

## Guidance: Recruiting and Enrolling Your Students

### Overview

Conducting human subjects research where there may be an existing professional or status relationship between participants and members of a study team introduces unique ethical considerations. This is especially true when a researcher might want to recruit their students.

Investigators can be approved to conduct human subjects research activities and recruit their students provided additional measures are implemented to address these ethical concerns. This guidance discusses some considerations for research teams who wish to recruit from their students and/or courses.

### Mitigating the Potential for Coercion or Undue Influence

There is a potential for real or perceived coercion or undue influence when recruiting your students. A power differential may exist when a researcher has the authority to make decisions that could impact the prospective participant outside the research context. Students may feel pressured to take part in your project in the hopes that it might benefit their grade, result in opportunities down the line, or perhaps, improve a letter of recommendation they might be hoping you will write them in several months. Students may also worry that declining to participate could negatively affect their grade.

Mitigating this concern can be done in different ways, but a few of the most common ways include:

- Have a third party recruit, consent, and/or collect data. For example, ask your collaborator, who doesn't teach the class, to send recruitment materials and conduct the interviews.
- Recruit students at the end of the semester after grades have been submitted.
- Recruit via passive recruitment rather than active recruitment. For example, rather than asking each student to participate, you might post a flyer in your classroom where students initiate contact with the study team.
- Structure the research such that instructors or other individuals who have a relationship with the students won't know who does and does not participate. For example, have a third party anonymize data before analysis by the full research team, or replace names with a participant-generated reproducible anonymous ID.
- Recruit from a broader pool of participants that includes participants not likely to be your students. For example, recruit from your own English 101 class, but also recruit from several other English 101 classes at Northeastern or other universities.
- Ensure that any extra credit is minimal such that it does not introduce undue influence. (See below for more details about extra credit.)

**Please Note:** Not all research studies are the same; some of the above may not be practicable or might not mitigate the risk. Please consider additional measures as your study design warrants.

## Equitable Subject Selection

The Belmont Report principle of justice prompts us to evaluate why a population is targeted for research. A study population should not be selected as potential participants simply due to convenience. In general, potential participants should be solicited from a “broad base” of individuals meeting the conditions for the study rather than from your classes. Study teams should limit recruitment to their students only when the study aims cannot be achieved with a broader population.

## Distinction between Educational Activities and Research Activities

Most research involving students examines or intersects with classroom activities. Disentangling what is being done for research purposes vs. what is being done as part of a course is critical to facilitate IRB review and for informed consent.

Many researchers understandably confuse “educational practice” with “research.” This needs to be disentangled so students are clear about what is being asked of them for the research study. An educational practice developed and implemented without any research aim is not considered a “research activity.” It is up to individual educators, districts, colleges, departments, etc., to determine how and what is taught in a classroom – and, if it is decided that teaching an experimental practice is prudent, then it is outside of the IRB’s purview to decide otherwise. It is good to give the IRB an overview of the educational practice for contextualization, but an in-depth, detailed explanation is not necessary as we review research activities.

In many cases, the research activities consist of the following:

- Collecting data from tests, quizzes, journals, etc., the students produce as part of the course.
- Collecting questionnaires, tests, quizzes, journals, etc., the students would *not* normally produce as part of the class but are being added specifically to answer the proposed research questions.
- Interviewing or surveying students. This may include video- or audio-recorded individual or group interviews.
- Recording or observing a classroom.

### Case Study:

A research study is designed to examine how well an instructional strategy implemented by the department works. To do this, we will need test scores, qualitative analysis of final term papers, and pre/post surveys to collect data that can’t be found in coursework. How might this be broken down to understand what the research activities are vs. what the coursework is?

Non-research Activities	Non-research data that are being accessed for research purposes	Research-only Activities
The instructional strategy is being implemented by the department. If this research study isn't approved, we will implement the strategy anyway.	While the tests and term papers are being implemented by the department and will occur if this study isn't approved, I also want to get permission to use the content of the term papers for research data.	The pre/post surveys serve no academic purpose and are only being done if this study is approved. So, the surveys are research-only procedures.
Teaching the class involves my "Instructor Only" hat.	Collecting + grading the students' tests/papers is under my "Instructor" hat. Asking permission to also analyze them for research purposes is my "Researcher" hat (and may be regulated by FERPA).	Asking my students to complete the surveys involves my "Researcher Only" hat.
The consent process explains that the study is evaluating the instructional strategy and makes it clear that it is being done as part of the class.	The consent process asks students for signed permission and authorization to collect and use tests/papers for research purposes. It specifies what tests and papers will be used and how students can opt to withdraw a particular test or paper, or all of them, from the research study.	The consent process makes it clear that the pre/post surveys are being done only for the research study and are not related to the course. It makes it clear that these are entirely voluntary.

### Extra Credit

If you offer extra credit for research participation, there should be alternative non-research opportunities students can pursue to obtain the same amount of extra credit. It is critical that the non-research activity is not more difficult or strenuous than the research study. For example, writing a 5-page paper would not be an appropriate alternative to completing a 15-minute research survey. Having a more strenuous non-research alternative (or no alternative) means students will feel pressured to take part in the research activity to improve their grade.

The credit should also be small in proportion to the student's overall grade to avoid a perception that a student must complete the research activity to pass the course. Credit should also be given for students who opt out after agreeing to take part in the study, and this should be conveyed during the

consent process. A student who decides they no longer wish to take part may otherwise feel pressured to complete the study to receive the credit. You will be expected to address this risk in the protocol and consent form.

Consider how credit will be administered without jeopardizing participant privacy or confidentiality. How will you identify which students will receive credit while minimizing the collection of identifiers? You should think about the logistics of assigning credit and how this might impact student privacy and confidentiality. It may be appropriate for a separate sign-up sheet to be used for credit not linked to research data, or a printable non-unique completion certificate be generated that the student can email to their professor.

## FERPA

If you plan to access any academic data such as:

- Grades
- Homework
- Final Papers
- Work produced during class
- Registrar data

the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) likely applies to the research use of this data. Most often, this U.S. law requires that you obtain signed authorization from the student (or parent if the student is a minor) to disclose academic data for research purposes. In most cases, a signed, IRB-approved, informed consent form satisfies the requirements for signed authorization under FERPA. It is important to keep in mind that having access to this type of data as an instructor for educational purposes is not the same as seeking to access and use the data for research purposes.

At Northeastern, our [Office of the General Counsel](#) oversees the interpretation and application of FERPA in research contexts. You will need to consult with it anytime you seek to use any data that could fall under FERPA for research purposes.

## Minors

When studying college students, it is important to consider whether any of the students are minors (under 18 years old). This often comes up when studying freshmen. If minors are or could be included in your target population, be sure to plan appropriately by either excluding them or addressing regulatory requirements related to conducting research with minors. Please see the relevant guidance and materials on [the guidance page of our website](#).

## Resources and References

[21 CFR 56.111](#)

[45 CFR 46.111](#)

[The Belmont Report](#)

[U.S. Department of Education: What is FERPA?](#)

[Northeastern University Policy 106: Policy on Student Rights under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#)

[Northeastern University Policy 505: Policy on Human Subjects Research](#)

[Department of Human Research Guidance Page](#)

[Northeastern University Office of the General Counsel \(OGC\)](#)