

FAQ: Classroom Research Projects

Almost every semester, questions arise about when a classroom research project needs to seek approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). These frequently asked questions are intended to guide faculty and students to determine when they should submit a protocol for IRB approval before the research is conducted.

Q: What is the definition of "research" used in the Federal Guidelines governing the Institutional Review Board (IRB)?

A: Research is a systematic investigation designed to test hypotheses, evaluate programs, draw conclusions, or contribute to generalizable knowledge. Research is usually described in a formal protocol that sets forth objectives and a set of procedures designed to reach those objectives.

Q: Who are deemed "human subjects" in research?

A: Human subjects in research are living individuals about whom investigators (professionals or students) conducting research obtain (1) data through intervention or interaction with individuals, or (2) identifiable private information. Identifiable private information includes any acquired information via self-report, behavior, or observation in which the identity of research subjects is or may readily be ascertained by the investigators or be associated with the information.

Q: I was told that classroom projects or assignments are not subject to IRB review. Is that correct?

A: Some are not subject to IRB review, but it depends on what is being done and the anticipated use of data collected. It does **not** depend on its being a classroom assignment, as opposed to a separate research project, and it does **not** depend on whether a publication or presentation may be provided in a public venue. Typically, the purpose of classroom projects is not to contribute to generalizable knowledge but to achieve one of the following:

- 1) The purpose is to teach research methods. These projects are designed to provide students with an opportunity to practice various research methods such as interview, observation and survey techniques as well as data analysis. These projects may be presented by students within the course context as part of their class assignment and are typically initiated and completed within a single term. Such projects are not undertaken with the goal of contributing to generalizable knowledge. These data cannot be used as research data.
- 2) The purpose is to conduct a pilot study, i.e., a preliminary investigation of the feasibility of a study. This is typically done on a small scale (10 or fewer subjects) and is exploratory in nature. It is designed to help the investigator refine data collection procedures and instruments or prepare a better, more precise research design. Such a pilot is not undertaken with the goal of contributing to generalizable knowledge. These data cannot be used as research data.

Q: What does it mean that data cannot be used as research data?

A: The data collected cannot be used for a publication, thesis, or dissertation that reports on information learned or that asserts any conclusions related to a hypothesis.

Q: What criteria must be followed for a classroom project that is **not** subject to IRB review?

A: In the case of classroom projects, it is the responsibility of the course instructor and student to ensure that all basic ethical criteria are followed:

- 1) Full disclosure to each person responding to any survey, poll, or other data collection medium of all recruitment and data collection efforts
- 2) Human subject interaction poses no risk or harm to others;
- 3) No medical intervention or interaction is involved;
- 4) No FERPA or HIPAA protected information is involved;
- 5) No information on any potentially illegal activity is involved;
- 6) No vulnerable populations are involved; and
- 7) All data reporting is anonymous and will not be used outside of the classroom assignment requirements.

Q: What if one or more of these criteria are not followed?

If the specifications above are not met, the project must be submitted for IRB review.

Q: What is the timeline for IRB review?

A: IRB applications are reviewed on a “first come, first served” basis and there is no procedure under which applications can be fast-tracked. It may not be possible for the IRB to review these projects on a timeline that will allow these projects to be completed within one semester and no such guarantee is given.

Based on the information in this FAQ, instructors and students are strongly encouraged to consider classroom assignment research projects carefully and where possible, use available data sets in order to achieve practice-related goals.