

THE INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PLAN: A GUIDE

This document is designed to guide you through the key elements of the *Individualized Learning Plan*, the central requirement of application to the program, and the heart the learning experience for Individualized Studies students.

What is a liberal education?

Students often come to Individualized Studies with misconceptions about the program and its goals. One common misconception concerns the distinction between *professional training* and a liberal education. Professional training teaches skills specific to a career or job (that is, a profession). Classic examples are business, engineering, or architecture at the undergraduate level, or law or medicine at the graduate level. By contrast, liberal education focuses on skills broadly applicable to **any** profession: critical thinking, analytical, and communication skills, as well the breadth necessary to be an engaged citizen of a democracy. The goal of a liberal education is not to teach job-specific skills.

Individualized Studies offers a liberal education. Indeed, we see it as the prototypical liberal education. We do not offer professional degrees in whole or in part (for example, “the business of X”). If you are seeking a degree to provide the skills particular to a specific career, Individualized Studies is not the major for you.

A strong liberal education balances breadth and depth. Although Individualized Studies students’ interests are interdisciplinary, the courses across these disciplines must be held together by a strong intellectual focus. It is not enough to know a collection of facts. This program is, quite the opposite, about **deeply understanding** something, because that deep engagement develops the critical thinking skills intrinsic to a liberal education.

THE INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PLAN

The Learning Plan is much more than a course list; it articulates a vision for the rest of your academic career. It makes the case that what you propose to learn is worth learning, and that you can learn it. A good idea is not good enough if we cannot know that you can actually learn what you want to learn. This is more than an “application” to the program; it is your proof that you can complete the program.

General details.

The notes below offer some detail on each of the elements of the learning plan. You may include whatever supplemental materials you wish beyond those below. But be sure you include everything listed here. Simply put, if you cannot complete this plan, we will not believe you can complete the major. Recall that **you cannot reapply**; if you are denied, Individualized Studies is no longer an option. Be sure you understand the stakes.

*Elements of the Learning Plan***1. Statement of purpose.**

This is the rationale for your program. In broad terms, what do you want to learn, and why? Why can't you learn this in an existing UW program?

This is your first impression; make it count. Demonstrate that you understand the goals of a liberal education, that you are committed to those goals, and that you can meet them. You should convey, above all, a passion for the topic and for learning in general. If it is clear that you merely want "to graduate," you will be denied – not because we don't want you to graduate, but because that motivation cannot sustain you through this program. If you want to take on this program, you must be passionate about your learning. Make sure that message comes through.

We believe deeply that it is the faculty that makes this university what it is. If you want to learn chemistry, you should learn it from the world class faculty we have hired to teach it, in the program designed for that purpose. The same is true for any area of study. If we have a program that can teach what you want to learn, that is the place to learn it. So you must demonstrate that you cannot meet your learning goals in any existing department. Be sure you address this issue explicitly.

2. Learning goals.

This is the heart of the learning plan. Here you must translate your broad interests into specific learning goals. This is likely to be the hardest part of the plan, but no other part is more important. Everything in Individualized Studies depends on these goals. Your success in this program will not be determined by whether you complete the courses, but by whether you have learned what you set out to learn.

Consider that in most majors, the faculty have built the courses to fit that major. The courses presumably fit together in a such a way that if you follow the path designated by the faculty (the "requirements" of the major), you should meet the larger learning goals. You don't have to think about these goals (though it is much better for your own learning if you do); you simply follow the path.

In Individualized Studies you do not have that luxury. None of your courses will have been designed to meet your goals, because you are inventing those goals. In order for those courses to build toward something, therefore, **you will have to connect them**. Your plan is not a list of courses; it is a plan connecting and integrating those courses. You must be able to articulate the principles and concepts and questions that connect them. You must provide the frame within which these otherwise disconnected courses come together into a unified whole. Each course (or other element, such as an internship) has to build toward the larger end of your specific learning goals and those of a liberal education. If these courses are bricks, they must build toward a coherent, intentional structure – not just a pile of bricks.

Compare, again, to a typical major. A major is not a collection of courses about something – say, for example, "politics." There are courses on politics in every social science department. The same is

true of “culture” or “economy” or any other number of popular topics. The topic is not what differentiates disciplines; disciplines are ways of understanding and studying topics. Anthropologists and sociologists and historians and philosophers all study “politics,” as do (of course) political scientists. What holds a political science program together is not the word “politics”; what holds it together is the unique disciplinary perspective of political science, the lens through which political scientists see and understand the world. Different disciplines have different lenses, and these lenses manifest in the learning goals each department has for its students. In short, what holds the political science “major” together is the fact that the courses (which may in fact include other disciplines) cohere around a set of learning goals all political science majors should (in the view of the political science faculty) meet. **The learning goals hold the courses together, not the other way around.** Your job is to articulate the goals that hold your own program together.

This section should also include an **assessment plan**. You have articulated what you want to learn; now you must explain how you will know when you have met those goals, and how you will demonstrate that fact. Passing courses will not be sufficient, for all the reasons above; you must have a plan to connect your courses and demonstrate those connections. How will you know when you have learned what you set out to learn? Will you complete a project? Write reflective essays at the end of each quarter? How will you revise your plan if a course does not meet the goals you thought it would? This is hard. We will judge you less on your assessment plan per se (because we can help you with that) than on whether we can tell that you have actually thought about this, and whether you understand how important it is to your learning.

3. Annotated course plan.

This is where you detail **how** you will meet your learning goals, including a brief discussion how each proposed class connects to your learning goals. These are not the course descriptions (which you should also include as an appendix; see below); this is where **you explain** how each course will help you meet specific learning goals.

Most students make the mistake of starting with the courses. Your courses are far less important than your goals. It is easy to approve a plan with good goals and few courses; it is easy to reject a plan with lots of courses and weak goals. The goals are the key; if they are worthy, and we believe you can meet them, we can help you find ways to meet them.

This section, then, is actually not about the courses. It is actually about showing us that you understand your own goals. We want to see that you have thought deeply and intentionally about them, and about what it means to be educated about something. If you have simply chosen a course because it has a particular word in the title, we will know that you do not understand the topic (or the discipline or the course) or your own goals. There is no surer way to prove to the committee that Individualized Studies is the wrong major for you.

This section will also include a tentative **quarterly plan** (listing your courses by quarter). This is simply to demonstrate that the courses can be done in a reasonable time and order. Since you will

not know for sure that you can get into these courses (or that they will be offered), this is only tentative.

4. Additional appendices.

Attach these at the end of the plan as separate sections.

- **Catalog course descriptions** (you may copy these from the online catalog). This is background information for the committee; it is not the center of your plan, but it is necessary for the committee to review your plan.
- **Your “Plan B.”** Provide a brief explanation (a paragraph or two) explaining what major you will study if you are not admitted to Individualized Studies. This is not optional. We must be confident that you have explored all options – in part because that is necessary for you to succeed in your learning plan.
- **Approval by key departments, where appropriate.** You should talk to the key departments in which you plan to take courses, particularly if you are proposing multiple courses in those departments. The first department you must visit (and demonstrate that you have visited) is your “Plan B” department, especially if you have coursework in your plan from that department. We need confidence that you can get the courses and mentoring (beyond your formal mentor) you need to meet your goals.
- Signed **mentor agreement form** (available on the web page). The goal of Individualized Studies is not that you learn everything on your own; it is to build a structure connecting you to the people who can help you learn it. Your mentor is essential to your success; you cannot meet your learning goals without a good mentor. This takes a real commitment on the part of the mentor, so it is crucial that your mentor (and you) understand that commitment. Note that your mentor must be a regular, full-time (tenure-track or permanent lecturer) UW Seattle faculty member.

EVALUATING THE LEARNING PLAN

The committee will include faculty and advisers. We will review applications once per quarter. The decision will be based on criteria including but not limited to the following:

- Does your plan reflect a legitimate intellectual question? Is it really worthy of a degree (rather than just, say, a few courses)?
- Is it a liberal arts degree (rather than a professional degree)? Do you understand what a liberal education is?
- Can the learning goals be met in an existing department or major? If so, you will not be admitted to Individualized Studies – you will be directed to the relevant major.
- Are the learning goals clearly articulated? Are the goals rigorous and intellectually challenging? Are the goals reasonable – can you actually meet those goals? Is this plan really built around learning something, or just taking courses (or getting a degree)?
- Is there a reasonable assessment plan? Will we actually know that you have met the goals, or will we simply know that you have taken some classes? Can we tell that you have thought carefully about this?

More general criteria:

- Do you really understand what you are getting into? Are you serious and committed to it? This is a challenging major; we do not want to set anyone up to fail, so we will look carefully to see if you understand the goals of the program, and understand what it will take to be successful.
- Are you passionate about learning, both in your proposed area of study and in general? If you are not passionate about learning, this is not the right program for you.
- Is the Learning Plan complete? If you cannot complete the plan, we will not believe you can complete the program.