Students in Research

Students as Research Subjects

In an academic institutional setting, students play an integral role as subjects in certain research situations (for example, research dealing with teaching methods, curricula, and other areas related to the scholarship of teaching and learning). An underlying principle of the regulations governing the involvement of human subjects in research is that the subject's participation is voluntary and based upon full and accurate information.

Consistent with an overall concern that research subjects should not be coerced, student and faculty researchers should take particular care to avoid the unintentional or subliminal coercion that may occur when potential subjects are also students. For this reason, faculty researchers, in particular, must avoid involving their own students as research subjects. Faculty who wish to involve their own students as subjects should be able to provide a good scientific reason, rather than convenience, for selecting those students as research subjects. The research project should be relevant to the topic of the class, and participation should be part of the learning experience for the students.

In instances where investigators can provide a good reason for involving their own students in their research, the IRB generally requires that someone other than the investigator (instructor) obtain informed consent and collect the data. When this is not possible, the IRB will consider other methods for obtaining consent and collecting data that would not reveal to the instructor whether or not a specific student participated in the research project until after final grades have been determined. The students should be informed of what these procedures are in the informed consent form. In addition, it is generally recommended that the investigator/professor provide a recruitment flyer or letter to a student pool, general student population, or both so that the student may be the one who initiates contact with the investigator/researcher.

If a student feels he/she has been coerced to participate in a study, he/she should immediately inform the institution's compliance office and/or the IRB.

What Should a Student Expect as a Subject?

All students have certain rights as a research subject. These rights, such as the right to be free from any coercion, can be found below:

Consent Form

In accordance with the principles of free and informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality, and in consideration of the vulnerable nature of students as research subjects, students have the right to a consent form that addresses key points of the study.

Recruitment of Subjects

Students have the right to be free from any coercion or bias that might result when a researcher is also evaluating them in a course. Therefore, the person recruiting the subjects should be someone other than an instructor of the students. This is to reduce any perception of coercion and to reduce the possibility of bias by the person evaluating the students resulting from knowing who is or isn't participating in the research project.

Obtaining Subjects' Names

Students have the right to privacy of personal information. Under the institution's privacy guidelines, the institution may not supply a researcher with the names of students for research purposes. Also, a researcher with knowledge of student names as a result of teaching or other institution-related activity may not be permitted to use that knowledge to generate a list of student names for research purposes. (There may be some exceptions - please check with the applicable IRB.) The researcher may create a written form describing the kind of subjects being recruited and why, which can be:

- Distributed in class (it would be important for the researcher to be absent at the time of distribution to reduce any perception of coercion).
- Posted in a place where potential subjects will see it.
- Distributed via a class e-mail listserv (not using individual student names). If this option is employed, the use of the e-mail listserv should be "at arm's length." In other words, the listserv should either list students in the class of a third party or, if the listserv lists students in the researcher's own class, students should be directed to respond to a third party.

How Can Coercion Be Avoided?

Whenever possible, researchers should avoid involving their own students if another population of subjects is equally suited to the research question (e.g., another class section not taught by the researcher, recruitment by another instructor, or blinded/coded data collected by an associate so that subjects are not identified to the instructor). Students should be given an opportunity to decline participation without jeopardy.

Unless the research question is directly related to class material, or the study process is being used as a teaching opportunity, such as in a research methods class, the use of class time to recruit subjects or class time used to complete study instruments is discouraged.

What is the Role/Expectation of the Faculty Advisor?

Faculty advisors may be chosen by the student investigator or assigned to the student. Their role as the advisor is to guide students through the IRB process by discussing general principles of research ethics with the class/student prior to the initiation of any project involving human subjects.

Faculty members who supervise student research are responsible for the protection of human subjects and are required to:

1. Be familiar with the ethical and regulatory requirements of human subjects research.
2. Determine whether projects require IRB review and assist students with the process. (If the project involves research in a non-US setting, then considerations of local regulations and customs must be understood and satisfied.)
3. Discuss research ethics with the students.
4. Advise students conducting international studies on understanding the local customs and ethics.
5. Monitor student projects, paying special attention to maintaining confidentiality, privacy, level of risk, voluntary participation and withdrawal, and informed consent.
6. Assure that any unexpected or adverse events are reported to the IRB.

Reference

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