

Matters to consider when using students in research projects

- Students are convenient, inexpensive and easy to recruit. These realities put special obligations on researchers to pay extra attention to all possible vulnerabilities of students. Some of these vulnerabilities are listed below.
- Because of the significant power differential between faculty/researchers and students/subjects – i.e., students may be anxious to please professors since they may take future courses from that professor, may need to request letters of recommendation, etc -- extra attention must be paid to any potential coercion or accidental undue influence in the process of asking students to participate in studies.
- Will any payments or compensation be offered to subjects for their cooperation? Is giving course credit for participation in a study coercive?
- Some college students are minors (state laws apply).
- Confidentiality is an important value and because of the nature of a college community extra care is required. Human Subjects Review Committees should ask researchers how subjects' names and data will be kept separate in order to insure confidentiality.
- Informed consent requires that subjects be given adequate "time to consider" the request for participation. (One thing this means is that the process of providing information to potential subjects and the process of requesting consent probably should not happen all in one class period.)
- Undue influence. Requests to participate in a research project have less chance of being coercive or having "undue influence" if the request is less direct (perhaps made by someone other than the instructor?) How else might the potential for undue influence be ameliorated?
- Researchers need to be especially concerned about the vulnerabilities of students who may have physical, psychological or developmental disabilities.
- Special care must be taken to avoid accidental violation of students' privacy or confidentiality. If a research project is about a specific identifiable course or about a specific identifiable group of students, could individual subjects be considered identifiable? (This consideration affects whether a study would fall into the "exempt," "expedited," or "full review" category.)

Potential risks to students who may participate in a SoTL research project

- Breach of confidentiality, whether actual or potential
- Unintentional violation of privacy, even when confidentiality is assured
- Unintentional validation of inappropriate or undesirable behaviors of subjects, perhaps based on misunderstanding of the researcher's intent
- Presentation of results in a way that does not respect (or agree with) the subjects' interests
- Possible harm to individuals not directly involved in the research but about whom data are obtained indirectly (secondary subjects), or who do not

- belong to the class or group from which subjects were selected
- Harm to subjects' dignity, self-image, or innocence as a result of indiscreet or age-inappropriate questions in an interview or questionnaire

from Robert Amdur and Elizabeth Bankert,
Institutional Review Board Management and Function,
Jones and Bartlett, 2002 (pp 403-04)