

## Guidance: Faculty Use of Students in their Classes as Research Subjects

The Wright State Institutional Review Board (IRB) stipulates that all research be conducted in accordance with the principles of the Belmont Report. This includes maintaining the highest ethical standards and full respect for persons participating in human subject research. Regardless of intentions, a faculty member's use of students in their classes as research subjects poses significant ethical issues, creates potential risks to research participants due to the inherent conflict of interest/conflict of commitment situation, raises the issue of voluntariness, and may pose issues related to intellectual property rights. At the same time, the IRB recognizes that there are times when this is the only viable scientific option available to researchers to obtain reliable data.

The Wright State IRB discourages faculty from using students in their classes and/or student materials from those classes in human subjects' research unless there is a compelling and legitimate justification. If one's own students are to be used in research, then the researchers must take all due precautions to protect the safety, rights, and welfare of the participants; ensure the proper privacy and security of the research data; and comply with all applicable university policies for the protection of students and student information.

If the project involves student materials/records that faculty members/instructors personally hold (e.g., tests, journals, written assignments, etc.), the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) may apply. See *Research with FERPA Protected Education Records Guidance* for additional information. Wright State Researchers are responsible for maintaining compliance with FERPA, in addition to human research regulations, when accessing Education Records for the purpose of research.

### Summary Requirements & Recommendations:

- No alternative method of data collection is feasible. PI must provide a compelling reason in the IRB application describing why they need to use their own students for research over any other option.
- The recruitment and/or consent process should be conducted by someone who does NOT have a status and/or classroom relationship with the potential subjects. The recruitment/consent language should contain clear statements to address and minimize coercion and undue influence.
- If the research is conducted within the classroom setting, data can be collected but should not be analyzed until grades are posted.
- If possible, the faculty should not know which students have agreed or not agreed to participate in the study until after grades are posted.
- Participation of students must be voluntary. Students may stop participating at any time without penalty. Students must not be penalized for non-participation.
- For studies conducted during class time, students who do not participate should be assigned an alternate task to have those students be active while others are engaged in the study.

- If data collection is taking place outside of the instructional time, non-participating students can be excused.
- The research activities must be clearly distinguished from the normal curriculum activities in the application and the consent form. Research activities would require consent whereas normal curriculum activities would not. Completing the curriculum activity would not require consent, but use of materials produced for research would.
- If class time is used for any research activity, the activity must serve the educational purpose of the course.

#### **Faculty/Researchers Recruiting Current Students as Research Participants:**

- Students are considered a vulnerable population due to the power dynamic in the classroom. Researchers must take all due precautions to protect the safety, rights, and welfare of the participants to prevent the appearance of coercion or undue influence.
- Students must be informed that consent is voluntary, and participation (or lack of) will not affect grades, academic standing, etc.
- Students are given an opt-in option to participate. Opt-out is generally not permitted.
- Incentives, rewards, and extra credit for participation are minimal. There must be an equivalent non-research-based option available to the student.
- Where possible, student data should be collected anonymously. If identifiable data is required, the instructor must take appropriate precautions to eliminate the potential for unintended coercion (e.g., blind collection of informed consent and data held for analysis until after final grades are turned in).
- Students must be allowed to discuss concerns directly with the Wright State IRB; the researcher must provide this contact information before the study begins.
- Appropriate credit (e.g., authorship) should be given when possible or when applicable (e.g., journals), unless confidentiality/privacy needs to be protected.
- Priority remains on teaching, not data collection.
- Faculty researchers are required to retain all signed consent/authorization forms and be able to produce them upon request by authorized authorities. Consent forms must be retained for the life of the data.

#### **Faculty Using Previously Created Educational Records/Class Materials from Their Past Students for Research Purposes:**

- Researchers using data for which they are the instructor of record should create a separate research dataset and fully de-identify the student data at the earliest possible point in the study and utilize aggregated data where possible. See [Data De-identification: An Overview](#) for additional information.
- Researchers using data for which they are not the instructor of record must obtain the research dataset without implicit or explicit identifiers, otherwise documented student consent will be required.

- Use of journals and similar educational materials are not recommended to be utilized as these types of documents are difficult to de-identify. Qualitative data can be converted to deidentified quantitative data by developing a rubric and application of the rubric to those materials by an instructor who would have had access to the materials as part of the normal curriculum. See *Research Rubric Examples* located on the [IRB website](#) for additional information.

### **Unknown Future Research Projects:**

Many educators desire to engage in pedagogical research after many years of teaching. They often find they are unable to locate former students to obtain written permission for use of graded classroom materials to meet FERPA requirements. The IRB recommends that Wright State instructors include as part of their course syllabus a “*Permission for Use of Classroom Materials for Future Research Projects*” syllabus insert to meet FERPA requirements. The IRB staff can provide additional guidance for studies of this nature.

### **Power Difference between Faculty and Student**

Research with one’s own students presents unique considerations regarding human subjects’ protections. At the center of the issue is the inherent power difference between student and faculty. Regardless of how well a faculty member presents the recruitment and option not to participate, students may feel as though they must participate or risk having their non-participation impact their grade or relationship with the faculty. In addition, the idea of ongoing voluntary participation is a potential issue if a student intends to enroll in another course with the same faculty or decides she/he/they wants to discontinue participation after initially consenting. Real coercion is rare, but the perception of coercion can be just as problematic in obtaining voluntary informed consent. The perception of coercion by a student could negatively impact their experience and participation class activities. In many cases, the involvement of a neutral third party may be an effective way to address perceived coercion or undue influence.

### **Third Party Role in Data Collection**

The Wright State IRB recommends that faculty who are conducting research with their own students use a third party to distribute and collect consent and data. The third party may be an individual from the department/office, another faculty member, or a co-investigator, etc. who has no relationship to the students or course (i.e., not a co-faculty, peer mentor, teaching assistant, or student teacher). The specific role of the third party may or may not require them to be listed as a co-investigator on the IRB submission. Individuals who are tasked with obtaining consent (i.e., describing the study procedures, answering questions about the study, ensuring comprehension, etc.) are engaged in human research activities and are considered investigators by the IRB. Other individuals (i.e., graduate assistants) who are only tasked with gathering consent (i.e., distributing and collecting data packets) are not themselves considered investigators on the study.

### **Avoiding Unintentional Coercion or Undue Influence in Classroom Settings**

Many research activities can be similar to or overlap with normal coursework or class projects. It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that students can truly understand what research participation involves and can distinguish voluntary research activities from required course activities. Following are some examples of processes that can help minimize the appearance of coercion or undue influence:

#### **Example of Conducting Research and Soliciting Enrolled Students for Participation:**

Data will be collected from students in a targeted class through an anonymous survey (no names or other identifying information will be included). At the end of a class period, the faculty introduces a third party. The faculty member leaves after the third party is introduced. The third party discusses the study with the students, provides participant information forms, answers any questions, and then begins to collect data. If data is collected electronically, it is the responsibility of the researcher and the research team to ensure data is collected anonymously and not linked to electronic consent forms. Using this process, the students can be assured that the faculty does not know who provided which survey and who did or did not participate.

#### **Example of Action Research and/or Qualitative Data Collection:**

A faculty proposes to use typical student work products which includes identifying information (e.g., assignments, papers, interviews, etc.) as research data. If data is collected electronically, it is the responsibility of the researcher and the research team to ensure data is not linked to electronic consent forms. Documented (signed) consent forms need to be collected by a third party from students who are willing to provide their data for the study. The third party will present the study to the class and answer questions. The third party will collect signed consent forms and keep them in a locked file cabinet until after the class grades have been posted. After course grades have been posted, the faculty researcher can access the consent forms and collect and analyze only the work products of those students who have given permission to use their data in the study. Again, in this process the students can be assured that their participation, or lack thereof, has no impact on their grade or their relationship with the faculty.