

Students as Research Subjects: How to Avoid Undue Influence and Coercion

Background: Particular care must be taken when students are used as subjects, as there is an inherent power differential between students and instructors, faculty members, and teachers, who serve as Principal Investigators (PIs) or members of research teams. Care should be taken to eliminate or reduce the risk that **undue influence** by faculty or **coercion** that affects student participation in research. This document provides guidelines to assist departments and faculty who engage in research projects in which students will be asked to be research subjects.

No matter how well intentioned the investigator, students may feel compelled to participate, believing that failure to do so will negatively affect their grades and the attitude of the investigator (and perhaps other students) toward them. For this reason, the IRB generally will not permit an investigator to use his/her own students as subjects in the investigator's research project. Although students often provide a ready source of potential participants, they are not always an appropriate or representative study sample, as compared to other subject pools. Attention should be given to whether they are being solicited because they are a convenient and accessible sample, rather than as a representative sample for the research inquiry.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can I invite students I teach to participate in a study I am conducting?

Yes, however:

- a) The research must present no more than minimal risk to subjects.
- b) Participation in the research must represent a potential educational opportunity for the participants.
- c) The recruitment should involve only indirect methods (meaning participants cannot be recruited on a personal basis). For example, the participants may be recruited through the posting of IRB-approved flyers/ads, or through IRB approved communications sent out to a larger group (such as mass mailings like emails or letters). Guidance on recruiting can be found here: [Advertising and Recruitment](#)
- d) The consent process should be conducted by a third party. See [third party FAQ](#) below.
- e) If the research is conducted within a classroom setting, the instructor should be blinded to the identity of the participants, and data cannot be analyzed until final grades have been posted. [See example below.](#)

What should I include in my protocol if I want to include my students as potential subjects?

When submitting a study for review and recruitment includes subjects who are your students, be sure to include details as to how each point above will be addressed in the protocol document. You must include a section in your protocol that specifically addresses how consent will be obtained. For example: A consent form drop box will be available in the [department main office/regular classroom/etc.].

What is meant by collection of data by third party?

In situations where the activities to be undertaken by the students are not part of required class activities, and thus students may or may not choose to participate, the instructor/researcher should arrange to have the 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 the tests administered by a colleague at times when the instructor was not present. A graduate teaching assistant in the class in which the students/subjects are enrolled does not qualify as a third party for collecting data on behalf of the instructor as described above.

What if collecting data by a third party is not feasible?

If it is not feasible, the IRB requires that the student's written consent to use of his or her own data, e.g., test results, papers written, homework, etc., be obtained after grades are entered.

For example, use of a particular teaching method throughout the class might not be capable of being structured so that students could opt out. Typically, we ask the instructor/researcher to obtain the subjects' written consent at the beginning of the course concerning the study. This written consent should make clear that the students will have an opportunity to again agree or not to agree (i.e. re-consent) to the inclusion of their data in the instructor's study after the course is finished and grades are entered. By fashioning the student's participation in this manner, we do not place the student in the position of having to either choose to participate or find an alternative course.

This is an example of an IRB approved Consent Process for research involving students:

Assent/ consent will be sought from the students and parents/ guardians several weeks before the project is officially introduced. I will read a script that introduces myself and informs students of basic information about the project and the information I would like to collect on them (see "process to document consent in writing" section for a copy of the script). I will remind students that their grades will not be affected by their decision to participate and that they can withdraw from the study at any point. I will pass out two consent and assent forms to each student. I will have all students read the forms and place one copy of the assent form in a box at the front of the room so that neither I nor the teacher not will see who is turning in a signed form or unsigned form. I will provide students with an extra copy of the consent form so that they can refer to it in the future.

All students will have two copies of the parental consent form to have a parent/ guardian sign and may take additional copies if they wish. The teacher normally sends paperwork to be signed home with students. The teacher typically does not translate documents she sends home about class assignments, yet gets 100% of the forms returned with parent/ guardian signatures. The school sends documents home in Spanish and English for translation. I will have consent documents translated into Spanish, and if students express that they need consent forms in Arabic and Vietnamese, as these are the dominant first languages spoken by student's guardian's/parents in this class, I will have consent forms translated into Arabic and Vietnamese as well.

I will only require one consent form to be signed by the assenting students' parent/ guardian. I will leave box in the back of the classroom for students to drop off their signed and unsigned consent forms that the students will be allowed to turn in anonymously.

I will return to the school within the week of introducing the study. I will record the obtained and outstanding consent forms. I will then negotiate a time with the teacher during small group work, or individual work time that I may visit with students whose consent and/or assent I have not obtained and provide them a new consent and/or assent form if they no longer have the forms I gave them initially. Because I am asking ALL students to return a consent and assent forms whether they are giving consent/ assent or not, this procedure will not indicate to other students who is and is not going to be in the study. I will return to the school at least 1-2 times a week during a time I negotiate with the teacher and repeat this process. For those whose consent I do not have after two weeks, or within one week of starting data collection, I will obtain home phone numbers from students or the front office and call student's parents/ guardians. In this phone call, I will introduce myself and explain that I am a researcher from the University of Colorado conducting a study in their child's Senior Honors English class. I will inform them that I

have sent their child home with a form that explains the study, and that I am asking each student to bring the form back with a parent or guardian signature that either does or does not give permission for them to be in the study. I will thank them for their time and say goodbye.

Problem Practices:

- **Use of Extra Credit for Participation.** Sometimes participation in the investigator's research is structured as an available extra credit assignment. Even when other means of obtaining extra credit are available, the IRB may not find this is sufficient to overcome the power disparity and the perception of students that participation in the instructor's research is expected, even if not required. If extra credit is offered for research participation, the IRB strongly recommends that a comparable alternate assignment is offered to students who do not wish to participate but would like the opportunity to earn extra credit. The additional means of gaining such credits must require a similar level of commitment of time and effort as the research participation.
- **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.
- **Use of student grades and other assessments.** In research where the instructor wants access to identifiable student academic records, a consent process is 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 which may normally qualify as exempt research under either category 1 or 2 requires 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.
- **Minors.** Research involving minors (under 18 years of age) as subjects, (even 17 year old college students) in most instances requires a signed parental permission, as well as the assent/consent of the student.
- **Graduate Teaching Assistants.** Research conducted by graduate students in a class in which the researcher teaches, assists in the class or does any grading are subject to the same restraints described above.