adopted campus-wide on March 8, 2013, by Faculty Council as Resolution 2013-06 (<http://faccoun.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Res2013-06OnIndependentStudyTFReportFinal.pdf>).

What Is Independent Study?

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 types 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 at <http://registrar.unc.edu/academic-services/policies-procedures/university-policy-memorandums/upm-4-standard-course-numbering-system>):

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: 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. Such courses show numbers ending in 95.

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 types of independent study courses described above, the following requirements apply:

1. A minimum of 750 minutes (12.5 hours) of instructional contact time is required for one hour of course credit; 2250 minutes (37.5 hours) are required for a three-credit course. An equivalent amount of work must be established for independent study courses.
2. UNC-Chapel Hill has adopted the Federal Definition of a Credit Hour (<https://registrar.unc.edu/academic-services/policies-procedures/university-policy-memorandums/upm-29-definition-of-a-credit-hour>), which requires not less than one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours out of class for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester hour of credit. Consequently, students should expect to devote a minimum of nine hours each week of the semester to their work in a three-credit independent study course.
3. 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).
4. Faculty members supervising an independent study must meet with the student on a regular basis throughout the term rather than merely at the beginning or end.
5. Schools, departments, and curricula should create sections of a course for each faculty member supervising an independent study.
6. 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 additional students per semester or summer session who are working on an honors thesis.

7. 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 required in the College of Arts and Sciences is available at <http://collegeintranet.web.unc.edu/resources/dofoms>.
8. 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 week of classes in a fall or spring semester or the equivalent date in each summer session).
9. 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 at <http://faccoun.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Res2013-06OnIndependentStudyTFReportFinal.pdf>), 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; and
 - The two-student restriction on the number of students a faculty member may supervise in cases involving internships/practica required by the professional school.