

Mathiowetz's Undergraduate Independent Study (IS) Guidelines

Advising and engaging in independent study projects with undergraduate students is a regular, important, and rewarding part of my job as a professor. I judge every independent study proposal on its merits, but here are a few guidelines to consider if you think you would like to discuss setting up such a project with me.

Will you work with me?

I am most inclined to supervise students whose academic creativity and skills I have already had an opportunity to engage first hand, and who know enough about my teaching style to be aware of what they are getting themselves into. The best way for us to know each other in this way is for you to have taken—and done good work in—one of my courses. An upper-division elective or senior seminar is best, because I have the most opportunity to get to know your scholarly virtues in these settings.

I rarely engage in IS projects with students whom I do not know from my classroom. When someone I do not know approaches me for an IS, I ask that the student come personally and very highly recommended to me by a colleague who knows the student's work very well.

Lastly, I am employed by the University from mid-September to mid-June. I do not supervise IS projects in the summer.

What kind of project is appropriate?

An IS is equivalent to an upper-division elective or seminar in the Politics Department. The range and depth of your proposal—not to mention the amount of reading and written work—must be comparable to what you have seen in equivalent courses. While it's likely that the IS will culminate in a long research paper, the reading and research must be broader in scope than that paper alone. In other words, proposing an independent study simply in order to write a research or theoretical paper whose topic you have already narrowly defined and/or whose argument you have already mapped out in your mind is not appropriate for independent study.

It's also crucial that I have much to contribute, besides a helpful mien and a signature, to this project. In other words, I should have some expertise in the topic, so that I can critically assist and assess your work. While I am a political theorist, I am not capable of supervising an IS in every topic covered by this vast, interdisciplinary subfield—let alone in other areas of political studies, like social movements or constitutional law. If you are interested in those areas, you should consult faculty with expertise in them in our department or elsewhere on campus. In terms of my own competencies, spending a little time with my web page (i.e., taking account of my elective course offerings, research description, and published writings) will give you an idea of the range of topics in which I have developed, or am developing, expertise.

What will you expect?

During the term prior to when you would like to do an IS, you should see me in office hours with a 300-word proposal for your project and a one-page preliminary bibliography. This proposal should define the area of study covered by the project, and describe your scholarly background (previous coursework, etc.)

insofar as it shows you to be ready to engage in this project. It should also identify the several literatures you will examine as a part of it (and perhaps briefly justify their relevance), and spell out the amount and kind of written work you propose. We'll discuss your project when we meet, and if I don't see any immediate difficulties, I will keep the proposal, read it closely, and give you an answer within a few days.

If we are in agreement about the project, your assignment for the first week of the term in which we have arranged the IS (or sooner) will be to bring me a fully articulated syllabus for the rest of the term, that is, a list of readings, broken down by week, for each of the remaining nine weeks. The amount of reading should be appropriate for an upper-division undergraduate course. I also require a 300-word critical reading response each week. You may submit this by e-mail but it must be polished and scholarly prose, with MLA style citations. We do not need to meet every week, but we should meet at least five more times throughout the term. The final essay can vary according to the project (and we will agree upon a definite expectation at the outset), but 12-15 pages is a good place to begin in your thinking about it.

I evaluate your work on an IS in two respects. First is your success in keeping to the schedule of readings and assignments that you proposed on the syllabus that you bring me and that I approve—this is your baseline for satisfactory work. Second is the scholarly creativity and rigor of your written work. I prefer to arrange IS projects to be graded on a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory basis. In that case, your work in keeping up and your written work must both be satisfactory in order to merit a grade of S. I am willing to consider grading IS projects of the A-F scale, if there is good reason to do so. Be aware that I consider an average performance to merit something like a B-. You are the only student in the “class,” and therefore, strictly speaking, you are the best, but this does not mean your work merits an A.

I got a great internship. Can I get independent study credit for it?

An internship can provide you with great experience on a number of levels, from practical exposure to the problems and activities of the public realm, to stimulating encounter with new and innovative ideas. An internship is also a useful, if not essential bridge between your college career and the one that comes after. But, just as college study is not a substitute for experience in the world beyond the university, experience in that world is not a substitute for academic reading, writing, and research. An IS project carried out concurrently with your internship can be rewarding and productive, but the IS needs to present a complete academic complement of its own.

I am skeptical about IS projects that are attached to unpaid internships at for-profit companies. In this case, it seems likely that the business is justifying your unpaid labor under the aegis of the term “internship” (i.e., skirting labor laws), meanwhile making you pay the University for course credit. This is almost certainly the case if the company requires you to arrange college credit in order to do the work.

What about a senior thesis?

A senior thesis is a seriously ambitious undertaking. It requires at least two quarters of work, one of which should (in my view) be similar to the IS requirements outlined above, the second of which should involve multiple revisions of a lengthy (50 page) thesis paper that involves significant original research.

Equally important is your motivation for the project. Few professional or graduate program admissions committees will require a senior thesis or will even read it when evaluating your application. (They may be keen to hear from a recommender that you carried one out with stellar success.) Therefore, if you propose a senior thesis, you must address three key questions. One, what intellectual and scholarly motivation brings you to this project? Two, what will the payoff of the thesis be, in terms of your personal and professional development? Be specific. Three, what will your thesis have to achieve, in order to make an original scholarly contribution to academic or policy realm (or both) related to your chosen topic?