

Institutional Review Board Classroom Project or Research? An Outline

Class projects or assignments involving human subjects are generally conducted for education or training solely to fulfill a course requirement; as such, an element of the definition of research— the intent to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge—is lacking, so these activities do not meet the regulatory definition of research. Most student class projects or assignments, therefore, will not require the submission of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application for review and approval. If a class project or activity is a systematic investigation (including research development, testing and evaluation) designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge, it meets the definition of research and will require IRB review and approval.

Scholarly and journalistic activities (e.g., oral history, journalism, biography, literary criticism, legal research, and historical scholarship), including the collection and use of information, that focus directly on the specific individuals about whom the information is collected, are deemed not to be “research” per the above definition.

Thesis and dissertation projects are usually conducted to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge and, therefore, meet the definition of research. If these projects involve human subjects, IRB review and approval will be required. For more information, visit the IRB webpage on the ABAC website.

Faculty and Student Responsibilities

It is the responsibility of the Faculty to determine whether a class project involving human participants is outside the purview of the IRB, and to contact the Office of Sponsored Programs. As with any instructional activity, the Faculty assumes responsibility for the conduct and oversight of these class projects or activities. It is expected that these activities will uphold the principles of ethical treatment and respect, and ensure the safety and protection, of the individuals who will be involved in these projects. This includes:

1. Discussing the general principles of ethical research with human subjects with the class prior to the initiation of the project. This can be supplemented by the completion of the CITI IRB training by the students who will conduct the projects.
2. Reviewing student research plans and monitoring research activities to ensure that human participants are protected.

3. At a minimum, students conducting the research inform participants of the voluntary nature of participation and employ measures to protect privacy and confidentiality, if applicable.

4. If research will be conducted outside of ABAC, ensuring that there are appropriate permissions or authorizations from the external sites for the conduct of the project.

Finally, Instructors must convey to students that the data may not be used or shared beyond the circumstances described below:

1. In the classroom;

2. If the project involves gathering data from or about a company, agency, or organization, the data/results are shared only with that company, agency, or organization; and/or

3. Presentations of project results at Departmental, Interdepartmental, School or College seminars or similar venue designed to exhibit coursework or to continue the learning process.

Disclosure to Participants

All students conducting projects under this policy should disclose important information to the participants. If an Informed Consent Document or Consent Cover Letter is used, the following will be included:

1. The student identifies him/herself as an ABAC student who is performing the activity to fulfill a course requirement, and the course is specifically identified.

2. The name and contact information for the Course Instructor or Supervising Faculty Member to contact for questions is provided.

3. The persons who have access to the individual data and/or summarized results are specified (e.g., Instructor only, Company/Agency/Organization).

4. Participants are informed that their participation is completely voluntary, that they do not have to participate in the study if they don't want to, and that they can stop participating at any time.

5. The disclosure should not state that the project has been approved by the ABAC IRB. Informed Consent Documents and Consent Cover Letter templates can be found on the IRB webpage.

Future Use of Data

It is very important that careful consideration be given to the possibility of any publication, presentation, or use of any collected data for future research studies. Retroactive approval cannot be granted for studies conducted without IRB approval. For example, if a class project was conducted without IRB approval and resulted in unexpected but important findings or data, those findings or data may not be presented at a national meeting or used in a future project or research study.

Questions

Please contact Mr. Scott Pierce, Director of Sponsored Programs and IRB Chair, at 229-391-4983 or scott.pierce@abac.edu.