

What is ISP and Why is it Different from Other Programs at the College?

1. Community. ISP is purposely designed as a learning community of students and teachers. ISP students take classes together and ISP professors co-teach those classes. We prioritize what's happening with the students inside and outside the classroom. We know each other. We are all interconnected.

Why is this important? Belonging to a supportive social and academic community is a proven element of a successful college career. College is designed to be challenging—which is a good thing—and it can often feel large, impersonal, and overwhelming. But if you are a member of a community you have a home, a built-in support network, and a place you can go to for advice. In ISP you will take classes with many of the same people, most of who are working through the same assignments, ideas and issues. These friends will be invaluable as you grapple with the demands of college.

It also means you will get to know your professors very well, and they will get to know you, which is hugely important but often hard. Full time professors are busy people with many demands on their time and they rarely teach lower-level classes. ISP is designed to be different, to bring students and professors together. Your ISP professor's door will always be open. This means you will always have someone to go to for academic advice or for mentoring. It also means that your professors will be able to write you really excellent recommendation letters, crucially important for the honors program, graduate school, fellowships, scholarships, etc. They will know you well, be really invested in your success, and be able to speak clearly and forcefully to your skills and accomplishments.

It is vital to have a community of friends at college. It is vital to have one or more faculty mentors. It is crucial to have both if you intend to thrive at college and achieve your full potential.

2. Intellectual Approach. ISP believes that colleges are not great mirrors of the world, that life outside the classroom is complex and not split neatly into categories. ISP doesn't believe that one branch of knowledge (say, psychology or history or political science) has all the answers. Rather, we believe that historical events, cultural movements, and social phenomena are multi-dimensional, involving lots of different elements, branches of knowledge and modes of behavior. We believe that understanding and solving the problems of the twenty-first century requires us to think outside of the academic box, to see the world through a kaleidoscope of perspectives. By taking this intellectual approach, interdisciplinarity aims to gain a fuller and richer sense of the world. As Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor recently declared, at John Jay's own convocation, no less, "no one field is enough" to comprehend and solve "the problems of the modern world. You need instead to approach problems from multiple disciplines."

Why is this important? Because it's what employers want. Employers want people who are supple and flexible in their thinking, not confined to one way of doing or thinking about things. They want curious, resourceful people able to synthesize and apply different types of knowledge. They want innovative, interdisciplinary thinking, thinking that corresponds to the world in which they operate. Life doesn't come with a textbook and neither do good, interesting careers. They require you to think fast, think broadly, and think for yourself. An interdisciplinary education is freeing and it helps prepares you for an interconnected world. A good ISP student isn't just good at history or good at psychology; they are good at many things. They are curious, confident, and they can solve problems.

3. What We Teach. a) ISP is skills and issues-driven program. Most college majors are concerned with ‘coverage’ (or breadth): imparting a large body of specific knowledge. Global History, for example, needs to cover broad periods of history from across the whole planet. This is why most college classes use textbooks. ISP operates with a different focus. Because we are a general education program, we are unbound by coverage, free to zero in on specific issues—justice, gender, race, even food—and work on developing the sorts of skills that will allow students to thrive in their majors as well as in their careers. These skills are:

1. Close Reading (the ability to comprehend complex written material)
2. Critical Thinking (the ability to successfully digest and analyze complex information)
3. Attentive Listening (the ability to completely grasp the points and arguments that other people are making verbally)
4. Thoughtful Speaking (the ability to convey your ideas verbally in a manner that can be fully understood by your audience)
5. Clear Writing (the ability to impart your ideas in succinct and straightforward manner)

Why should I be interested in a program that promotes skills over coverage? Because a successful college career involves mastering skills and knowledge. In this, ISP is the perfect compliment to any major. It will give you the tools to succeed at any level of college. The skills outlined above are crucial to successfully doing the work of any major. If you can master them, you will master college and beyond.

How will this help after college? Because skills are the foundation upon which knowledge rests. They are the most important thing you can take into a career. Read any survey or report about what employers want in job candidates and they nearly all say: skills. Knowledge can be learned on the job but you will need skills from the day you start to the day you leave. The last thing law schools want, for example, is prior training in the law. They want excellent close reading skills, critical thinking, and writing skills. They’ll teach you all you need to know about law, but that will all be wasted if that knowledge isn’t coupled with excellent academic skills.

b) ISP is also the college’s only General Education completion program.

How will this help me? Unlike the rest of the college—where you take lots of isolated classes in lots of different departments, few of which have any relationship to each other—ISP is designed as a cohesive program that extends from first semester freshman to juniors and seniors. ISP classes build on each other, so that skills and ideas are introduced systematically, then reinforced and extended through your entire college career. ISP is your roadmap through John Jay’s General Education requirements, one that is planned and purposeful, not scattershot or fragmented.

4. How We Teach. ISP has a specific educational vision that stretches across all its classes. ISP believes in active, collaborative, and experiential learning.

What is active learning and why is it useful? Active learning is learning by doing. In traditional educational models—a lecture, for example—students are passive, uncritical recipients of knowledge imparted to them by an expert and regurgitated on a test. By contrast, active learning means discussion, debate, problem-solving, self-reflection, group work, writing projects, any activity where students participate directly in the learning process. Students are thereby encouraged to bring their identity, passion and experience into the classroom. ISP believes students learn best when they are actively engaged as equal partners in their own learning.

What is collaborative learning and why is it useful? Collaborative learning is an interactive process where two or more people share knowledge, skills, resources, and experiences in pursuit of a common goal. It builds trust, promotes accountability and active learning, flattens out traditional educational hierarchies, and enhances problem-solving skills. Because employers tend to prize collaborative skills above almost all others, collaborative learning is vital for preparing students for their post-college lives.

What is experiential learning and why is it useful? Experiential learning is the practice of learning by getting out of the classroom. It means taking the ideas we have discussed and generated in the classroom and testing and reflecting on them in the real world. ISP believes that learning takes place both inside and outside of traditional academic settings, and that the two should always be linked. Such practices underlie ISP's firm belief that learning should never stop at the classroom door or at the completion of a degree. Learning is first and foremost a life-long practice.