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INDEPENDENT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Independent Study courses offer a unique opportunity to learn about a particular area where you want to go to greater depth. Independent Study courses are usually intended to allow a student to investigate an issue where there is no existing course or to follow up on a specific issue from an existing course.

Doing an independent study calls for an ability to teaching ourselves, an excellent skill in life. It takes initiative, responsibility, and task management, since there is no existing structure to the course. Be sure to examine carefully your capabilities to pursue a task on your own, and negotiate carefully with your faculty sponsor what you will do, how you will do the work, and what the learning products will be. Be sure to examine materials on self-directed learning, such as [goal-setting](#) and [time-management](#) skills, and [What Makes a Good Learner?](#)

In organizing your independent study project, be sure to cover the following points:

Objectives: What specifically do you want to have achieved at the end of your project, in term of both learning and skills?

Issue: What is the specific problem that you want to resolve? Independent projects are rarely conducted just to learn more information, and involve critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Faculty Sponsor: Which faculty member will you ask to help supervise and grade your project? Keep in mind that faculty have different skills, interests, and time to work with you on your project, plus the faculty member will be doing this pro bono, with no career rewards other than your learning and appreciation. In particular, you should clarify what the faculty member's expectations are for the work you will do and the criteria for how this work will be evaluated and graded, to make sure they coincide with what you want to do... and to avoid later misunderstandings.

Research Plan: How will you go about investigating the issue?

There are many different approaches to [gathering information](#), including:

Readings. Before starting, you should put together a beginning bibliography of the materials you will use to investigate your issue. You can search for acceptable sources using academic library engines, and sometimes other engines as appropriate. Most sources are usually based on academic professional articles and books, which you can normally take as accepted information, as long as you document these sources. Depending on your project, you can also include other materials like news media, creative writing, and even internet blogs... but keep in mind that these cannot be accepted as proven "facts", only that people think something is so.

Other Resources. Depending on your project, there may be other approaches to building your learning, including interviews, original research, and creative art.

There are also different approaches to [analyzing information](#). There are both qualitative and quantitative methods for ensuring that your judgement is well grounded.

Be sure to discuss with your faculty sponsor about what approaches and resources are most appropriate for the independent study, and also which sources s/he may recommend.

Schedule: How will you manage your time and energy to make sure that project is completed on time? Since most courses are based on an academic calendar, determine how much time and energy you have available to complete the different parts of the project plan, including analysis of information and writing of reports... and also the time and energy demanded by other courses and your personal life.

It is best to work out a schedule with your faculty sponsor for the work to be accomplished. Include not only by when you will have completed each task, but also when you will meet with your sponsor to regularly review your progress, to receive feedback on your thinking and work, and to make the necessary adjustments that will be inevitable as realities set in.

Products: What results will your learning project produce? Be sure to discuss this with your faculty sponsor before starting your project. Usually, the products of an independent learning project include written reports at regular intervals on work done and a final report reviewing the issue, data, analysis, and grounded conclusions... and often a reflection on what you learned about learning on your own and the new skills you have developed by doing the project. Depending on your project, the products may include a visual representation of the issue, an original work of art, or other kind of product.

Keep in mind that the products of independent learning are also useful when applying for scholarships, jobs, and other career-related and life opportunities. These show your ability to learn well, creativity and initiative, organization of effort, analysis and writing skills, and other characteristics relevant to the directions you are going in life.

Evaluation: All independent learning efforts should include an evaluation of your efforts and how you have developed as a result.

Most important is your own self-evaluation. Most important, what did you actually learn about how to learn? What new learning skills have you developed about identifying grounded and ungrounded information, about how to organize grounded information, about analyzing patterns and influences, and about developing reliable and valid conclusions? Also, what did you learn about what not to do? And, of course, reflect on what you enjoyed the most about the effort, and what this tells you about your life orientations. Be sure to put this writing, both for clarification in your own mind and for future reference about your development, and even make it a part of your final product.

Your faculty sponsor will also evaluate your work based on academic and professional standards. Be sure to discuss your project and development with your sponsor when the course is over, as s/he will have thoughts and insights based on professional experience and having worked with many different kinds of students over the years.

Independent learning activities can also be developed within existing courses, if the instructor is willing and able to take the extra time to work with you in adjusting the course requirements so you can follow an interest within the topic that is especially meaningful to you. If you are interested in such an opportunity, work out your activities with the instructor before the course gets underway, to maximize the benefits of your efforts.