**Students as Research Participants**

Research with one’s own students presents unique considerations with regard to human subjects protections. At the center of the issue is the inherent power difference between student and instructor. Regardless how well a faculty member presents the recruitment and option not to participate, students may feel as though they have to participate or risk having their non-participation impact their grade or relationship with the professor.  In addition, the idea of ongoing voluntary participation is a potential issue if a student decides they want to discontinue their participation after initially consenting.  Real coercion is rare is research, but the perception of coercion can be just a problematic in obtaining voluntary informed consent.

The IRB considers the following factors in support of proposed enrollment of subjects with potential status relationships with the researcher(s):

* The research presents no greater than minimal risk to subjects.
* The research represents a potential educational opportunity for participants.
* The recruitment/consent language contain clear statements to address and minimize coercion and undue influence.
* The recruitment and/or consent process will be conducted by someone who does NOT have a status relationship with the potential subjects.
* If the research is conducted within the classroom setting, the instructor is blinded to the identity of participants - at least until grades are posted.

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# **Examples for Avoiding Unintentional Coercion or Undue Influence in Classroom Settings**

The IRB often requires that faculty who are conducting research with their own students use a third party to distribute and collect consent and data - just as you would a course evaluation.  The third party may be an individual from the department office, another faculty member, or a co-investigator, etc. who has no relationship to these students or the course (i.e. not a co-instructor, teaching assistant, or student teacher). There are many variations to using this approach depending on the timing and procedures involved.  Here are some examples of processes that can help minimize coercion of undue influence:

**EXAMPLE A:**  Data will be collected from students in a targeted class through an anonymous survey (no names or other identifying information will be included).  The researcher, who is also the instructor of the course, has designed a simple written consent statement to describe the research and no signed consent forms will be collected.  At the end of a class period, the instructor/researcher introduces and discusses the study with the students (using the approved recruitment script and consent statement), answers any questions, and then leaves.  A third party would distribute the survey to students and collect any completed surveys.  The surveys could be provided to the instructor after all were collected.  Using this process, the students can be assured that the instructor does not know who provided which survey and who did or did not participate.

**EXAMPLE B:**  The survey administered to a targeted class is not anonymous (student names and IDs are being collected). The survey data will be linked to participating students' final exam scores and course grades.  Here, the third party would be used the same as in the first example, but *signed* consent forms and identifiable surveys are collected and placed in a sealed envelope.  The third party would keep the sealed envelope in a locked file cabinet until after the class grades were submitted. Only then are the completed consent forms and surveys provided to the instructor/researcher.  The researcher will then know who has agreed to participate in the study and which survey they provided; but, the involvement of a third party and the timing provide students assurance that their participation, or lack thereof, has no impact on their grade or their standing in the class.

**EXAMPLE C:**  An instructor proposes to use student work products (assignments, papers, quizzes, exams, etc.) as research data.  Documented (signed) consent forms need to be collected from students who are willing to provide their data for the study.  The instructor/researcher would present the study to the class and answer questions, as in the other examples.  The third party would collect signed consent forms and keep them in a locked file cabinet until after the class grades have been submitted.  Then, the faculty researcher could access the consent forms and collect and analyze only the work products of those students who had given permission to use for their data in the study.  Again, in this process the students can be assured that their participation, or lack thereof, has no impact on their grade or their relationship with the instructor.

The specific role of the third party may or may not require them to be listed as a researcher on the IRB submission.  Individuals who are tasked with obtaining consent (describing the study procedures, answering questions about the study, ensuring comprehension, etc.) are engaged in human research activities and are considered researchers/research staff by the IRB.  Other individuals, like the third parties in the three example above, may only be tasked with collecting and temporarily holding documents for the investigators and generally are not themselves considered researchers on the study.  How this process will work best for your study will depend on the procedures, the subject population, and other components of your specific research plan.

Include the procedures the researcher will follow in the consent form(s) and IRB application.