

Guidance for Researchers using Student Data or Students* as Research Participants

Research with college students is common in academic settings and is permissible in most cases. However, there are a few requirements and restrictions that researchers must consider. The Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) has developed this guidance to help researchers understand the requirements when conducting research that involves Virginia Tech students. If the research does not fit into any of these categories, or if you have questions, please contact HRPP at irb@vt.edu.

Activity	What is it?	What do I submit to HRPP**?	Additional Considerations
Class project	Intended to teach students how to do research; please see HRPP guidance on class projects vs. research Not research	Nothing: No need to submit a human subjects research determination or protocol	Must be conducted ethically; recommend deleting the data at the conclusion of the course; identifiable data cannot be retained for future use; de-identified datasets may be retained by the instructor for future course use
Program or course evaluation	Designed to evaluate or improve a program or course; results will only be used within a department or college Not research	Submit a human subjects research determination	The evaluation or testing a pedagogical intervention or technique might be research rather than a course evaluation.
Research using existing course data	Using existing course artifacts (tests, assignments, lab reports, etc.) from previous semesters Human subjects research; OR Not human subjects research	Submit an existing data protocol or a human subjects research determination; must be clear in the protocol that the artifacts were always planned as course activities and assignments and were not designed with future research in mind	If the data are identifiable the research might be subject to the Family Educational and Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA); please contact the Privacy and Research Data Protection Program (PRDP) for additional guidance
Pedagogical – teaching methods	Examination of teaching methods with data obtained from students with their consent; studying the teaching techniques rather than the students; designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge Human subjects research	Submit a protocol; no special precautions needed, but the inclusion of students should be addressed in the “vulnerable populations” section of the protocol	FERPA may apply; please contact PRDP for additional guidance

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Research related to course content, but not pedagogical	Relates to course content, but does not examine teaching approaches or how they affect learners (e.g., an examination of how students form a theory of linear algebra) Human subjects research	Submit a protocol; describe precautions that will be taken to protect students from coercion in the “vulnerable populations” section of the protocol	FERPA may apply; please contact PRDP for additional guidance
Research in classroom that is unrelated to course content	Research is not related to the course content, but class time is being used and students are being used as a population of convenience	This type of research is typically not permissible	Remove the research activities from the classroom and open it up to the general population

*This guidance applies to projects that involve Virginia Tech students. There might be additional requirements if the research involves other students.
 **Please note that the “What do I submit to HRPP?” column is not a complete list of documents to submit. When a protocol is needed, all documents that are to be used in the research must be submitted to HRPP.

Requirements and Restrictions

1. Do not propose to conduct research with students because it is convenient. The protocol must include a justification as to why it is necessary to conduct research with the students as opposed to the general population.
2. The consent process should be conducted by someone who does not have a status relationship with the students (i.e., someone who grades assignments or assigns final course grades).
3. The consent form or information sheet must not include any language that could unduly influence a student to participate.
4. The researcher (professor or graduate assistant) should not know which students participated in the research until final grades have been turned in.
5. If extra credit is being offered for participation in the research, alternative equivalent extra credit must be offered for those that do not want to participate in the research.

Resources

1. HRPP Website: <https://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp.html>
2. Guidance on Student Projects or Human Subjects Research: https://www.research.vt.edu/content/dam/research_vt_edu/hrpp/files/guides/guidance-on-class-projects-vs-research.pdf
3. Questions on FERPA and research with student records contact [PRDP](#)
4. Protocol templates: <https://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp/resources/templates.html>
5. Questions and inquiries can be directed to irb@vt.edu