

Aurora University IRB

Classroom Research Guidelines

Human Subjects Research vs. Classroom Research

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are required to review and approve many studies that meet the definition of human subjects research according to federal guidelines. On the other hand, many college classes include activities that may ask students to perform research projects to fulfill a course requirement and/or to teach about research methods and these often do not fall under IRB purview. Sometimes, it can be difficult to distinguish whether or not what is being done is purely classroom research or if it meets the definition of human subjects research that would be subject to IRB review.

To be human subjects research, it must involve “human subjects” as part of the study and be understood as “research” according to federal definitions. Most projects that do not involve human participants, such as archival/document research, do not meet this definition.

Additionally, to be defined as “research” according to federal guidelines, the study must be for purposes of developing or contributing to *generalizable* knowledge. Typically, if research is being conducted for purposes of scholarly pursuit, such as academic presentation or publication, and involves human participants, then it meets the definition of human subjects research and falls under IRB purview. Much classroom research, however, is not done for these purposes and is only intended to teach about research methods and is only disseminated within the confines of the particular course (*Graduate theses and doctoral dissertations are NOT considered “classroom research” and do meet human subjects research definitions*). Because many classroom projects do not involve human participants and/or do not meet the definition of “research,” they are often excluded from IRB review.

It is also possible that a project could be both classroom research and human subjects research. The best example of this is when a student or faculty member performs a project for classroom purposes and then later decides that they would like to publish or present their work. If this is the case, the intention to make the work “generalizable” through presentation/publication means it meets the definition of human subjects research. **However, it is important to understand that research CANNOT be reviewed and approved by an IRB retroactively. Thus, if there is any thought that classroom research may become “generalizable” research, you should consult with the IRB to determine if it needs review (Note that there are several more exempt categories even if a project meets the definition of “human subjects research”).**

Fundamentally, many classroom research projects do not meet the definition of “human subjects research” according to federal definitions and are, therefore, excluded from IRB jurisdiction. If, as a student or faculty member, you are unsure about this, you should either: a) contact the AU IRB or b) complete and submit the Human Subjects Determination Form on the IRB website. There are some exceptions to the exemption of classroom research and, even when exempt, there are still guidelines that should be understood and followed when engaging classroom research projects. These topics are covered below.

Classroom Research Involving Sensitive Information or Protected Populations

Though classroom research projects typically do not fall under IRB jurisdiction, many IRBs still require at least some review of projects if they involve participants that are in protected populations or involve the collection of sensitive information.

Some examples of protected populations include, but are not limited to:

- Children/minors (under the age of 18)
- Prisoners

Some examples of sensitive information include, but are not limited to:

- Information related to sexual activities or practices
- Information related to illegal behavior
- Information related to traumatic experiences or instances of harm, self-harm, or abuse
- Information related to clinical psychological and/or mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, etc.
- Information that if released could reasonably place the individual at risk of criminal or civil liability

If classroom projects involve any of these elements, you should contact the IRB to determine if it will require review.

Student and Faculty Responsibilities in Classroom Research

Even when classroom projects do not fall under the jurisdiction of IRB, it is still the responsibility of instructors and students to conduct any project involving human participants, or information collected from humans (e.g. secondary datasets), with the highest regard for ethical responsibility. In this section, we have listed some guidelines and best practices to consider when engaging in classroom research projects for both instructors and students.

For instructors:

- Ensure that the research does not meet the definition of “human subjects research” requiring IRB review. Consult with IRB if any question
- Ensure that you consult with student to ensure they are engaging in ethical practices throughout
- Consult with student to ensure that project does not involve protected participants and/or collection of sensitive information OR that IRB review is conducted if it does
- Consult with student to protect any collected information and to identify the project as for classroom purposes, as opposed to “research”
- Consult with student to ensure that project does not include any personally identifying information

- *If IRB review is needed or if there is some question about whether it may be needed, we recommend that you reach out to the IRB prior to the semester in which the projects will take place. Bulk student projects from one class may need to be scheduled apart from regular monthly meeting dates. IRB reviews can also take anywhere from a few weeks to a few months based on the type of project, quality of the application, etc. and could create delays that you had not anticipated when planning the class*

For students:

- When appropriate, identify yourself to the participant and explain the nature of the project
- Ensure that the project does not include protected classes of people and does not meet the definition of human subjects research and/or sensitive information requiring IRB review in consultation with instructor
- Protect any collected data appropriately, destroy data in a timely manner, and do not include any personally identifying information in reports
- Ensure that participants understand that any participation is voluntary and can be revoked at any time

Conclusion

In determining whether classroom projects fall within the purview of IRB review, it is important to understand the definition of “human subjects research” and whether one’s classroom activities fit that definition. Additionally, it is important to understand some exceptions to classroom project exemptions and general responsibilities and guidelines when engaging in classroom research. Following these guidelines helps to ensure ethical research practices and protects both researchers and participants.

It is always best to contact the Aurora University IRB if there is any question or concern over classroom research projects.