Independent Concentration | Info Sheet

What it is, whether it’s the right option, and how to design one

1. What – Overview of the IC program

Independent Concentrations are personalized programs of study designed and implemented by students. Ever since undergraduates wrote the New Curriculum, Brown students have had the opportunity to propose new, interdisciplinary concentrations organized around a central theme, topic, or set of related inquiries.

The process of designing an IC entails honing one’s academic interests in collaboration with a faculty member, and molding them into a coherent plan. Too many students are intimidated by the myth that it is too difficult to create an IC and get it approved. However, the majority of the work involved is simply about defining and presenting one’s own interests – arguably something that all students should do while at Brown.

Though IC’s are most often interdisciplinary, they must represent a coherent academic study\(^1\) that aligns with Brown’s philosophy of education and Liberal Learning Goals. Concentrations that focus on vocational, technical, or business training of the kind not offered at Brown will not be accepted.

Note that many standard concentrations began as IC’s, so undergraduates can help blaze the way for curricular innovation. Some of these have included Environmental Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Neuroscience.

2. When – Dates and deadlines

IC applications may be submitted to the IC subcommittee of the College Curriculum Council on the 1\(^{st}\) of every September, October, November, February, March, and April.

Students must submit IC proposals prior to the end of their 6\(^{th}\) semester.

Since students must declare a concentration in their 4\(^{th}\) semester, many students submit their proposals in their 3\(^{rd}\) or 4\(^{th}\) semesters to avoid having to declare another concentration first. Students who receive approval or tentative approval (see The Decision Process section) before the concentration declaration deadline in their 4\(^{th}\) semesters do not need to declare another concentration.

All potential ICers are strongly advised to pick a backup concentration that they would be happy completing if the IC is not approved. Students cannot declare their IC until the proposal is given full approval by the review committee, so there is a chance that they will have to accept the standard concentration as their own.

3. Getting Started – How to begin the process

Students interested in pursuing ICs should start by mapping out the subjects they find fascinating, looking for common themes between them, and talking to as many people as possible about their ideas and questions. Potential ICers should visit the Curricular Resource Center to browse accepted IC proposals and to meet with the student IC coordinators, who are experienced advisors that can help students hone their interests into viable ICs. Students should work to identify faculty members that could serve as sponsors for the project.

\(^1\) What does “academic” mean? An academic study entails a comprehensive investigation of a topic that analyzes the particular subject matter within its broader scholarly and worldly context. Such a study should consider differing viewpoints and explore the topic in and between existing disciplines.
4. **How – The nitty-gritty details**

**The Role of the Faculty Sponsor**

Any student proposing an IC must work closely with a faculty member that will sponsor the concentration. The faculty sponsor helps the student develop the concentration and submits a letter of support that accompanies the proposal. Once the IC is approved, the faculty sponsor serves as the student’s academic advisor and is responsible for meeting regularly with the student to provide guidance and to assess progress made toward attaining the concentration’s goals. This relationship is a central element of the IC.

By faculty rules, the sponsor must be a Brown Faculty member *above the rank of Instructor or Lecturer and cannot be emeritus*. A Senior Lecturer will be considered with the support of their Departmental Chair. An IC may have more than one faculty sponsor.

**The Capstone Project or Honors Thesis**

All ICs must include a culminating one-semester Capstone project or year-long Honors Thesis that draws on what the student has learned from the IC and ties together the various disciplines and strands of thought. The final project should be presented publicly toward the end of the student’s senior year.

A Capstone is an Independent Study registered in the Faculty Sponsor’s department ending with a research paper, a performance, art opening, or another type of project. Depending on the IC, a focused internship or other educational work experience may qualify.

An Honors Thesis consists of 2 semesters of honors coursework in the department of the Thesis Advisor, who may or may not be the same as the Faculty Sponsor. To be eligible for honors, students must have grades of superior quality and must assemble an Honors Committee early in Senior Year consisting of 3 faculty readers, including the Thesis Advisor. The Thesis Advisor chairs the committee and coordinates evaluation of the thesis. The student must keep in touch with the committee throughout the thesis-writing process.

**The Review Process**

ICs are reviewed by a subcommittee of the College Curriculum Council that consists of faculty members, deans, and undergraduates, including the IC Coordinators from the CRC. Some of the key questions the committee considers are:

- Is it a concentration? Is there a **clear and substantive theme** that knits the courses into a coherent educational experience? Is the theme reflected in the proposed title?
- Is it independent? Is it substantially different from existing concentrations?
- Are the educational goals clear? Are the intellectual groundwork and methodology compelling?
- Does it move from introductory to advanced coursework, even across disciplines? Will the courses help the student to develop their ideas and apply new techniques of investigation?
- Do some of the courses analyze or involve the broader theoretical and worldly context surrounding the field of study?
- Does the faculty sponsor’s letter demonstrate a strong commitment to supporting the project?
- Does it fall under the umbrella of a liberal arts education, as Brown has defined it?

**The Decision / Revision Process**

Students who submit proposals will receive an official letter within three weeks of the committee’s. The possible responses of the committee include:

- **Accepted**.
- **Tentatively Accepted**, pending a few small changes which must be submitted to the IC Dean.
- **Not Accepted But Encouraged to Resubmit**, which means that the committee likes the proposal but feels that the concentration still needs significant work. In this case, if the student chooses to revise the proposal, they must submit a revised proposal including all of the changes requested in the IC Dean’s letter, as well as a statement outlining the revisions and a new letter from the Faculty Sponsor approving of the changes.
- **Not Accepted**, meaning the committee does not feel that the proposal is a viable IC and that the student may only resubmit a proposal if it is *substantially* different from the one that was not accepted. In some cases, the committee has accepted proposals that have been so revised but students must keep their options open to complete a standard concentration.

**Changing IC Programs After Approval**
Students may make minor changes to the IC program or course list by requesting in writing the approval of their advisor and the IC Dean. Major changes, such as the change of sponsor or substantive change to the final project, must be resubmitted to the IC committee in the form of a new proposal.