Independent Study Project

ISPR-3000 (6 Credits / 180 class hours)

SIT Study Abroad Program:
Australia: Rainforest, Reef, and Cultural Ecology

The Independent Study Project (ISP) offers students the opportunity to undertake an in-depth, analytical, and individualized study of an aspect of Australian ecology or human-environment interactions. Students obtain hands-on research experience using the scientific paradigm and interacting with local experts to creatively investigate a topic of interest. ISP integrates the concepts and tools learned in the Rainforest, Reef, and Cultural Ecology Seminar and Environmental Field Study Seminar to develop research questions and methods, collect an extensive set of primary data in the field, and analyze and interpret the results within the context of the literature. By taking responsibility for developing learning goals and outcomes and remaining focused in their attention to details, students learn from their successes as well as their setbacks. For many students the ISP represents the culmination of their semester's work and understanding of experiential learning in a field setting.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

o To acquire knowledge of the potential strengths and weaknesses of the scientific paradigm

o To gain an in-depth understanding of some aspect of Australian ecology or human-environment interactions through the application of hypothesis testing and rigorous analysis

o To develop motivation, curiosity and a sense of self-sufficiency in the development and execution of sound and rigorous research methods and data collection techniques

o To gain confidence in interacting with host country professionals and lay persons

o To integrate, analyze, and synthesize information from a variety of written and oral sources

o To increase the capacity to think critically and creatively, and communicate ideas effectively and precisely in both written and oral presentation.

o To recognize and appreciate the personal and professional responsibilities and ethical implications associated with researching both human and natural communities.

EXPECTED LEARNING OUTCOMES:

On successful completion of this course students should be able to:

1) Articulate the relevance of a personal interest and resultant research question(s)

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2) Analyze the effect of personal pre-conceptions and the process of gathering primary information and interacting with people and the environment
3) Execute ethically and technically appropriate field study methodologies and techniques to gather data
4) Exercise critical thinking and scientific caution in the interpretation and systematic analysis of study results
5) Communicate a field study in both a written and an oral presentation
6) Exhibit motivation, self-confidence, professionalism, adaptability, and a critical appreciation of the research process

THE ISP PROCESS

Students work with the Academic Director from day one to identify interests and frame these within a range of appropriate ISP topics. Then, students conduct background research before contacting relevant experts knowledgeable on the subject. From this inquiry a specific question is developed around which students can collect primary data and evidence from field observations and experiences. A student's initial ideas could come from previous interests, the local media, or lectures, readings, or discussions with visiting lecturers. The ISP is not a library-based research project. It is not the role of the AD to develop the topic, only to act as a guide; though topical ideas and pre-conceptions may be challenged in relation to practicality and safety issues.

Once a student has clarified a topic of interest, she or he will cultivate contacts in order to build a relationship with an ISP advisor. . The ISP advisor is generally recognized as an expert or authority in the student's field of study, and will help guide the student in the practical aspects of her study. In conjunction with the advisor, or the AD, the student refines the research question and develops appropriate methods and approaches.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Requirements for the ISP include the following:

1) At least **180 hours** of project related work; the quality of written and oral work is expected to reflect this commitment.

2) A detailed and up to date account of all work in an **ISP Work Journal** commencing with the student's arrival in country. This journal should reflect the effort of the entire project and include background information, methods development, records of important contacts and meetings, study site, and data collection with field notes.

3) A **preliminary and a final proposal** (including a budget) must be submitted by the student prior to departure for field work.

4) A completed **ISP report** is in the form of a **20-40 page analytical paper**, using the student's primary data and built upon an appropriate understanding of the theory and literature behind the study topic.

5) A 25 minute, professionally appropriate **oral presentation** covering the background, aims, findings, and conclusions of the report and ISP work.

ISP CONSTRAINTS AND REQUIREMENTS

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1) The project must fall within the focus of the program. It must deal with an ecological or human ecology topic. Topics involving Indigenous people(s) or remote settings are usually ethically and logistically very hard to organize. You will need to start organizing these early in the semester and demonstrate at an early stage that you have the support of an Indigenous organization.

2) Topics that cannot reasonably be completed in one month, or are better done in the US are inappropriate. The project can be undertaken anywhere in Australia that is appropriate to the topic and is safe. Since there is another SIT program operating around northern New South Wales, you need to gain approval from the ADs of both programs before undertaking a project there.

3. The AD will be the final arbiter on whether a project meets the safety standards of the program. The AD must always be able to contact you within 24 hours and you must check in with program staff every four days during the ISP period.

4. You must maintain contact with your Advisor throughout the ISP period and, at a minimum, once a week.

5. By 5pm every Sunday, you must email your Advisor (and copied to your Academic Director) a brief update of achievements during the week along with a work plan for the next week.

6. Students must read and abide by the SIT Study Abroad policies and procedures for ethical study of human subjects. Students must at all times consider the rights and well being of the people and environments studied.

ASSESSMENT

Final grades for this course will be based on the following weighting:

ISP Report	65%
ISP Oral Presentation	15%
ISP Proposals (preliminary and final)	10%
ISP Journal	10%

The ISP written reports are evaluated on the basis of content, organization, technical accuracy, clarity of ideas, and depth of analysis and synthesis. Comments and evaluations of the project advisors may be taken into consideration when the Academic Director assigns final ISP report grades. Oral presentations are assessed by the Academic Director on their organization, clarity of communication, and factual content, evidence and logic used in convincing their audience of their conclusions. ISP proposals are assessed based on the student's analysis of the theoretical background to the research question, and the proposed methods and logistics (including a detailed schedule and budget) for collecting data. ISP journals are assessed on the student's inclusion of all background work related to the ISP which was not able to be directly included in the final ISP report (including communications logs, contacts, literature reviews of relevant articles, project brainstorming, and a log of hours worked at particular tasks).

A major emphasis of the ISP course centers on fostering student independence in pursuing the research agendas and executing the study; therefore, it is the responsibility of the student to develop and impose her or his own deadlines within the ISP period. Dates for submission of the final paper and oral presentation are inflexible. Late work receives the loss of a half a grade point for every day it is late.

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Grading Scale
94-100%   A
90-93%   A-
87-89%   B+
84-86%   B
80-83%   B-
77-79%   C+
74-76%   C
70-73%   C-
67-69%   D+
64-66%   D
below 64   F

ADVISORS

Project advisors are identified by the student in conjunction with the Academic Director, and are most often researchers, academics, or professionals working directly on the topic of student interest. In broad outline, the Project Advisor helps the student refine her or his topic considering local conditions, availability of resources and the duration of the study. The Project Advisor supervises the student's progress through regular meetings and submits to the Academic Director a brief written evaluation of the student's work near the end of the program. It is critical that students recognize their advisors are there to assist them in guidance, but that ultimately the students "own" their ISP project.

READINGS

Ambrose, H.W., Emlen, D.J. & Bright, K., 2002. *A Handbook of Biological Investigation.* Hunter Textbooks Inc. Winston-Salem.
Other course readings include sections from the Academic Handbook.

Students are also expected to use books, articles, and past student ISP's from the program library and SIT's electronic library database to gather information about their specific topic, possible methods, and overall relevance of their topic of interest.

POLICIES THAT APPLY TO THE COURSE

Students are expected to work independently on their projects, document activities in
their work journal, produce a quality written paper and an engaging oral presentation.
They should coordinate their research with the Academic Director and Project Advisor,
and are expected to adhere to the highest levels of professional and ethical behavior.
Students are asked to refer to the Program's Academic Handbook and the SIT Study Abroad Student Handbook for policies on academic integrity, ethics, academic warning and probation, diversity and disability, sexual harassment, and the academic appeals process.

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