

# **INDEPENDENT STUDY (An Overview)**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

According to Gagne and Driscoll (1988, p. 133), "a high priority goal often cited for education is to teach students to be self-learners and independent thinkers". In this respect, independent study has a vital role to play in promoting quality learning and at ensuring that the school experiences of every learner become more fulfilling.

Independent studies are structured to meet the needs of able and advanced students to undertake more sophisticated and in depth investigations in their specific fields of interest which would not be possible in a traditional classroom set-up. An independent study, in order to be successful, requires a high degree of cooperation and understanding between both the student and the faculty advisor.

This paper provides an overview on the topic of independent study, looking specifically at the aims of independent study, the problems relating to independent study, and the ways to ensure the success of independent study.

## **2. WHAT IS INDEPENDENT STUDY**

Dressel and Thompson (1973) define independent study as "the student's self - directed pursuit of academic competence in as autonomous a manner as he is able to exercise at any particular time." They believe that higher education is primarily concerned with 'academic competence' and that independent study 'comes close to being if it is not, indeed, the major goal of all education'.

According to Friedman (1986), independent study usually extends into areas not covered either in the established curriculum of a college in the content of courses taught by the supervising professor. Each independent study project is therefore unique in many ways and demands

a lengthy and in - depth discussion between faculty and students pertaining to the objectives, content, methods, end - product and evaluation of the task completed.

In 1957, researchers at the College of Wooster, adopted the definition that "an independent study program is one which provides a formal opportunity on an institution - wide basis for the pursuit of special topics or projects by individual students, under the guidance of faculty advisors, apart from organized courses, for honors only or for credit toward graduation, available to students who meet certain requirements or required of all student". This definition implies that independent study activities encourage individuals to pursue his own interests, promote a high degree of self - direction and cooperation, and at the same time ought to be well - integrated to be regarded a program.

### **3. THE AIMS OF INDEPENDENT STUDY**

E.E. Robinson (1937), one of the early experimenters with independent study, suggests that "the primary aim of all independent study has been to stimulate the superior student to do more work and better work than he would ordinarily do without individual supervision". In other words, independent study is viewed as an effective tool to develop intellectual interest, ability to integrate knowledge and to awaken scholastic interests among the more advanced students.

Lamden and Worby (1976) claim that independent study helps students "learn how to learn, which is more fundamental than learning what to learn". Since independent study forces the students to design their own learning process, they are now able to associate learning with something that they can organize and control instead of the very structured learning which they are forced to adhere to in the classroom situation.

Zemke (1982) acknowledges the fact that independent study trains students "to determine what material is most valuable, organize their time, and develop a sense of competition against themselves". This means that independent students have the capacity to 1) determine what they want or need to learn 2) establish goals detailing when and how they will complete their objectives, and 3) evaluate their rate of success.

## 4. PROBLEMS RELATING TO INDEPENDENT STUDY

Obstacles to the success of independent study are to be found in students, faculty and institutional environment.

### 4.1 Students

There is a tendency for students to enroll in independent studies because "they are perceived to be : an easy A, less time consuming than a traditional class, or an answer to an incomplete course schedule" (Weber, 1989). This misconception results in both students and faculty failing to plan objectives properly, lacking the needed motivation and effort, and ultimately leading to outcome(s) which are disappointing.

Many students have a passive attitude toward independent study due to their personalities, their educational background and the uncertainties surrounding independent study opportunities and requirements or the excessive work which they believe to be involved. Many tend to avoid independent study as they are unwilling to accept the responsibilities of self-directed learning. Some feel that independent study is too personal and also too demanding while in lecture class, they feel more comfortable as they practically do not need to prepare anything before class, and they can go unnoticed during class. In fact, some admit that they are so used to the lecture system that they somehow feel ill-equipped and unable to face the challenges of independent stud,

The inability to pace oneself is another problem. When courses are structured, assignments clearly outlined by an instructor, it is easy to pace oneself. However, in an independent study, where the student is his own taskmaster, pacing is difficult and procrastination usually sets in.

As mentioned earlier, an independent study can be successful if the rapport between the student and the faculty is good and sufficient. Nevertheless, such rapport may not exist. At times, students find it difficult to get along with certain professors and gain very little or nothing at all from the mentor mentee relationship. This may arise out of a lack of motivation on the part of the student or the lack of adequate knowledge and interest on the part of the faculty, in the specific areas to be explored.

## 4.2 Faculty

No doubt, the faculty plays a vital role in exerting the needed influence in determining the success of an independent study. However, some faculty seem reluctant to take up the advising of independent study as they are too time - consuming and burdensome. Some have had bad experiences in the past such as "students do not complete their projects; they turn in something very different from what the professor had envisioned; they come for help more often than had been anticipated; their work is not of superior quality; or they are astonished at the grade they receive and argue to change it (Friedman, 1986).

Some faculty possess specialization in a particular field and regard themselves as specialists in a discipline, a purveyor to students of organized knowledge rather than as an inspirer of learning. They find it difficult to guide students in disciplines not within their intellectual interest.

Lack of time available for direction of independent study causes faculty not to want to contribute effectively and causes students to lose interest. Often, they are overloaded with teaching responsibilities and their additional departmental commitments. Moreover, the faculty's preference for their special courses reduced their time and interest for independent study.

## 4.3 Institutional Environment

Frequently, college or university environments do not provide the needed encouragement for independent study and more often it was seen to be hostile. Independent study seems to be supported by a small segment of a whole institution : "a single faculty efforts in a hostile or apathetic department; single departmental attempts in a disinterested college, or single college stirrings in an unconcerned university" (Dressel and Thompson 1973, p. 75). In institutions which are antagonistic to independent study, students are discouraged to explore self-direction in learning.

There are also institutions which pretend to be highly oriented to student academic independence and project an image of progressiveness but in actual fact it does not exist and things are actually more structured.

Another possible problem in this respect, is the reluctance on the part of the faculty and administration to accept independent study as a partial or complete substitute for required courses. This hinders self-directed learning in areas where students are most interested and forces them to forego independent study when heavy major requirements leave them with no electives. Environmental functions and departmental rigidities also operate

against or completely negate attempts of some professors to expand independent study opportunities (Dressel and Thompson, 1973, p. 89).

## 5. HOW TO ENSURE THE SUCCESS OF INDEPENDENT STUDY

Several recommendations as to how we can make independent study successful are put forward in this section. The three elements - students, faculty - advisors, and the institution are brought in for discussion.

### 5.1 Students

Students planning to take up an independent study should be required to provide specific information concerning the nature of the proposed independent study. This proposal will then be evaluated by a faculty committee before permission is given to the student to pursue his independent study courses. By this way, students would get a clear sense of direction due to early planning; the faculty-advisor would better understand the students' objectives and expected end - results, and an independent study project of high quality can be expected.

When pursuing their independent study, students should schedule meetings with their respective advisors to discuss problems and seek guidance and direction. They should keep a good rapport with their assigned advisors and be frank in giving ideas and concerns.

Students should work toward defined goals in independent study. A student is regarded as performing effectively in independent study if he :

1. *perceives worthwhile things to do*
2. *personalizes learning*
3. *exercises self-discipline*
4. *makes use of human resources*
5. *makes use of material resources*
6. *produces results*
7. *strives for improvement*

(Beggs and Billie, 1965 p.3)

## 5.2 Faculty - Advisor

The role of faculty advisors to students enrolled in independent study is multi-faceted (Weber, 1985 p. 85). Friedman (1986) suggests that "only skilled faculty can manage all the sensitive tasks involved in supervising independent study" (p. 88). Faculty advisors function as facilitators, assistants, interpreters and counsellors to ensure the success of students. For example, to ensure effective advising, the faculty - advisor should prepare before hand a written information to be discussed with the independent - study students. General issues are properly noted in advance so that time needed to design individual projects can be reduced.

Weber (1989) suggests that faculties should question students, prior to their independent study project, the following:

1. *Why do you want to take an independent study?*
2. *What will you gain from the independent study that you would not receive in a traditional classroom?*
3. *How will you achieve your objectives?*
4. *What method will you use?*
5. *How will you know if your efforts have been successful?*

If students can answer the questions clearly, then he is ready to embark on his independent project.

## 5.3 Institutional Environment

To ensure the success of independent study in colleges and universities, the following steps can be taken by institutions of higher learning, which include :

1. Clear objectives for independent study must be developed
2. An environment must be created which encourages independent study and which is not bound by credits or grades.
3. A regular curricular review should be made so that departmental innovations such as independent study may be based on common institutional objectives, evaluated by common criteria, and considered in terms of financial investment.

4. Faculty should be encouraged to sponsor independent study, stimulate the apathetic and fearful to engage in it, and allow a maximum of freedom to those prepared to do it.
5. Faculty, who often come from a lecture - oriented background, must be taught how to guide students to increasing self-direction.
6. Studies of student self-evaluation are needed to determine the extent to which it can supplant present grading systems. Standards for self-evaluation are also needed.
7. Independent study must be distinguished from the one-to-one teacher-student relationship of tutorials.
8. Research is needed on the application of individual and group techniques to different ability groups.
9. Evaluation must be designed so that the degree of success is not misrepresented by participants who are not prepared for self-direction rather than the amount of accumulated information.
10. For college students to achieve a high degree of self-direction, secondary education or even lower levels of learning must begin the process of developing independence.
11. The cost of independent study must be investigated, especially the cost and success of patterns which require less faculty time than the prevalent tutorial systems.
12. The role of pass/fail grading, interim programs, and field work in developing self-direction should be studied.

(Dressel and Thompson, 1973 p. 144 - 149)

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Independent study permits the most able and advanced students to fulfil their intellectual potential. Consequently, it is an effective medium in the quest for academic excellence.

If properly undertaken and implemented, independent study should result in increased capability for generalization and transfer, a sense of the relevance of learning, and the skill to analyze, synthesize, and apply learning. Eventually, it will lead to self-evaluation, self-satisfaction, continuing interest and more self-confidence in independent learning than students in the traditional classroom.

The real value of knowledge and abilities accumulated by students depends on how well they can adapt and augment them in facing the real challenges in life. Education should mould students into individuals who possess motivation, curiosity, ability to think critically and creatively, and self-sufficiency, all of which would be vital in problem-solving.

Independent study, as an approach to the self-pursuit of academic competence should be given the attention it fully deserves as rightly stressed by Percy and Ramden (1980, p. 7) that "a student cannot claim to have been educated successfully at university or college unless he has learned to study independently."



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