

Student Research at Manhattanville: A Taxonomy

All independent research projects involving collecting data from humans are overseen by the IRB. Student projects are typically low-risk, and the amount of information requested is reduced. Nevertheless, if the college requires a student to do a research project (especially off-campus), it must make sure that the project is ethically sound and carried out in a responsible way. For educational research, privacy and consent questions are particularly relevant, and all research on minors is subject to considerably more oversight than on adults.

Simple projects that raise fewer issues are quicker to approve and are unlikely to require extra information, permissions, or protocols. What makes a project “simple” is explained below. Note that if a school or district requires a permission letter before a project is undertaken, this permission letter must be furnished to the IRB as well.

TYPES OF PROJECT

Educational Exemption. The data is gathered using “normal” educational activities, and used to improve pedagogy. Nothing happens that a schoolchild would find unusual. This is the simplest project to approve, and is particularly easy when the subjects are current students of the investigator. (Examples 1, 2, 3)

Submit: Exemption request. *Avoid:* Interviews with students, especially about non-academic topics; comparisons of different teachers, or any measure that reflects on teacher performance; videotaping of students or teachers; interaction with parents. Interviews with many other teachers may raise issues.

Anonymous Research Exemption. Data is gathered completely anonymously, usually by paper or web survey with no identifying information, and is not sensitive or risky to disclose. (Example 4)

Submit: Exemption request. *Avoid:* Face-to-face interviews; sensitive questions.

Student Research I. Manhattanville student gathers data for a course; the study is not exempt, but the project entails minimal risk. The project is substantially devised or approved by a faculty member and counts for credit in a course.

Submit: Student research form. The form should include either informal consent information in a “script”, describing what subjects will be told, or a formal consent form should be attached. If permission must be obtained from parents, that permission form can serve as the consent. *Avoid:* Parent interviews.

Student Research II. Manhattanville student gathers data for an independent project, such as a senior or graduate thesis. The student devises the project him/herself, with guidance from a faculty mentor, and may seek to publish the results.

Submit: Full research proposal, with literature, all scripts, instruments, and consent forms. *Avoid:* Greater than minimal risk.

DEFINITIONS:

Exemption vs. Research proposal: Some minimal-risk research is exempt from IRB oversight, but only the IRB can determine whether a project is indeed exempt. On the student form, there are separate sections to be used if the project is likely to be exempt, or if it is not.

For student class projects, the difference between exemptions and research proposals is not that significant; the proposal asks for somewhat more information, but both will be expedited.

Normally, no special consent is required for exempt projects (or very informal).

Expedited review: Full research proposals (as might be submitted by faculty) must be voted on at a meeting of the IRB; such meetings take place on a set schedule as posted on our website, and there is an associated deadline for each meeting. Most other proposals, including most student projects, can be reviewed using an expedited process by two designated IRB members, and the decision can be issued within a few days to two weeks. Expect slower responses during busy times, such as the last month of a semester.

Automatic exemption: A few activities are automatically exempt and do not need to be cleared with the IRB at all. Education students doing a standard field experience are automatically exempt.

Minimal risk: Roughly speaking, no more risky than any activity typically undertaken in daily life. Risks are not just medical, but include those of damage to reputation, financial standing, employability, emotional distress, legal status, etc.

EXAMPLES

1. A teacher tries a new instructional method on her students and uses grades and observation to see whether it is effective, then prepares a report or publication from her data. **Exempt**
2. A graduate student researcher uses standardized test scores to look at the effects of various interventions by a single teacher during a school year. This will require *permission* if the researcher would not ordinarily have access to the scores. **Exempt, but permission letter must be submitted if necessary**
3. A special education teacher conducts a case study on a particular student, systematically collecting data on what causes problematic behavior and how it can be stopped. The study includes information provided by the student's regular classroom teacher. The special ed. teacher might talk with the student about his behavior, but in a normal classroom context rather than a formal "interview." **Exempt**
4. A graduate student researcher prepares a survey on attitudes toward instructional technology, and places a copy in every faculty mailbox. Faculty return their completed surveys to a bin, without names attached. **Exempt**
5. A student teacher designs a case study on one student with reading difficulties. She collects test scores for the past three years and interviews several former teachers, including at the child's previous school. **Probably not exempt; issues of confidentiality arise with old records and with information from outside the current school. The child's parents may need to consent.**

6. A graduate student researcher interviews ten teachers about their training in a particular technique or requirement. **Not exempt; researcher will need to demonstrate consent and show that questions are not sensitive; confidentiality may need to be kept.**
7. A student researcher videotapes several classes to examine student behaviors during various types of instruction. **Not exempt; most districts require separate video release for minors; potential sensitive data on teachers requires careful confidentiality protocols.**
8. A student teacher designs a tardiness intervention program involving an after-school support group; he interviews parents by phone to collect data on children's behavior in the mornings. **Not exempt; raises serious questions of privacy, respect, and power dynamics; needs detailed protocol specifying exact script and steps to create a safe situation.**
9. A student teacher is interested in the effects of parental illiteracy on reading outcomes for her students; she interviews parents identified as not fully literate and assesses their self-reported abilities and experiences. **Unlikely to be approved; a very sensitive and stigmatizing topic which should require a professional, and is inappropriate in a schools context.**