

Recruiting Psychology Students to Participate in Faculty/Department Research: Ethical Considerations and Best Practices

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INTRODUCTION

Introductory psychology courses often have high enrollments and present department faculty and staff with a large pool of potential research subjects.¹ At many institutions, professors make participation in department research a course requirement or offer extra credit as a participation incentive. Early participation is thought to benefit students by exposing them to the research process and to techniques they may encounter in the future.² Many students who choose to participate are pleased with their experience and feel more connected to their departmental community.³ Nevertheless, the unique faculty-student relationship raises important questions about the ethics of student participation in faculty or department research.⁴

ANALYSIS

The primary issues are informed consent and voluntariness. Students should decide to participate in research of their own free will, and their participation should be a reflection of their own values and desires.⁵ However, faculty are in a position of authority over students, who may see their approval as crucial for academic and professional advancement. Students may fear that declining opportunities to participate in department research will leave them struggling to complete time-consuming “alternate assignments,” prevent them from obtaining strong letters of recommendation, or earn them a negative reputation in the department, potentially impacting their performance in future courses. These problems could be exacerbated if research participation is not anonymous or if it becomes synonymous with what a “model student” would do.⁶ Even perceived pressure can impact a decision to participate, and there is some evidence that younger students

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and students of color perceive more pressure to participate than their peers.⁷ This issue is significant because it can skew the subject pool and place a disproportionate burden on already disadvantaged groups. In addition, it threatens to undermine students' trust in the research enterprise and their relationship with professors outside of research.

Voluntariness is also threatened by offering extra credit as an incentive for research participation. Extra credit may constitute undue inducement: it may be so attractive to students that they will do more than what is appropriate to get it. Nearly 85 percent of students at one large state university said they would participate in research for as little as a 3-5 percent boost to their final averages.⁸ While this may be a problem with student culture rather than extra credit itself, it is something that faculty must take into account.

Moreover, because of circumstances outside their control, some students may be denied either the opportunity for extra credit (if no comparable alternatives are available) or the educational benefits associated with research participation. Some students do not have time to participate in research because they work multiple jobs or have other commitments, including travel for sports. Some students are left-handed or have braces and so are ineligible for many studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) electroencephalography (EEG) and other, similar techniques.⁹

But much of this has been discussed in the literature, and with the help of the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), some universities have even developed semi-satisfactory solutions.¹⁰ I wish to expand on the solutions I believe are most important, as well as to propose others rooted in my belief that soliciting students to participate in research is only ethical if they derive real, long-term educational benefit from it. To my knowledge, no university has implemented all of these measures.

First, psychology departments should ensure there are sufficient and diverse research opportunities available for all students who wish to participate. Not only does this promote fairness for students with packed schedules, it increases educational benefit by exposing students to different research techniques. Another means of ensuring that students derive personal benefit from research participation is to require "experimental debriefs" soon after participation. Debriefs should include a Q&A session.

If professors award extra credit for research participation, they must also offer alternate assignments that require the same amount of time and energy to complete. Professors should advertise alternate assignments vigorously and emphasize that students who choose to complete them will not be viewed negatively by course faculty or others in the department. Perhaps a committee of students and faculty can come together to decide what an appropriate amount of extra credit might be, or whether extra credit should be off the table altogether.¹¹ The answer will depend largely on institutional culture. If sufficient participation can be achieved through advertising, if extra credit is not traditionally offered in other courses for other assignments, or if faculty feel comfortable making research participation a course requirement, extra credit for research participation should probably not be offered. To ensure participation remains voluntary throughout the research process, students who withdraw from a study for any reason should receive the same credit or extra credit as students who complete that study. Most studies are short and require little effort, so it is unlikely that students will abuse this policy.

To minimize the possibility of coercion or undue influence, and to allow professors to fulfill their primary duty to students (as teachers), students should book their research participation or alternate assignments through an online, department-wide system that course professors agree not to regularly monitor for student

participation.¹² Students should not be able to participate in research that their professor directly oversees. Exceptions may be made for small departments to ensure that sufficient studies are available. This system could tabulate points derived from research participation or alternative assignments and update course professors on students' progress before grades are due. While implementation may be costly and complicated for larger departments, they are the most likely to have the requisite resources and manpower.

Transparency is key. Universities should publish a general policy for research on students. While all proposed experiments filter through the same set of institutional review boards (IRBs), a published standard holds IRBs accountable and motivates them to explicitly incorporate consideration of the outlined ethical issues into their initial and continuing reviews of relevant studies. It also helps ensure parity and equal protection for student subjects across departments.

The ethical rationale for each of these safeguards should be explained to students. They should understand what it means to give informed consent in the context of a power differential and what might be an inappropriate incentive for participation in research. Despite the widely acknowledged importance of research ethics, it receives little attention in introductory courses. Even if some students do go on to take research methodology courses, where these issues are properly fleshed out, most will not, and asking them to participate in department research studies, using "exposure to the research process" as a justification, cannot be ethically done without including a discussion of this key component of research. Moreover, frank discussions of these issues may influence institutional/department culture such that students who choose not to participate feel less like they are "letting down" their professors or that they are simply "too sensitive." Perhaps the possible racial differences in perceived pressure to participate will diminish as well.

One might argue that college students are not truly so vulnerable a population. Unlike children, they are capable of performing their own risk-benefit analyses. Theoretically, it should not matter if they are asked to participate in research studies run by their professors or if they can earn a marginal amount of extra credit by doing so; existing informed consent standards already account for these and other issues likely to arise. Furthermore, unlike prisoners, students cannot be considered a "captive" population. They are free to enroll in other courses, to "vote with their feet." And even if they were as vulnerable as children or prisoners, it does not seem reasonable to require that they derive direct benefit from research participation because psychology research seldom poses more than minimal risk. This actually protects college students more than children¹³ and, in some ways, more than prisoners.¹⁴

However, college students are susceptible to peer pressure and depend on the approval of their mentors, who can double as research investigators. It is unreasonable to expect them to challenge a system erected by those with authority over them. Without departmental efforts to ensure students personally benefit from research participation, they are nothing more than a population of convenience, which is unjust.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

It is crucial that all universities acting as research institutions prioritize the integrity of the research enterprise and the professor-student relationship. Students should be free to participate in faculty or department research if they so choose – there's benefit to be had! – but it must really be them doing the choosing.

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- ⁴ Adair, J. G. (2001); Bartholomay, E. M., & Sifers, S. K. (2016). Student perception of pressure in faculty-led research. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 50, 302–307. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2016.08.025>; Office for Human Research Protections (2011b). Chapter 6: Special Classes of Subjects. In *Institutional review board guidebook*. Retrieved from http://wayback.archive-it.org/org-745/20150930182815/http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/archive/irb/irb_chapter6.htm
- ⁵ University of Waterloo: Office of Research Ethics. (2014, January 28). *Conducting research in classes or with students as participants*. UWaterloo.Ca. <https://uwaterloo.ca/research/office-research-ethics/research-human-participants/pre-submission-and-training/human-research-guidelines-and-policies-alphabetical-list/conducting-research-classes-or-students-participants>
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Bartholomay, E. M., & Sifers, S. K. (2016).
- ⁸ Midzinski, A. L. (2010). *Students' Perceptions of Coercion in Research* [Master's Thesis, Utah State University].
- ⁹ Plaut, E. (2020, October 24).
- ¹⁰ Examples include the University of Waterloo, Boise State University, the Metropolitan State University of Denver, the University of Kentucky, etc.
- ¹¹ Bartholomay, E. M., & Sifers, S. K. (2016). 303.
- ¹² Dartmouth College. (2017). *PSYC 001: Introductory Psychology Course Syllabus*. Hanover, NH: Thalia Wheatley, Paul Whalen, Bill Kelley & Todd Heatherton.
- ¹³ 45 CFR § 46.306
- ¹⁴ 45 CFR § 46.404
- ¹⁵ National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. (1979). *The Belmont report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research*. Retrieved from <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/read-the-belmont-report/index.html>