

Rationale for independent study declaration form
Academic Priorities Committee (APC)
December 2024

Effective fall 2025, each independent study will be established using the attached form. This document explains the rationale for the form, and rationale for the associated changes to current practice.

Why is the form being required?

New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), the college's accreditor, requires integrity in the awarding of academic credit. This integrity includes "demonstrable academic content for all experiences for which credit is awarded." Current practice at the college offers no record of the content of independent studies. The form is designed to offer such a record, and the forms will be made available to the accreditor.

Why now? Why not delay implementation?

APC first announced the form during the 2023-24 academic year, and delayed implementation by a year to allow departments time to prepare. The College must begin collecting this information in fall 2025, so that there is a minimum of two years' worth of records by the time of the next accreditation in fall 2027.

Will the forms be used to approve or reject independent studies?

No. The forms will not undergo the same peremptory approval process as regular courses; because many independent studies are decided upon right before the semester, there is not sufficient time for APC to realistically review and approve all forms at once. The Registrar's office will only check each form for completeness before setting up the independent study. However, APC may periodically review the forms to better understand the variety of independent studies across the College. There is currently no consistent set of information about these offerings.

Will each form need to be approved before an independent study can be created?

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Does this replace the current way of establishing an independent study?

Yes. The instructor for an independent study will no longer need to complete the "Independent Study Section Request" on my.mtholyoke.

Why is the department chair's signature required?

There are three reasons:

1. Faculty legislation (2. VI. A.) requires that "Requests to undertake independent study must be approved by the director of the project and the chair of the department or committee."
2. Department chairs serve as a check to ensure that no faculty member, especially a junior faculty member, is unduly pressured to supervise independent studies.
3. As recently announced by the Provost (see the October Provost's report), up to eight credits of independent study supervision is a normal part of every faculty member's job. Supervision above that amount up to 20 credits is compensated for on an accrued basis by either overload pay or a course release. Chairs should be aware of and approve offerings for academic credit that could impact department staffing in the future.

How extensive does the independent study plan need to be? Can there be a word limit?

The previous draft of the form included a longer list of required elements of the description. APC has pared back this list to the following minimal essential elements: Learning outcomes and schedule of work. In many cases, a paragraph will suffice. Some instructors may wish to offer a longer description or provide a complete syllabus.

Can a professor submit a description ahead of time for pre-approval, eliminating the need to submit one form per student for every instance of independent study?

Having one form per student identifies each student that needs to be registered for an independent study, and ensures that each student is aware of and has agreed to the expectations of the independent study. The Registrar's office is not able to manage this system of independent study registration, while simultaneously also managing a parallel system in which students register for pre-approved independent studies.

However, APC is acutely aware of the additional paperwork this new form requires, and would like to highlight several ways of limiting this burden:

- The form will have checkboxes and textboxes that can be completed on a computer. So, for example, the same independent study plan can be copy-and-pasted onto multiple forms.
- The form can be completed once, then printed multiple times, one for each student to sign.
- The form can be signed electronically by the instructor, chair, and/or student.
- The form can be submitted to the Registrar's office in-person or by email.

Finally, although this new process adds a paperwork burden, it eliminates another burden in that faculty will no longer be required to complete the independent study section request on my.mtholyoke.

Will instructors continue to be able to adjust the number of credits during the semester?

Currently, instructors can raise or lower the credits of a particular independent study well into the semester in response to the student's availability and actual amount of work completed. This practice differs from regular courses, the standard academic offering at the college, in which the number of credits is set at time of registration and students who do not meet expectations may, for example, receive a lower grade.

As required by the College's accreditor, "The evaluation of student learning or achievement and the award of credit or certification of competencies are based upon clearly stated criteria that reflect learning objectives and are consistently and effectively applied." This consistency in the awarding of credit requires that all academic offerings for credit, whether regular courses or independent study, specify the number of credits ahead of time.

APC recognizes that this is a change to established practice, and flexibility of credits is a feature of how many faculty members currently structure independent study. APC would like to highlight that the half-semester option for independent study will continue to allow substantial flexibility. For example, a student and instructor could provisionally plan on a full-semester, four-credit independent study. They would first agree to a two-credit independent study for the first half of the semester. Then, midway through the semester, they would evaluate the student's interest and availability in continuing the project, and together would decide whether to abandon the project or establish a one or two-credit independent study by the relevant add deadline for the second half of the semester.

Can an instructor still provide a title for the independent study?

Yes, and the process for doing so has not changed: After the independent study has been created and before the end of the semester, the instructor may enter a title for the independent study on my.mtholyoke.