

Guidance Regarding Use of University Students as Research Participants

While university students usually are not minors under the age of 18, they may still be considered a “vulnerable” population, embedded in a hierarchical social structure within the college/university environment. There is a power differential between instructors and students, and students may feel compelled to participate in research, especially if they are recruited from a class they are enrolled in. College students may still participate in research, but precautions should be observed in light of their potential vulnerability.

1. Are university students always considered a vulnerable population?

No. If you are not specifically targeting students for recruiting (i.e., if they may incidentally end up in your sample), they would not be considered vulnerable. Further, if your recruiting methods sample from all students on campus (e.g., an announcement in The Connection) or via a campus organization, (e.g., CMFK, Hillel) or target specific groups to which you have no direct personal connection, they would not be considered vulnerable.

Please note however, if students are recruited from classes they are taking or by instructors in their major or minor programs, they would likely be considered vulnerable to undue influence.

2. How can I minimize the risk of undue influence if I want to recruit from vulnerable student populations?

To avoid or minimize the risk of undue influence, there are a number of mitigation strategies you can employ, including the following suggestions:

- Offering extra credit (as opposed to course credit) for participation.
- Using a credit management system such as SONA.
- Ensuring that yours is not the only research participation opportunity available to students.
- Offering alternative means for earning participation credit.
- Ensuring that participation is voluntary.
- Using procedures that ensure participants are not known to you until after grades are submitted.
- Having a third party remove identifying information.

Not every strategy should be used in each study. Each study is unique and a strategy which may be appropriate or practicable for one study may not work for others. Be mindful that students may feel pressure to participate in a study, and take steps that will reasonably reduce that pressure.

3. Are there FERPA concerns in using students as research participants?

If your study involves any educational record, formal or informal, [FERPA](#) rules may apply. Please refer to our [Guidance on Research involving Education Records](#) document for additional information on FERPA rules.