Smith College Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Classroom Research Policy
(9/01/16)

This U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines human subjects research as “a systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge” typically involving obtaining information from living individuals. Many forms of human subjects research are subject to Institutional Review Board (IRB) review and approval before they can proceed. This document describes a change in Smith College IRB policy regarding classroom research, which will be defined hereafter as “the study of living persons outside the classroom as part of an academic exercise with the goal of enhancing student learning rather than yielding generalizable knowledge.” Classroom research should be distinguished from collecting data from students within a classroom as part of a classroom exercise, which never requires IRB review. Classroom research should also be distinguished from special studies, honors theses, and other original research projects that may be published or presented off campus, which typically require IRB review. This policy will be in effect beginning the Fall 2016 semester and will be reviewed before Fall 2017 to determine if further modification is required.

A. Classroom Research Can Proceed Without IRB Review UNLESS:

1. The research specifically targets federally defined “vulnerable” populations (e.g., minors, pregnant women and fetuses, prisoners, persons with physical or mental disabilities). The IRB may be able to provide rapid approval (i.e., without full board review) of classroom projects targeting vulnerable populations after determining that the specific research procedures do not place the vulnerable population at greater risk than the general population.

2. The research involves deceiving participants about the researcher’s identity (e.g., researchers posing as participants) or intentions (e.g., misleading the participant about the true purpose of the study). Deception interferes with true informed consent and raises the risk that participants will feel (or be) mistreated. Thus, IRB review provides extra precaution and protection.

3. The research targets or invites the disclosure of information concerning the participant’s plan to harm themselves or others. Coming into possession of knowledge that an identifiable person plans to hurt or kill themselves or others raises complex ethical questions that requires careful planning and consultation.

4. The research may be published or presented off campus (e.g., the internet, professional conferences). It may prove difficult to obtain IRB approval of classroom research after the data have been collected and thus investigators are advised to clarify their intended purpose prior to data collection. Retrospective IRB approval of classroom research will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

B. Classroom Research Should Include Oral or Written Informed Consent UNLESS:

1. The participants in the research are limited to students in the class and/or their immediate family members (e.g., interviewing one’s parents). Under these circumstances, oral “assent” is still required along with a disclosure of how the data will be used (e.g., participants should be told if their responses will be presented in class or elsewhere on campus).
2. The assignment involves observations of people in settings where they have no reasonable expectation of privacy (e.g., walking down the street). Observations of people in "semi-public" places (e.g., classrooms, coffee shops, social clubs) should only proceed with a letter of approval from a relevant authority (e.g., classroom teacher, shop owner, club President).

3. The assignment involves collection of information from public officials about their public role or activities.

C. By Foregoing IRB Review, Faculty Become Responsible For:

1. Thoroughly instructing their students about the current ethical standards of their field as applicable to the classroom research project(s).

2. Ensuring that they and their students are up-to-date on the Smith College CITI Training (https://www.citiprogram.org/). CITI training should not be considered a substitute for thorough in-class instruction about ethics.

3. Recruiting potential participants with truthful advertising and without excessive inducement or coercion.

4. Taking reasonable care to exclude federally defined “vulnerable” populations (especially minors) from classroom research. This can be done, for example, by including statements in recruitment and consent materials prohibiting such persons from participating.

5. Seeking informed consent from participants (when appropriate) including clear statements about all anticipated personal and/or social risks of research participation and with sensitivity to the particular population under study and changing local norms, values, and preferences. If relevant, consent should include explicit permission for presentation of findings on campus.

6. Determining whether IRB review or consultation would be prudent (even if not required). IRB review refers to seeking written IRB approval via a written IRB proposal. IRB consultation refers to asking for advice from the IRB without submitting to a formal review or approval process. The removal of IRB review of classroom research removes a layer of protection for the research participants, the College, and the faculty member. Faculty are expected to use their best judgment in conjunction with current social norms to decide whether to include IRB in their classroom research planning.

D. It may be wise to seek IRB consultation or review when classroom research:

1. Addresses topics that may provoke strong emotions in research participants (e.g., personal trauma, stigmatized social identities, mental health symptoms, contentious political issues, microaggressions). Some participants may feel that their participation in research has caused them emotional injury beyond what they would have experienced without the research.

2. Poses possible social risk to research participants (e.g., risk to reputation by revealing otherwise hidden views or stigmatized identities, disclosure of illegal activity). Some research procedures could produce lasting social harm to participants that would not have occurred without their research participation.