

Research & Scholarship Council
Report on Independent Study
April, 2016

Charge from Senate Executive Committee (Oct 2015): “work with department chairs to determine whether there has been a change in procedure for applying for independent studies and whether there have been changes in the number of independent studies awarded.”

To fulfill this charge the Council pursued two leads. First, we queried the Banner system for information about the number of independent study course sections that ran in Fall 2014 vs. Fall 2015. The purpose was to assess whether there had been a significant decrease in the actual number of independent studies following reports of policy change announcements from university leadership in May 2015. Results of the query indicated 25 undergraduate independent studies in Fall 2015, down from 54 undergraduate independent studies in Fall 2014. That is a decrease of 54%, which is large enough to rule out random fluctuation, and is considered by this Council a worrisome decrease in faculty-student scholarly collaboration.

Undetermined from the Banner query was whether this significant drop was due to decreases in the number of applications submitted, the number of applications approved, or both. To address this question, the Council sent an email to Chairpersons of all departments requesting information about whether there had been recent changes in the numbers of independent study applications submitted, instances of applications that were not approved, and whether changes in the approval criteria had been articulated by university leadership. The text of this information request is attached here as an appendix. Responses from Chairpersons are described below.

Survey Response Summary

- Total number of responses was 10 out of 36 requests
- The total number of reported IS applications was: for AY 2014-2015 = 35, for AY 2015-2016 = 13.
- The number of departments reporting that they had discouraged or eliminated IS applications during AY 2015-2016 was 5 of 10 (50%).
- The reported number of IS applications NOT approved by Deans for AY 2015-2016 was 0 from 10 departments.
- The number of departments reporting recent articulation of approval criteria by their dean was 2 of 10 (from 2 colleges). Confusion about the criteria for approval was apparent from mixed responses from departments within the same college.
- The number of departments reporting changes in articulated criteria for IS approval was 2 of 10 (from 2 colleges). Common to both of these reported changes was the criterion that the independent study must be needed to fulfill requirements of a student's program of study (i.e., in order to graduate). Other reported criteria included “onload” credit for the mentoring faculty member, documentation of “extenuating circumstances”, and extensive student professional-development justification. In some cases, these criteria are documented in meeting minutes. Also cited as a change in criteria was an email from Provost Sandmann (6/8/15) stating that independent study requests would be subject to “enhanced review” by the Dean and Provost, emphasizing “those that lead to timely degree completion”. Confusion was expressed about whether the above criteria currently apply.

These results suggest that the 54% drop in the number of independent studies between Fall 2014 and Fall 2015 (above) was due primarily to a drop in applications as a result of announced policy changes by university leadership at both college and university levels.

Recommendation

From the perspective of the Senate Research and Scholarship Council, the recent decrease in the number of undergraduate independent study applications is a worrisome sign of an eroding institutional culture of scholarship and decreasing opportunity for faculty to provide students with professional experiential learning in accordance with WPU's mission and strategic plan. As an issue that is both curricular (independent study is coursework) and one that affects faculty professional development (via scholarship), it is unfortunate that in the Spring of 2015 university leadership neither consulted faculty for an assessment of negative impacts nor articulated a clear, justified policy change with respect to independent study. We recommend that to restore the vigor of independent study at WPU, leadership at both the university and college levels 1) communicates to the faculty the importance of independent study for student success, student-faculty scholarship, university recognition, and institutional marketing, and 2) clarifies on record the criteria for approval of student requests. We further encourage university leadership to engage the faculty in discussions of how to improve mentored student research and scholarship at WPU in the face of current budget limitations and in consideration of the long-term strategic advantages mentored scholarship provides our institution.

This report approved by Senate Research and Scholarship Council on April 18, 2016.

Members (alphabetical order)

Jorge Arevalo (CCoB)
Annette Baron (Adjunct Faculty Rep)
David Gilley (CoSH)
Lucia McMahon (CoHSS)
Lilian Prince (CoA&C)
Pam Theus (Library)
Lisa Warner (CoE)
Martin Williams (Administrative Liaison)

Appendix: text of request for information

Dear Chairpersons,

The Senate Research & Scholarship Council, in fulfillment of a charge from the Faculty Senate, is investigating whether each department has experienced changes in application procedures for independent study and whether there have been changes in the number of independent study applications and approvals. To this end, we would like to request the information below for your department to the best of your knowledge. Please send this email with your responses to May Chabayta at the Senate Office: chabaytam@wpunj.edu (no need to “reply all”).

1. Was there a change in the number of IS *applications* for Fall 2014 vs. Fall 2015?
 - A. Number applications for Fall 2014 = _____ Number applications for Fall 2015 = _____
 - B. If a significant difference, what do you think might explain the change?
2. Was there a change in the number of IS *applications* for Spring 2015 vs. Spring 2016?
 - A. Number applications for Spring 2015 = _____ Number applications for Spring 2016 = _____
 - B. If a significant difference, what do you think might explain the change? (if different from above)
3. Were any IS applications NOT approved for Fall 2015 or Spring 2016 semesters?
 - A. Number NOT approved Fall 2015 = _____ Number NOT approved Spring 2016 = _____
 - B. Were any of these unapproved applications from students for whom IS is required for graduation?
How many? _____
 - C. Were any of these unapproved applications from students from the Honor’s College?
How many? _____
 - D. Were any of these unapproved applications rejected for reasons other than the quality of the proposal?
How many? _____
4. Has the Dean of your College recently articulated criteria for approval of independent study?
 - A. Criteria articulated in Spring 2015 for Fall 2015 independent studies: _____
 - B. Criteria articulated in Fall 2015 for Spring 2016 independent studies: _____
5. Please add any additional information that you feel might be useful.

Thank you for your help. This information will allow the Faculty Senate to respond to this important issue in an effective manner.

Sincerely,
Senate Research & Scholarship Council