

Independent Studies and Interdisciplinarity

Lindsay Neuberger and Sarah Reed are collaborating on this IAP. This project investigates the culture of independent studies within James Madison and in different departments and colleges around the university. We propose that the student experience of the independent study varies widely across contexts. Some departments use independent studies to investigate areas not covered by normal course content, others use them to foster intellectual exploration among talented students, and still others utilize students taking independent study courses as research assistants. We think this experience may vary in different disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts. We propose to study these similarities and differences with a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. We are holding multiple focus groups with James Madison students who have participated in independent study programs and comparative focus groups with students who have taken independent study courses in departments outside James Madison. These comparative focus groups will be conducted with students from other colleges at MSU (e.g., social science, education, communication). The final product will be an academic paper (suitable for publication) that discusses the differences between these different independent study experiences and provides recommendations based on findings.