

Researchers across disciplines conduct Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research. This document is informed and inspired by a University of Wisconsin System guide for those doing SoTL research to aid understanding of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process (Meyers, 2007). The intent of these guidelines is not to dictate decisions or actions, but to provide useful information and clarify ambiguities about SoTL research at Drake.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Research

“SoTL researchers seek to advance the practice of teaching and learning through scholarly inquiry into student learning. They are interested in systematically investigating questions that improve our understanding of how students learn, and focus on building practitioner knowledge about the practice of teaching.... This research is most often conducted in established educational settings (i.e., the classroom) and revolves around normal educational practice. This research often involves a comparison of various instructional techniques, learning tools, curriculum materials, or classroom teaching strategies. It may also include analysis of student papers or assignments.”

(Meyers, 2007)

Examples of the types of questions that SoTL researchers might pursue include:

- How can students learn to be more critical or reflective thinkers?
- How can students learn to use feedback to make subsequent assignments better?
- How do students view group participation, and how does that impact their learning?
- How do students draw on their prior knowledge to learn about new information or ideas?

Levels of IRB Review

There are three levels of IRB review: exempt, expedited, and full (see <http://www.drake.edu/academics/irb/criteria.php> for more information). All researchers working with human participants must file a protocol and receive approval.

- SoTL research is often in the **exempt** review category because it does not disrupt or manipulate subjects' normal life experiences, incorporate overly intrusive procedures, or identify subjects in a way that it poses more than minimal risk to them. In short, exempt means that the protocol is reviewed by the IRB chair or staff, and not by the full board.
- Research under the **expedited** review category is also minimal risk (which is defined as the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those originally encountered in daily life or during routine physical or psychological examinations or tests). An example of when the minimal risk category might apply to SoTL research would be if the researcher was collecting data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings for research purposes, or if the students were asked to perform tasks that extend beyond course expectations. Protocols are reviewed in an expedited manner by a subcommittee of the full board.
- Research with higher risk for participants requires a **full board review**. Generally, SoTL research will not fall into this higher “risk” category (e.g., research on sensitive or protected populations, research that results in more than minimal risks for the

participants, or research that involves intentional deception of the participants); however, vulnerable populations can include economically or educationally disadvantaged individuals, as well as other socially vulnerable categories. If there is any question about the ways in which an SoTL study might have increased risk for these populations, the IRB is likely to work with you to minimize these risks.

Most SoTL work will fall into one (or a combination) of the following commonly recognized **exempt** review categories (*as defined in federal regulations*):

1. **Exemption for education.** Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (a) research on regular or special education instructional strategies, or (b) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods is exempted.
2. **Exemption for research involving educational tests.** Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement) is exempted, unless (a) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (c) any disclosure of the subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.
3. **Exemption for survey or interview procedures.** Research involving survey or interview procedures is exempted unless (a) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (c) any disclosure of the subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.
4. **Research for collection or study of existing data.** Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens is exempted, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Guidelines for Protecting Students and Their Work

If the Informed Consent document is clear and explicit, and the researcher takes every precaution to present/publish the student data in an ethical and confidential manner, then the likelihood of identification and harm are greatly reduced. The IRB can often be helpful in guiding researchers in ways to make their data public in both confidential and ethical formats. The following requirements and recommendations can be useful when preparing the IRB form:

- Ask for “informed consent” from the student research participants, and allow any participant to withdraw from the study at any time. Remember that only those age 18

years or older can give informed consent. In some instances of exempt studies, informed consent may not be required (ex. category 4 above). Consult the IRB if you are unsure.

- Clearly delineate to the students which class assignments in the syllabus are required for the class and which of these required assignments will be used for research purposes. For each required class assignment also used for research, ensure that students understand they can choose to exclude their assigned work from the research without penalty. If there are optional class assignments used only for research purposes, be certain students understand they can choose whether to participate without penalty. Extra credit points should not be offered for research participation in required or optional class assignments.
- Emphasize that deciding not to participate in the research will have no effect on grades in the class. In fact, it is ideal if the instructor does not know until after final grades for the course are submitted which students have elected to participate in the study. Consult your IRB about ways to accomplish this task.
- Do not access students' confidential data (e.g., overall GPA) without requesting the students' permission to use that data. This can be a violation not just of research ethics, but also of their FERPA privacy rights.
- Take every precaution to present/publish the student data in an ethical and confidential manner. If possible, publish or present data in aggregate form. If using student work, excerpts, or quotes, take precautions to remove obvious student identifiers (name, class, year, etc.), choose excerpts or quotes that are not directly linked to students or that pose no risk to the students, and to present/publish the student evidence in the least identifiable form possible. In addition, the researcher can ask on the Informed Consent form whether the student is willing to be cited, and if so, whether identified or anonymously. Ensure students understand how their work will be made public and any implications for them.
- Be careful to exclude all identifiers on student surveys or questionnaires, or other collected evidence, whenever possible.
- If possible, student papers or assignments that are assessed for research purposes should be analyzed after final grades are posted and are rendered confidential by removing any identifiers before analysis.

References:

Meyers, R. A. (2007). Guidelines for human research participants in scholarship of teaching and learning research. Retrieved from http://www4.uwm.edu/sotl/steps_to_success/upload/LS-IRB-white-paper-dec7.pdf (July 13, 2011).

Resources:

Burman, M. E., & Kleinsasser, A. (2004). Ethical guidelines for use of student work: Moving from teaching's invisibility to inquiry's visibility in the scholarship of teaching and learning. *The Journal of General Education*, 53 (1), 59-79.

Hutchings, P. (Ed.). (2002). *Ethics of inquiry: Issues in the scholarship of teaching and learning*. Menlo Park, CA: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

McKinney, K. (2007). *Enhancing learning through the scholarship of teaching and learning: The challenges and joys of juggling*. Bolton, MA: Anker Pub.