

Guidelines for Instructors Using their own Students as Research Participants

Please note: If the instructor only uses their students' data for internal evaluation purposes and has no plans to use the data for research purposes, IRB approval is not needed.

These guidelines are designed to assist researchers who wish to use their own current students as participants in research protocols. An underlying principle of the regulations governing use of human participants in research is that the subject's participation is voluntary, based upon full and accurate information. The relationship of teacher and student is inherently one that raises the issue of "voluntariness." No matter how well intentioned the instructor is, students may feel compelled to participate, believing that failure to do so will negatively affect their grades and the attitude of the instructor (and perhaps other students) toward them. For this reason, the IRB has taken the position that instructors should not use their own students as participants in their research if it can be avoided. This general policy is in accord with that of other institutional review boards.

The IRB recognizes, however, that in some research situations, use of one's own students is integral to the research. This is particularly true of research into teaching methods, curricula and other areas related to the scholarship of teaching and learning. The following are two models of research design that have been approved by the IRB in the past for such circumstances which we believe strike a balance between the two interests.

Collection of Data by Third Party

The instructor/researcher should arrange to have the consent forms and data collected by an independent third party so that the instructor does not know who participated and does not have access to the identifiable data or identity of participants for any purpose until grades have been assigned and entered.

For example, if the instructor wants to administer pre- and post- tests to determine the efficacy of a particular curriculum, the necessary consent forms could be obtained, and administration of the tests conducted by a colleague at times when the instructor was not present. [Note: If anonymous data will be collected (e.g., online, anonymous survey via Qualtrics), a third party is not required.]

Collection of Data by Instructor/Researcher

In situations where the collection of identifiable data by a third party is not feasible, the IRB will require that the student's written consent to use his or her own data, e.g., test results, papers written, homework, etc., be obtained:

- By a third party at the beginning of the semester, where the third party holds onto the consent documentation until grades are entered; or
- By the instructor/researcher after grades are entered.

Informed Consent

The informed consent document must clearly explain the following (as well as the IRB application itself):

- How the risk of coercion (e.g., to participate in the study; to participate in additional voluntary activities; etc.) will be minimized;
- That participation will not affect grades or standing in the class;
- What from their student academic records may be disclosed, the purpose of the disclosure, and the identity of the party or class of parties to whom the records may be disclosed.
- Like other research volunteers, students who become research participants must be allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The informed consent statement should make it clear that withdrawal from the research study prior to completion will not affect their grade or standing in the class.

Analysis of student grades, coursework and other academic records

In research where the instructor wants access to identifiable student academic records, signed consent forms are required even if the research activities conducted in the classroom are conducted by a third party and otherwise fall under an exempt category of research. For example, administration of a pre- and post-test by a third party will normally qualify as exempt research, requiring the provision of an information sheet, but not signed consent. If, however, part of the research also includes access to the individual, identifiable student's other grades etc., signed consent from each student is necessary.

Frequent Issues

Use of Extra Credit for Participation

Sometimes participation in the teacher's research is structured as an available extra credit assignment. Even when other means of obtaining extra credit are available, the IRB does not find this is sufficient to overcome the power disparity and the perception of students that participation in the instructor's research is advisable, even if not required.

Group activities

Group activities that are required as part of the course instruction pose a particularly difficult situation because the practicality of a student opting out is very limited. If the data is a group project or perhaps a videotape of the group interaction, each student's consent is necessary for the use of that data in the instructor's research. If one student does not consent, the data may be used only if the non-consenting student's data can be effectively excluded. In many cases this will not be possible. Thus, none of the data can be used.