IRB Guidelines and Best Practices for Classroom-based Research Activities

Federal regulations and Middlebury policy require IRB approval for research with human subjects for both student and faculty-led research projects. Human subjects research is defined as a systematic investigation designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge. Some high-impact class projects involve hands-on research activities with human participants that are conducted as educational exercises and are not intended to contribute to generalizable knowledge. These classroom-based research activities are not shared outside of the class context and are not subject to IRB review and approval.

NOTE: Undergraduate theses and research projects that may be presented outside the class context at a departmental or campus symposium, professional conference, or submitted for publication must undergo IRB review and approval *before* you begin research. If you want the option to present the work outside of the class context, you should submit an IRB application. IRB approval cannot be granted retroactively.

General Recommendations for Classroom-based Research Activities

While classroom-based research activities may not meet the requirements for IRB oversight, the Middlebury IRB recognizes the importance of protecting the persons who support student learning by participating in these research activities. The IRB provides the following guidance to assist faculty in balancing rigorous pedagogy with the need to protect human participants.

- **Require that students complete training in ethical treatment of human participants.** Faculty members assume responsibility for ensuring that students are appropriately trained in ethical treatment of human subjects and that all activities are conducted ethically. Faculty are free to require students to complete the training available via CITI or to develop and provide their own. *The IRB strongly encourages all faculty leading these types of class projects to complete the CITI training for human subjects research themselves.*
- **Have students collect consent and fully inform potential participants about participation.** Remember that from the participant's viewpoint, participation does not differ for a class assignment or a research project. Instructors should advise students to identify the project to participants as a class assignment and be sensitive to the personal nature of the obtained information. Labeling the class project as "research" is inaccurate and misleading to participants. Information on what to include in a consent form/script is provided below.
- **Only have students conduct minimal risk research**. Do not have participants provide sensitive information (i.e. any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation) or conduct research with vulnerable populations. *Research involving greater than minimal risk or vulnerable populations is better suited to more seasoned researchers who have had more training and experience with human subjects research*.
- **Keep data privacy in mind**. If possible, collect data anonymously. If collecting identifiable information or if using methods that cannot be conducted anonymously (such as interviews), data should be de-identified as soon as possible. Always store the data on platforms accessed using Middlebury credentials (i.e. OneDrive) and delete from student devices. Students should never retain the data they collect. Only the faculty member should retain the data, and it should be deleted/destroyed at the conclusion of the class.

- **Always collect the least amount of information that you need to satisfy the goals of the activity.** For example, if it is not necessary to collect demographic information such as age, gender, etc. to address the goals of the activity, do not collect that information. Video recordings are generally not recommended. Audio recordings should only be collected if necessary to address the goals of the project.
- **Avoid use of deception or incomplete disclosure.** These types of research activities are better suited to more seasoned researchers.

The IRB is available to give feedback on any proposed class project not meeting the definition of research, even though the IRB would not officially act on the project.

Informed Consent Guidelines

Regardless of the purpose of the activity and whether it is subject to IRB oversight, it is always important to inform potential participants about the nature of the project and what participation will involve. Informed consent for classroom-based research activities should include the following at a minimum:

The identity of the student, that this is a class project, and the purpose of the activity (i.e. "My name is Alex Brown and I am doing a class project for my sociology class at Middlebury College. We are learning about how X relates to Y and this project is designed to help us better understand that.")

What the participants will be asked to do (i.e. "I will ask you some questions about XYZ". Or "You will complete an online survey about XYZ" or "You will complete a short task on the computer, and I will measure your responses.")

How long participation will take to complete.

That they do not have to participate and can stop at any time (i.e. "You do not have to participate, and you can change your mind and stop participating at any time. I won't mind.")

Whether they will be identified in the dataset and who will have access to the data (i.e. "I will use a participant ID number instead of your name on all of the data and my notes. All data will be stored in a secure folder accessible only to my professor and me.")

What will happen to the data they provide. (i.e. "The information will be used to write a paper for my class. It will not be shared outside of the class. All the data and my notes will be destroyed after the class is over.")

The student's contact information and the faculty member's contact information for any questions or concerns.

Recruitment Guidelines
If students will be recruiting participants via social media posts, public forum posts, flyers, or email, the message should:

- Clearly identify the project as something that are completing to fulfill a <u>class assignment</u> with the course name identified
- Include the student and faculty member's contact information
- Contain no misleading information or coercive messaging such as "my grade depends on your participation!"