

Student Research with Human Subjects

Students, graduate and undergraduate, at the University of South Carolina conduct research with human subjects. The purpose of this guidance is to clarify when student research must be reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Subjects.

The applicable definition of research is any systematic investigation, including research development (pilot testing); designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. A human subject is a living individual with whom a researcher interacts or about whom a researcher (faculty or student) obtains data or information.

Generally, student research involving human subjects falls into one of two categories: (1) research practica, and (2) directed or independent research projects.

Research Practica

Research practica are class projects designed to provide students an opportunity to practice various research methods such as interview, observation and survey techniques, as well as data analysis. Such projects typically do not lead to generalizable knowledge and are not undertaken with that goal in mind. Research practica do not require IRB review unless the student researcher anticipates publishing the results. Publication may consist of a presentation at a professional meeting or other external venue.

Research Projects - Directed or Independent

Any research conducted by students, graduate or undergraduate, that does not fall under the definition of a research practicum, which uses human subjects, and which is intended to contribute to generalizable knowledge, must be reviewed and approved by the IRB. This includes, but is not limited to, independent undergraduate research projects and honors theses, masters' theses and dissertations. It is possible that a research project may be exempt from ongoing IRB review, but it must meet explicit criteria and the IRB or appropriate IRB Liaison must approve the exemption.

Responsibility of Faculty Advisors

- It is the responsibility of the faculty advisor to ensure that research practica are conducted according to the ethical standards of the relevant discipline.
- It is the responsibility of the faculty advisor to determine when an undergraduate student project does not meet the definition of a practicum and must be reviewed by the IRB.
- When student research activities are not practica, it is the responsibility of the faculty advisor to assist students in preparing review materials for the IRB and to ensure that the research is conducted in accordance with USC's agreement with the federal government (Federal-wide Assurance) and with applicable institutional policy.

Potential Practicum Problems

Students engaged in the process of learning research techniques understandably want to focus on compelling real-life issues. In the process of reviewing student research; however, the IRB has found topics and subjects that raise concerns for the well-being of the subjects and students themselves. Projects collecting data about illegal activities, those which could cause emotional distress to the subjects, those which would place the students at risk if confidentiality were breached, and those with children as subjects need to be constructed with special care. While practica are not under the purview of the IRB, the IRB staff and college IRB Liaisons are available for consultation with students. Classroom presentations may be arranged upon request.