**Independent Study Guidelines**

*USI Master of Public Administration*

**What is an independent study?**

An independent study is an educational option where students work with a faculty mentor to develop a learning opportunity that is tailored to the student and their interests or needs. Unlike traditional educational techniques that take place within the larger educational community of the classroom, independent studies are developed for the individual and are generally administered outside of the classroom context. Independent studies are well suited for highly-motivate students who can maintain the rigors and challenges of learning in what is often a less structured context. Within the MPA, independent studies have been utilized for a number of reasons including 1) the desire by a student to investigate a topic not covered in the traditional curriculum, 2) the need to fulfill a requirement for graduation in instances where a course is cancelled or there are extenuating circumstances that would prohibit the student from taking the course during its regularly schedule rotation, or 3) instances in which courses offered within a semester are not relevant to the students graduation plan.

The topics for an independent study are endless, but a brief selection of past topics include: nonprofit marketing, advanced research methods, community organizing, and survey design and data collection

**What should I expect in an independent study?**

Every independent study is unique. The independent study is an experience that you will determine with your faculty mentor. You should play an active role in developing the experience and communicating your goals and the way in which you learn best, but you will also need to be responsive to the preferences of the faculty member whom you have selected to lead the experience.

While every independent study is unique, there are some common forms that independent studies make take.

* Directed Readings: Under a directed readings format, the student and faculty mentor collaboratively select a set of readings on a topic. The student spends the semester completing the readings and writing short writing assignments that summarize and analyze the learning that is occurring. In many case, the student and faculty will meet regularly to discuss the readings and the students conclusions.
* Project-Based: With a project based independent study, the student develops a project to be completed over the course of the semester. This could be a project within a partner organization, a part of a faculty member’s research or another project of interest to the student. There may or may not be incremental deadlines or assignments, but the course will culminate with the completion of the project deliverable. As part of the independent study, the faculty will provide period guidance and feedback on the student’s progress.

**How do I make the most of my independent study?**

The content of your independent study will be determined by you and your faculty mentor, but some best practices to consider include:

* Every independent study should begin with a learning contract that is agreed upon by both the student and faculty member. This is a form of mini-syllabus that outlines the topics to be covered, assignments and due dates, grading and expectations for both the student and faculty member.
* Consider a “sort of” independent study. Some of the best independent studies include more than just one student. While the course will be filed as an independent study, having a small group of students (2-4) meeting with the faculty member often results in a more stimulating experience.
* Spend some time at the beginning of the independent study identifying learning/experience goals and developing strategies with your faculty supervisor about how best to achieve those.
* Choose a faculty mentor who has expertise or connection to the topic to be studied? Each faculty member in our department has a unique set of expertise. Try and choose the faculty member who best for your topic and not just the one that you know best.
* Develop incremental deliverables (e.g. short assignments, journals/memos, project updates). These will result in less pressure on the final deliverable in terms influencing the grade and will encourage semester-long learning rather than cramming at the end of the term.

**What do I need to know before I begin?**

Before you commit to an independent study, you should discuss expectations with your faculty supervisor. You will want to make sure that the experience is sufficiently rigorous to help you grow in your goals, but also that the expectations are manageable in terms of your other obligations. You are encouraged to discuss the following questions with your faculty supervisor?

* Is this independent study in place of a class and if so, in what ways will it be similar or different from taking the topic in a traditional classroom?
* What is your faculty supervisor’s experience with this topic? Do they feel that they are the best person to lead the independent study or might they recommend another faculty mentor?
* How often will the student and faculty meet? What time would be conducive to these meetings?
* In the indepenant study results in published research or presentations, how will contributions or authorship be determined?
* What are the deliverables? When are these due?
* What advice would the faculty member offer to make the most of the experience?