

## **Social Science Division Institutional Review Board** *A Brief Guide for Student Research Proposals*

Social science research encompasses a wide variety of methods of examining the multitude of experiences of people. While each discipline in the social sciences may emphasize particular methods of gathering and analyzing data, all social sciences are committed to the ethical conduct of researchers. Consequently, any social science scholar or student conducting research must consider the potential impact of research procedures, working to minimize the risks that research poses to those who are studied. An important principle underlying such research is the voluntary, informed nature of participation by research subjects.

Throughout the academic community, ethical research is encouraged through the process of institutional review: a committee of scholars examines a research proposal prior to the initiation of research to ensure that the best, ethical practices of social science are incorporated into the research design. The purpose of institutional review is to determine the extent to which the proposed design conforms to the standards of ethical conduct. To make this determination, the committee focuses on the balance of the risks to potential research participants and the benefits from the research. As such, the review does not consider the quality of research design except to consider whether the proposed design is sufficient to provide research benefits.

This brief guide is designed to help you complete your research proposal for the Macalester Social Science Institutional Review Board. The guide consists of the following:

- A brief explanation of preparing your proposal
- A set of answers to common questions
- A sample consent form

### **Preparing Your Proposal**

A research proposal to the Social Science Institutional Review Board should include a completed Proposal Form and any additional materials as appropriate (sample consent form, sample recruitment documents, a copy of a survey, or schedule of interview questions). For your convenience, an electronic copy of the Proposal Form is available on the SSIRB website (<http://www.macalester.edu/committees/irb/ssirb/index.html>). You should download the form and save a copy, so that you are able to save your completed form. Answer the questions by filling in the shaded areas on the form. *Please note: Because the document is set up as a Microsoft Word form, it will **not** spell-check or auto-correct what you type. For this reason, you may prefer to copy and paste answers into the form.*

The Proposal Form includes questions to guide you in providing the Social Science Institutional Review Board the information needed to evaluate your proposal in relation to ethical standards. You should complete the form in a thorough and thoughtful manner. If the Social Science Institutional Review Board receives forms that are incomplete or poorly written or edited, it may decide to return the proposal to the student without reviewing it.

You should submit one copy of your completed **and signed** proposal to the chair of the Social Science Institutional Review Board. After reviewing your proposal, the Board will contact you,

your faculty advisor for the project, and your department chair. The Board will either approve your proposal, identify areas of further concern that you will need to address before beginning your research, request further information, forward your proposal to the campus-wide IRB, or reject your proposal as not approvable.

## **Common Questions and Answers**

*For which projects do I need to complete a research proposal for the Social Science Institutional Review Board?*

If you are completing an honors project, a senior thesis, or an independent research project that includes empirical social science research, you should complete a research proposal for the Social Science Institutional Review Board, unless such research involves documentary / archival or existing data set analysis only.

*Are there some research projects that do not require institutional review?*

Yes. There are some projects that do not require review:

1. If you are analyzing existing data sets or constructing your own data sets from already published data sources, you are exempt from institutional review.
2. If you are analyzing documentary or archival sources only, you are exempt from institutional review.
3. If you are completing a research project for a course other than a senior project, your professor is responsible for reviewing your research proposal (unless it involves certain vulnerable populations or illegal activities, in which case you will need to complete a research proposal for the Social Science Institutional Review Board).

*What does it mean to describe the methods of selecting my participants? Why do you need to know this information?*

To describe the methods of selecting participants, you are explaining your sampling procedures by answering questions such as: Who is eligible to participate in the research? How will I determine which people from all of the eligible people will participate? What methods will I use to recruit or encourage people to participate? This is important information because it helps to ensure that your research participants give their informed consent.

*How thorough do I need to be in describing my research procedures?*

The more thorough that you are, the better. If you are interviewing individuals, describe if you are recording those interviews. If so, what are you going to do with the tapes from the interviews (How will they be stored? How will you ensure that nobody will be able to identify the individuals on your tapes?)

*What does it mean to describe the risks and benefits of participation in a study?*

In designing social science research, you have an obligation to consider the ways in which your actions as a researcher might affect the participants in your study. You describe the risks and benefits in order to take account of these impacts, so that you can minimize the potential harm of your research. In describing the risks, consider that the range of factors that may give rise to negative consequences. For instance, the procedures that you use ask individuals to give some of their time and to provide information. The methods through which you gather the information might cause discomfort. The information that you gather may be of a sensitive nature.

*How do I know the risks and benefits of the research?*

You should anticipate the potential risks and benefits of the research, or, in other words, what are the potential consequences for participants of the procedures that you are using. The risks might include disclosure of information to you that a person finds embarrassing or highly personal. Or, a business, political, or non-profit organization may disclose information that they consider proprietary. In both instances, the impact of such disclosure is higher if the identity of your participant is disclosed. In short, think through the potential course of your research and consider the variety of outcomes.

Perhaps the best way to consider the risks and benefits of the research is to put yourself in the place of a potential participant. Consider questions, such as: If a stranger asked me to participate, what might the cost or potential harm to me be? Would I be telling him or her things that I did not want other people to know? In developing the description of risks and benefits, it is far better to identify more risks than to under-identify risks, because you are then better able to consider ways that you can minimize risks to your participants.

*How can I minimize risks?*

Often times, researchers might have a particular topic or approach in mind for their research. Try to take a step back from this particular focus and think if there are other ways to accomplish your goals. Be aware of the number of different ways that you can ask about the same or similar topics. Be aware of different ways to contact people, such that you are less likely to inadvertently reveal identifying information about participants.

To minimize risk, it is also important that you follow the principle of informed consent. By making sure that you have disclosed potential risk and the optional nature of the study to participants before the study, your participants can also help minimize harmful consequences of the research. For instance, if an interview begins to cover a topic about which the individual does not want to discuss, a participant aware of informed consent can ask you to discuss a different topic or terminate the interview.

*Are there some topics or populations that pose particular problems for research?*

Yes. Researchers who study vulnerable populations must pass much higher standards of scrutiny for the risks of research. For instance, federal regulations require that any research that involves children and any research that involves a greater than minimal risk can only be approved under very strict circumstances. Similarly, a researcher who studies illegal activities may be

subpoenaed by law enforcement who may wish to use field notes or interview transcripts to discover evidence. In such cases, researchers are bound by an ethical promise to participants and put in a very difficult situation. Some researchers have even been held in jail for refusing to divulge information from their research.

*I am conducting semi-structured interviews, so how do I know what my questions are?*

You should have a list of subjects or topics and opening questions. It may be difficult for you to develop such a list; however, if you think of why and how you chose participants for the study (and why you chose the topic and research question), you may have an easier time coming up with such a list of questions. You certainly may not know all of your follow-up questions. Even so, the list of subjects and opening questions that you will ask is important to know, so that you can assess potential risks to your research subjects.

*How long will the review process take? When do I need to submit my research proposal?*

The Social Science Institutional Review Board meets three times per semester. For your proposal to be considered, it must be submitted by the appropriate deadline. During the fall semester, the deadlines for receipt of proposals are: the fourth Wednesday of September; the day before fall break; and the first Friday after Thanksgiving break. During the spring semester, the deadlines for receipt of proposals are: the fourth Wednesday of the semester; the day before spring break; and the third Thursday in April. Depending on the number of proposals received, this review process may take from one to three weeks. Given that you may need to revise your proposal after the review process, the sooner you complete and submit your proposal, the better. Additionally, you should consult with a faculty advisor who may be able to help by reading a first draft of a proposal, so that potential issues may be addressed prior to your initial submission.

*Do I always need a consent form?*

No. If you are distributing a survey that respondents complete and return to you when you are not present, their completion of the survey represents their consent. You should, however, disclose the type of information that is on a consent form on a cover page of the survey. Additionally, if a consent form is the only thing that might connect an individual research participant to your project, you are not required to have a signed consent form, but can prepare a disclosure statement that replicates the information on a consent form without obtaining a signature from the research participant; however, your advisor or department may prefer that you obtain a signed consent form.

*Adopted: April 20, 2005  
Revision: March, 2009*