



A Primer on Students as Participants

Students, both K-12 and USU attendees, are the most utilized study population among USU researchers. It makes sense that researchers at USU would be interested in conducting research with students, given the ease of access to that population. While an accessible research population is certainly important, the USU IRB wants to ensure that researchers are aware of the ethical considerations involving students as research subjects.

Students, just as with any other population, should not be selected merely because they are convenient to reach. Here are some recommendations for working with students as research participants when they are appropriate for inclusion in your research project, with a focus on avoiding atmospheres of coercion or undue influence.

College & University Populations

In general, working with students in your own department can create an atmosphere of coercion. If students in your department are the most appropriate pool for your research study, please incorporate the following recommendations into your recruitment, consent process, and study procedures.

- *Bring in someone from another department to conduct recruitment and informed consent processes.* A colleague who does not have a status relationship with your department's students is unlikely to present a coercive atmosphere when presenting the research participation opportunity. This person must have CITI training and be added to your protocol.
- *Do not recruit until after the semester has ended.* Some studies are only appropriate within the context of one's own classroom. In this case, if the students' coursework or course-related activities are relevant to your research project, you should request consent only after the semester has ended and grades have been submitted. This allows your students to proceed with business as usual, and gives them time away from the class to make a decision about whether their efforts should be used in your research.
- *Utilize existing resources to protect student privacy.* The Psychology Department at USU maintains SONA, which allows instructors to know that a student participated in a research project, but no additional details. Using SONA ensures that a student has voluntarily opted in to a study and maintains that student's privacy outside of the research team. You can [request a SONA account](#) online.
- *Extra credit must be consistent and fair.* Extra credit is compensation, and as such, it must be consistent among research participants. Ambiguous promises of extra credit at an instructor's discretion does not allow for a fully informed consent process. Researchers looking to compensate students with extra credit must: 1) secure an agreement from all relevant instructors whereby the compensation to participants is equal among the participants; and 2) ensure that an alternative extra credit opportunity is identified and made available to students during the recruitment process. The alternative can require no more time and effort of the student than the research opportunity would.
- *Avoid utilizing class time for research procedures.* Loss of instructional time or time-on-task for an unrelated research activity is unethical. Unless the research opportunity maps on to one of the existing learning objectives for the course in a way that benefits students, time in the classroom or related to classroom activities should not be displaced for research recruitment or procedures.

A dissertation study at USU requested that a panel of experts rate the coerciveness and acceptability of different recruitment procedures with students. While three of the four expert panelists, all professionals in the field of Psychology, rated one scenario as voluntary, most of the student participants who rated the same scenario indicated they would feel forced to participate.¹

¹ Azure Midzinski. *Students' Perceptions of Coercion in Research*. 2010. Utah State University Digital Commons, Paper 583.

Public K-12 Populations

Utah State University is somewhat unique in the number of USU students who also have professional roles in the public K-12 education setting. As such, a large number of student projects at USU look to work in K-12 settings where the USU student researcher holds a professional role. As can be the case with USU professors and college students, a professional in a public K-12 setting can hold a coercive relationship with the students and parents at their schools. If a member of the research team works in the district or school where the research will take place, please incorporate the following recommendations into your recruitment, consent process, and study procedures.

- *Avoid using teachers and principals to recruit families.* A child spends many hours each day with their teacher, particularly in earlier grades. Parents should not wonder whether agreeing to participate or not will affect their child's relationship with their teacher or principal. Teachers should avoid research with their own students. Instead, consider having a guidance counselor or the USU faculty member overseeing the project to conduct the recruitment and consent processes.
- *Avoid utilizing class time for research procedures.* Loss of instructional time or time-on-task for an unrelated research activity is unethical. Unless the research opportunity maps on to one of the existing learning objectives for the course in a way that benefits students, time in the classroom or related to classroom activities should not be displaced for research recruitment or procedures. The Utah Education Network makes the Utah Common Core standards available and easily accessible to researchers seeking to utilize classroom time on research procedures at www.uen.org/core.
- *Be aware of your dual roles and how those roles differ.* Remember that teachers, particularly K-12 teachers, have broad rights and responsibilities as to their students. Researchers, however, have much more restricted access. Mingling those roles can raise legal (e.g. FERPA) and ethical (e.g. conflict of interest) concerns that should be discussed with advisors and other experts.
- *Obtain the appropriate approvals.* District-level approval of any research project is required before the IRB can formally approve a project. The approval from the district must contain certain information, which is set out in Chapter 10(b)(28) of the USU IRB Standard Operating Procedures. If the work is in a school and utilizes classroom time and resources, an additional approval from a principal may be necessary, indicating that the activities have been reviewed and do not pose a risk to students in terms of lost instructional time and effort.
- *Separation of participants and non-participants should not be obvious.* Many studies are appropriate for classroom settings, but not every parent or guardian will consent to have their child participate. Where procedures can be the same for both participants and non-participants, privacy of research subjects is maximized. Some research procedures, however, must be differentiated – for example, videos or photos of children engaging in research activities must be sure to exclude students whose families have not consented to participate. Have a plan for how that separation will take place without “singling out” those who are (or are not) participating.

In summary, while students are a population that is easy to access, ethical considerations may dictate that you select a different population for your study. Indeed, we often find that studies recruiting students are unable to meet their accrual goals for a number of reasons specific to the education setting. However, students-as-participants are often appropriate for research, provided elements of coercion and undue influence can be minimized. Above are a list of recommendations, but there are certainly other ways to ensure that students and their families have full freedom of choice regarding participation in research studies.

The IRB has a guidance document on the importance of FERPA and the PPRA in education-based research settings. If you are working with students, we strongly recommend that you review those short documents as well. As always, if you have any questions as you structure your research projects, please do not hesitate to contact us at the information below.