IRB Tipsheet: Instructors Conducting Classroom Research

# **Overview:**

Use this tipsheet to determine best practices for classroom research, and if your classroom research should be submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review.

# **I. When is IRB review NOT needed?**

Instructors often conduct informal research in their classrooms to determine which teaching strategies work better or assess student learning. This informal research does not require IRB review if it’s only being used by the instructor to improve their teaching or as part of a promotion/retention portfolio. Also, if an instructor decides to present or publish a paper on a teaching strategy/assignment/lesson plan that does not include any collected data from students, this does not require IRB review.

# **II. When is IRB review needed?**

If instructors are doing formal scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) or want to present/publish data collected from students (including any evaluated course work/grades/surveys/class observations), the project now requires IRB approval. Often times instructors begin an informal assessment/investigation in their class but later want to use the data as part of a formal research project. This too requires IRB review.

## **When & How to submit to IRB:**

* You should submit your project to IRB before you begin collecting data if you think there is even a chance that you will want to present/publish findings from a classroom research project (e.g., direct or indirect assessment of student learning, investigation of the effectiveness of different teaching strategies).
  + Most of these projects will qualify for exempt status and can be submitted through the [Exempt Decision Tool](https://uwlax.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8eoDBd6txElsfbM), which is a simple survey to fill out.
* If you collected data from your class in the past just for your personal use and now you want to include it as part of a research project, this can be done in one of two ways:
  + Many of these projects will fall under the category of Secondary Research (research on data that already exists that was collected for a purpose other than your proposed study). In these cases, the researcher can submit their project through the IRB Exempt Decision Tool indicating they are conducting secondary research. If the research meets the criteria needed for exemption, the project will be approved as exempt from further review and the IRB process is complete. If not, the researcher would need to follow the process described below.
  + The investigator should submit a request for retrospective review to [irb@uwlax.edu](mailto:irb@uwlax.edu) in accordance with the [IRB Researcher’s Guide for Submission of Protocols](https://www.uwlax.edu/globalassets/offices-services/grants/researchers-guide-for-submission-of-protocols.pdf). The submission must indicate it is a request for retrospective review and provide a justification for the request (e.g., description of data for which approval is requested, intended use(s) of the data, justification for the request, justification for why the data cannot be obtained through other means). The submission is reviewed by the IRB Coordinator, who determines whether the project can receive retrospective approval.

***Note:*** *FERPA does not allow use of student records/course work/grades in research without student written consent UNLESS a school official is conducting research that benefits students and/or the University. Therefore, granting retrospective review without student consent is only allowed for research focused on improving teaching, not for other types of scholarship (e.g., an instructor’s personal area of research).*

# **III. Best Practices when Conducting Classroom Research**

When planning classroom research, remember that your students should have a choice as to whether they want their data used for research purposes and should not feel pressure from the instructor to grant this permission. To ensure this is the case, the following best practices should be followed:

1. Create a consent form asking for permission to use any data collected from students for research purposes. This might include, for example, course work, surveys, or classroom observations. The SOTL example consent form can be used as a model (see IRB website).
   * The consent form should explicitly say that students’ grades and class experiences will not be negatively impacted if they choose to withhold consent.
   * Make sure it’s clear to students in the consent form whether you may be using quotes from their submitted work (e.g., papers, essays, open-ended questions) when presenting/publishing or if you are only going to use grouped data.
2. When collecting consent from students, do so in such a way that the instructor doesn’t know who granted consent until after the semester is over and grades are submitted. This could be accomplished by having a colleague collect consent forms, having students put consent forms in an envelope that the instructor doesn’t open until the end of the semester, or collecting consent through an online survey and not checking the survey data until after the semester ends.
3. If the instructor is using course credit or extra credit incentives to encourage students to participate in research activities (e.g., surveys), there must be non-research alternatives for getting this credit that require comparable time/effort. These alternatives must be explained in the consent form.
   * Ideally, for assessment or SOTL research, any research activities are integrated into the course as required assignments/activities. In this way, all students participate in the activities as part of the course. Then the consent form is only asking students whether they grant permission for the data from these activities/assignments to be used for the research project. This reduces sample bias and the burden of having to design alternative activities/assignments for non-consenting students.