UW-Madison Policy on Directed/Independent Study for Undergraduates

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Contents

Context and Motivation for This Policy Discussion 1
Student and Instructor Participation in Directed/Independent Study 2
Directed/Independent Study Courses – Current Policy Context (2012-13) 2
Policy Guidelines for Directed/Independent Study 3
  A. Common values and expectations 3
  B. Who may be an instructor for directed study? 3
  C. Responsibilities of the directed study instructor 3
  D. Enrollment timing and limits 3
  E. Plan of study 4
  F. Assigning appropriate levels of credits 4
  G. Appropriate use of course numbers for directed study courses 6
  H. Directed study courses may not be used for group instruction 6
  I. Limits on Enrollment for Instructors 7
  J. Policy Hierarchy 7
Appendix 1. Federal Credit Definition 8
Reference Material, Including Links to School/College Forms for Independent/Directed Study 9

Context and Motivation for This Policy Discussion

Undergraduates have the opportunity to take directed/independent study (subsequently referred to as directed study) with UW-Madison faculty as part of a range of learning experiences available to them. These experiences are high-value learning experiences and contribute to the Wisconsin Experience. They are an important part of the educational experience at a major research university in which faculty mentor students in scholarly activity, provide individual-level feedback, and model the behavior and norms of academia and professional life. In these one-on-one learning experiences, student learning is “directed” by an instructor; the student is learning “independently” of other students under the direction of the faculty member. A clear policy context assures a common understanding and protects the value and integrity of that learning experience and what it signals to others.
This document seeks to update and combine in one document existing policies and guidelines that govern the terms of directed study. This policy is especially important relative to credit, given that course credit is the “currency” linked to federal financial aid and that the United States Congress has legislated a definition of the student credit hour. The federal credit definition is a subject of mandated scrutiny by the Higher Learning Commission at the time of accreditation review.

Recent misunderstandings about the use of directed study and cases of misuse among faculty and staff demonstrate the need for a campus-wide policy.

Student and Instructor Participation in Directed/Independent Study

Approximately 40 percent of those who graduate with a bachelor’s degree in recent years participated in directed study during their time as an undergraduate. A February 2012 analysis of directed study showed that on average 12% of undergraduates enroll in 2.6 credits of directed study each semester. On average 41% of instructors enroll one or more student in directed study each semester: the average enrollments per instructor were 3.8 students in 8.9 credits. The majority of instructors (87%) enroll five or fewer directed study students. Overall, 97% of directed study instructors enrolled 15 or fewer students. Two percent of instructors enrolled between 16 and 30 students. About 1% of instructors committed to mentoring more than 30 students, with a handful of outlier cases of enrollments over 100. Thus, for a small number of cases, directed study courses appear to be a substitute for group instruction or there are cases for which the expectations for individual supervision of students could not possibly be met.

Directed/Independent Study Courses – Current Policy Context

The 2012 Undergraduate Catalog describes directed study as follows: “Directed Study offers the student an opportunity to work with a faculty member on an individual study program. A student who is stimulated by a particular concept or problem encountered in a course can pursue and develop that interest in depth through a Directed Study project. Such individualized study can make a valuable contribution to a student’s educational experience. Directed Study courses are made available by departments on the basis of a student’s preparation and motivation and a faculty member’s willingness to accept the student in such an endeavor”.

Policy, guidelines and requirements associated with directed study are found in the Undergraduate Catalog, embedded in the course approval policy, noted in language on the Registrar’s Office web site, and included in Registrar’s Office communications to the departmental curricular representatives. Additionally, there is information in the L&S Administrative Gateway and on websites for other schools and colleges. In the next section, these relevant policies and guidelines are assembled into a single document. The L&S documents form the basis of several sections. Some additional language has been added to clarify and make the guidelines better fit the current academic context.
Policy and Guidelines for Directed/Independent Study

This policy is intended to be a guide to the conduct of directed/independent study. It is intended to recognize a range of accepted norms across the disciplines. It will be most useful in its application at the time that new independent/directed study courses are proposed and in circumstances when there is some evidence of misunderstanding, misuse, or abuse of these shared standards.

A. Common values and expectations

As a fundamental value, directed study is to be a high-quality mentored learning experience that includes regular instructional contact between the instructor and the student. Students become more self-directed learners while they work closely with faculty mentors who guide their research, provide feedback, and model scholarly and professional behavior. By their nature, these experiences are highly variable. Common expectations as defined in these guidelines are minimum standards that ensure the integrity of the student experience across the breadth of the university offerings.

B. Who may be an instructor for directed study?

Individual departments determine who may be a directed study instructor in their subject area. Directed study instructors must have the appropriate academic credentials to teach the specific course and they must hold a UW-Madison instructor appointment. Some departments may limit this role to tenured/tenure track faculty. Others may extend this role to appropriately credentialed instructional academic staff and emeritus faculty. TA’s or others whose instructional role assumes faculty supervision are not eligible to supervise directed/independent study. Each department is obligated to establish criteria and maintain a list of instructors who may oversee directed study in their subject area.

C. Responsibilities of the directed study instructor

The instructor oversees the student’s learning experience. The instructor ensures that credit awarded is linked to instructional activity and to projects appropriate to the UW-Madison learning experience. Any instructor who is approached by a student with a request to mentor a directed study course may accept or decline the request. If (s)he accepts, the instructor is expected to establish the instructional criteria for the credit awarded, define the instructional contact, and approve the student projects and student learning experience. The student will integrate this information into the plan of study (see section E.) The instructor is responsible for evaluation of student work and determines the appropriate grade. These instructor responsibilities are not to be delegated to others.

D. Enrollment timing and limits

Students are responsible for initiating and developing arrangements with the instructor. Students make the request to the instructor, who may accept or decline. The arrangements should be made by the course add deadline, usually the end of the second week for fall and spring semesters. The student and
the instructor prepare a written study plan (see section E) and determine the time and place for regular meetings, the number of credits to be earned, and how to enroll in the course.

Students who enroll late need additional approvals. Enrollments after the course add deadline (the end of the second week of class in fall and spring semesters; consult appropriate sources for summer sessions) but within the first half of the semester require approval from the instructor and departmental administration. Students who enroll after the semester is more than half completed must have the approval from the instructor, the departmental administrator or designee, and an academic dean. The written study plan is one document that will be used as a basis for approval. Approval should only be given only if the study plan is appropriate for the amount of work that can be accomplished at the late date in the semester, recognizing that the work for the specified number of credits must now fit into a compressed time frame.

A student may not enroll for directed study for a prior semester once the semester has ended. Exceptions may be made for students who were enrolled in other directed/independent study courses or group instruction courses in the prior semester that were converted to directed/independent study courses; requires dean’s office approval.

E. Plan of study

Students are responsible for preparing a written study plan, in collaboration and agreement with the instructor, consistent with the responsibilities of the instructor. The study plan will include expectations for learning and student work, the time and place for regular meetings, the number of credits to be earned, and any other issues related to the learning experience. Both the student and the instructor keep a copy of the agreement as important reference document; the instructor may be asked to make the agreement available for review by the dean’s office, especially if the instructor is the instructor for a large number of directed study students (section I) or if the student seeks to add the directed study course late in the semester (section D). Many schools/colleges have a standard form that is used to document the plan of study.

F. Assigning appropriate levels of credits

According to the Federal Credit Definition (Appendix 1), the amount of credit for regular group instruction is such that each credit should be equivalent to one hour of classroom instruction and a minimum of two hours of additional student work per week over 15 weeks, or the equivalent effort over a different time frame, or an amount of academic work equivalent to what would be expected in other for-credit activity.

For directed study and other forms of independent study and one-on-one instruction, the amount of work and learning must be consistent with that required in a group instruction course of the same number of credits. Given this federal mandate and the ambiguity inherent in the wording, determining the appropriate equivalent effort of a directed study experience to group instruction requires judgment.
Directed study encompasses a broad range of student learning experiences (examples include laboratory work, research projects, creative productions, faculty-supervised peer-mentor experiences, and academically supervised internships). No single standard can apply to all of the possible experiences. Credit levels must be justified in the plan of study and must be consistent with the standards of the discipline. Students must register for credits appropriate to the plan for the directed study, consistent with the required amount of direct faculty instruction time, work expected of the student, graded papers or projects or other activities, and the learning expectations. There must be meaningful interaction between the instructor and student throughout the term of study, in keeping with standards of the department or program.

Examples of reasonable standards for credit include, but are not limited to:

- **Reading literary works related to a specific topic, 3 credits:** The student read a short novel every week, discussed the reading with the professor in a weekly face-to-face meeting, and submitted a long paper at the end of the semester. Learning progress was evaluated based on weekly meetings with the professor and the final paper. Estimated amount of student work was 8-10 hours per week, including independent work and meetings with the professor. The weekly meeting can vary in length from 10 minutes to more than an hour and meeting formats may also include teleconferences and videoconferencing such as Skype.

- **Acting in a minor role for a full-scale theater production, 1 credit.** In addition to regular rehearsal (approximately 50 hours over the course of the semester), the student met individually with the professor several times throughout the semester. Learning progress was evaluated based on the student’s progression and performance in rehearsals and the student’s demonstration of learning in meetings with the professor.

- **Lab research, 3 credits.** The student conducted a lab-based experimental research project, which was defined in consultation with a professor. The student met periodically (at least once every three weeks) in a scheduled meeting with the professor (face-to-face, teleconference, or videoconference/Skype) and also in unscheduled lab conversations. The student was also mentored by graduate students and post-docs who were lab collaborators also under the supervision of the major professor. The student spent a significant number of hours reading independently and in the lab collecting data. The student’s learning was evaluated by demonstrated development of competence in the lab setting and in one-on-one meetings with the instructor, and was also based on written reports submitted by the student.

- **Supervised peer-mentoring and peer-instruction, 3 credits:** Senior undergraduates enrolled for 699 credit for a learning experience that involved their role as peer-instructors for an introductory course. The peer instructors have an intentional learning experience that helps them develop leadership skills, organizational skills, problem-solving, and deepen their own disciplinary learning through supporting the primary instructor in an introductory lab. Students participate in the instructional lab for 3 hours a week, in course meetings for 1 hour week, do supervised grading for about 1 hour a week, and work on a major paper on their experience which they submit at the end of the semester.
• Team Research, 3 credits. A group of 3 students conduct a lab-based team research project. The nature of the research is such that numerous techniques must be learned by the team as a whole in order to achieve the research goals. Each team member performs some tasks separately from other team members, and performs other tasks together with team members. Some training and daily oversight is provided by graduate students and postdocs. The members of the undergraduate team meet periodically (at least once every three weeks) in scheduled face-to-face meetings with the professor and also in unscheduled lab conversations. Each student’s learning will be evaluated by demonstrated development of competence in the lab setting and in one-on-one meetings with the instructor, and will also be based on written reports submitted by the student.

Note that a research paper on its own is not considered the equivalent of a credit’s worth of work if it is not accompanied by instructor contact and supervision.

G. Appropriate use of course numbers for directed study courses

Directed/independent study courses are identified by their number. Course numbers in which the middle digit is 9 are reserved for individual instruction (i.e., directed study, independent study, research and thesis) and are not to be used for group instruction. Directed study courses with a number X98 (e.g., 198 or 698) are offered on a Credit/No Credit basis. Courses numbered X99 are graded. An exception to the use of the middle digit of 9 for individual instruction is made for honors courses; honors individual instruction courses should have a middle digit of 8. The “X” in these examples signifies the appropriate level of the course. For directed study courses, 199 and 299 numbers are appropriate for lower-level undergraduates. Courses numbered 399 are useful at the intermediate level and are used by some units for special purposes (e.g., internships in CALS). Courses numbered 699 are intended for upper-level undergraduates. This distinction is important to maintain because courses numbered at the 600-level signal to those outside the university that the student is pursing advanced undergraduate work. For example, such credits may be used in some instance to waive graduate-level requirements if a student enters a graduate program. (By campus policy, courses numbered above 699 are reserved for graduate students.)

Students should enroll in the level of directed study that is appropriate for their level in school and prior preparation. Departments who wish to provide directed study opportunities for undergraduates should make a range of numbers available (e.g., 199 and 299 for elementary level, 399 for intermediate level, 699 for advanced level) so that they may appropriately serve students with a range of prior academic experience.

H. Directed study courses may not be used for group instruction

Directed/independent study courses must not to be used for group instruction. Directed study courses are only used in cases where students are pursuing individually mentored learning experiences, working one-on-one or in small groups (2-5 students) with an instructor, and with no regular group instruction taking place. Observation of the distinction between directed/independent study and group instruction
will ensure that students receive appropriate documentation of their learning experience in their formal record and on their transcript. If instructors are meeting with groups of students on a regularly scheduled basis, the instructor must arrange for the students to be enrolled in a group instruction course (lecture, seminar, discussion, lab) instead of directed/independent study.

I. Limits on Enrollment for Instructors

Because of the expected amount of faculty effort to teach directed study students, the number of undergraduates enrolled in directed study with an instructor will be limited. The limit will be set to 40 student credit hours of undergraduate instruction in directed study per instructor per semester (for example, 40 students at one credit each; 20 students at two credits each, and so on). Directed study enrollments of more than 40 student credit hours for a single instructor may signal that students are not receiving sufficient levels of individual attention or that directed study is being used for group instruction. Annual audits will be conducted by the Academic Planning and Institutional Research (Provost’s Office). If audits identify instructors who exceed this threshold, the school/college and home department will be contacted to confirm that the instructor is meeting all of the academic standards outlined in this policy and that the high levels of directed study have been approved.

Occasionally directed/independent study course numbers allow zero credit enrollments to document non-instructional, co-curricular activities. Zero credit enrollments will not be counted under this limit and are not considered instruction or otherwise subject to the elements of this policy.

J. Policy Hierarchy

In the event that this policy conflicts with federal or state statutes or UW System Board of Regent policy, the policy established at the higher level will take priority.
Appendix 1. Federal Credit Definition

UW-Madison follows the federal credit hour definition, established by Congress in 2010. The federal credit hour definition is defined as:

“A credit hour is an amount of work represented in intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement that is an institutionally-established equivalency that reasonably approximates not less than:

(1) one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately 15 weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit, or 10 to 12 weeks for one quarter hour of credit, or the equivalent amount of work over a different amount of time; or

(2) at least an equivalent amount of work as required in paragraph (1) of this definition for other activities as established by an institution, including laboratory work, internships, practica, studio work, and other academic work leading toward to the award of credit hours.”
Reference Material

1. Report: UW-Madison Undergraduates Enrolled in Independent Study Courses, Clare Huhn, Academic Planning and Institutional Research, February 2012

2. L&S Administrative Gateway Entry: "Who may teach directed/independent study", https://kb.wisc.edu/ls/page.php?id=23745


8. School of Nursing
   Form for student enrollment
   http://academic.son.wisc.edu/studentnet/forms/n699_enroll_auth_form.pdf
   Form to outline the contract (what is to be accomplished, by when)
   http://academic.son.wisc.edu/studentnet/forms/n699_contract.pdf

9. School of Pharmacy form for 699 courses:
   http://pharmacy.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/content/student-resources/current-pharmtox-resources/forms/699form_pharmtox.pdf