Research Involving College Students

Jennifer J. Tickle and Todd F. Heatherton

INTRODUCTION

Given that much research takes place in college and university settings, it is not surprising that college students are often participants in research studies. Indeed, some fields, such as psychological science, rely on college students as their primary research participants. Students are convenient, easy to recruit, and relatively inexpensive when compared with nonstudents. Although many of the issues related to research participation are the same for college students as other populations, there are two issues deserving special mention with regard to their research participation.

Coercion

College students are typically given the opportunity to participate in research in one of several ways: in exchange for course credit as part of a course requirement, in exchange for extra credit in a course, or in exchange for payment on a voluntary basis after recruitment. The Code of Federal Regulations\(^1\) states that an investigator should seek consent “only under circumstances that provide the prospective subject . . . sufficient opportunity to consider whether to participate and that minimize the possibility of coercion or undue influence.” The central controversy about college student participation involves whether participation for course credit is considered coercive. For instance, in cases where participation is linked to course requirements or credit, students may feel as if they have to participate in order to please the course professor. They may believe that their grades, potential letters of recommendation, or other opportunities in the department may be compromised if they do not participate in the research studies.\(^2\)

At the same time, research participation can be viewed as valuable for both the researcher and student participants. Research participation is a way for students to become involved in the learning process and to learn first-hand about the process of scientific research. Active learning by way of involvement is an effective way for students to acquire information. Therefore, the educational benefit of student participation in research should not be discounted.

Alternatives to Course-Required Research Participation

To decrease the potential for coercion with research participation for course credit, research departments can provide alternatives to participation that are comparable in time, effort, and fulfillment of course requirements. For instance, Gamble\(^3\) and Cohen\(^4\) have suggested such options as research papers (which can be comparable in time expenditure and educational benefit) or attendance at research talks given by department faculty (comparable in time, effort, and educational benefit) as alternatives to research participation. If alternative options cannot be offered, participants can at least be given a choice of studies in which to participate. Of course, as per federal standards,\(^1\) participants must be able to withdraw from participation in any study at any point without penalty. This means that even those participants who withdraw from a research study must receive full course-credit for research participation. When evaluating research that involves course credit, the IRB should understand how course-related participation in a given department is structured and whether comparable options are offered in the place of research participation to help ensure the voluntary nature of that participation.\(^2\)

Recruitment Practices

Aside from actual course credit for participation, recruitment into research can be made less coercive with attention to the recruitment process itself. For instance, faculty and researchers can solicit participants more broadly, using sign-up sheets or general announcements rather than direct invitations to particular students. This reduces the likelihood of “undue coercion” by decreasing the influence of the faculty–student relationship and making the request less direct. IRBs should review all recruitment material to be sure the risks and benefits are not misrepresented and to be sure that participation for course credit is not presented in a way that is likely to be coercive.\(^2\)

Paying Students to Participate in Research

Rather than offering course credit for research participation, some researchers have funds to pay participants for their time. Paying research participants is discussed in
several other chapters in this book. Payment, in the form of money, gifts, privileges, or other resources, can only be offered as a recruitment incentive, not as a benefit of participation. Therefore, payment for research participation must be commensurate with the time, effort, and discomfort involved in the research, as well as the risk of participating. Payment should not be so extreme as to unduly influence people to participate without considering the risks. Although explicit standards for the amount of incentive do not exist, IRBs should use reason when considering whether an investigator’s plans for recruitment incentives seem excessive for a given study.2(Chap. 3)

Some College Students Are Minors

One additional concern about using college students, particularly college freshmen, involves the age of the consent giver.1(Sec.408) Some college freshmen may be legal minors for whom parental consent is still needed. This is an issue to consider, especially if a college allows high school students to take its courses. IRBs should remind researchers about the regulations and law that relate to the need for surrogate (parental) consent to participate in research. IRB approval of research that targets college students should explicitly address the need for surrogate consent when appropriate.

Confidentiality

The second major concern of using college students as research participants, besides coercion, involves confidentiality. A variety of sensitive measures may be taken by researchers, ranging from medical information to ratings of self-esteem, depression, drug use, and so forth. Because of the close nature of many college environments, extra care must be taken to ensure participant confidentiality. For instance, data should be stored where access is restricted. If undergraduate research assistants are used for data collection, data coding, or data entry, they must understand the importance of the confidentiality of the data with which they are working. To help ensure confidentiality, all appropriate measures must be taken to keep participant names separate from data at all stages of the research process. IRBs should monitor this by requesting information about the process of data storage. Where possible, investigators should be encouraged to use code numbers to identify participants in the place of other more identifying information.2(Chap. 3)

Conclusion

College students are not usually defined as a separate class of research participants from the standpoint of ethical standards or regulatory compliance. However, since research often takes place on college campuses and some categories of research specifically target the student population, it is useful to review the issues that IRB members, researchers, and institutional officials should consider when evaluating research projects that are likely to enroll college students. In this setting, coercion and confidentiality are the two most common areas of concern. This chapter discusses ways to minimize problems in each of these areas. An additional issue that is often overlooked is that some college students are minors. Research involving minors must comply with federal regulations and, often, state law that does not apply to research limited to adult participants.

References


