

A National Perspective for Improving Working Relationships Between Educational Researchers and Institutional Review Board Members

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to set forth some fundamental guidelines for educators to develop a working relationship with Institutional Review Board members. The authors identify ways to prevent a strained environment from developing so that positive relationships can be established among key players whose role is to ensure that educational research proceeds in a manner that respects the rights of human subjects.

The role of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has grown dramatically in its oversight of ethics in educational research conducted within federally supported institutions since its introduction in 1976. This role remained largely symbolic and monitoring was based on ensuring that the proper paperwork had been filled out prior to research. This changed in 2001 when three major research universities saw all research activities suspended due to lack of compliance with federal IRB.

Since that time the IRB has assumed a vastly expanded mission in most universities leading some critics to claim that the IRB process has done its job too well. In an effort to be diligent in protecting the interests of the university, human subjects, the researcher, and the reputation of research in general, many disputes and

misunderstandings have occurred. Researchers lament the “ethics creep” that has greatly changed the way they work. Some research has been hindered or even halted because of miscommunication, over-diligence of less experience IRB regulators, or under-prepared researchers unaccustomed to accounting to outsiders regarding their specialized research. This resulting distrust and damaged working relationships between regulators and researchers has harmed the over-all environment within which research is conducted and discussed.

This strained working environment leads researchers to view the IRB as a heartless, inflexible bureaucracy. The regulators in the same environment come to see researchers as arrogant or even incompetent. Researchers have been reported to respond by becoming more tentative and less productive or finding ways to short-circuit the IRB process, ignoring it at times, at their own peril as well as that of the university.

The purpose of this article is to identify ways to prevent a strained working environment from developing so that relationships can be established among key players whose role is to ensure that research proceeds in a manner that respects the rights of human subjects. The following suggestions are based on the assumption that the researcher and the Institutional Research Board (IRB) regulator find themselves on common ground – partners in learning to cooperate in improving research and its ethical oversight.

1. Become an expert in the *ethical issues surrounding your specific research purpose, related questions, and methodology*. Some types of research methodologies or populations of research subjects call for higher levels of IRB monitoring. Some research may not be considered “research” according to IRB standards and may therefore be eligible for “expedited review.” In some cases it may be completely exempt from IRB oversight. Examples would be oral history, some quality improvement studies, or some ethnographic or naturalistic studies.
2. Become an expert in the *ethical standards for research in your academic discipline*. Quite often the professed standards are sufficient to meet the IRB standards. Carefully worded research proposals may allow IRB regulators to acknowledge the compliance of a study without unnecessary halts to the process or miscommunication. As you become more knowledgeable of the ethical standards in your discipline, others will come to rely on your knowledge.
3. Become an expert in the *IRB process* of your institution. Examine how each part of the IRB protocol or checklist relates to the ethical issue of your particular study, methodology, and academic discipline. Sometimes the protocol may not fit your specific study and special wording in your document or study proposal may be necessary to alleviate regulator concerns.
4. Get to know your IRB members personally. Don’t wait until you submit your proposal or go to the IRB meeting to discover who they are. By then it may be too late as they struggle to understand what you are trying to do and how you will conscientiously strive

to protect the human subjects involved in your study. Do keep your conversations focused and brief. Be professional and business-like.

5. Assume that IRB members want to do a good job. Empathize with them as you would someone who is in training for a new job. They may need some help understanding what you are trying to do. If their research experience is limited you may need to spend a bit more time to establish rapport and help them understand the research process. Once they understand, they may assume a helpful posture to assist you in meeting IRB requirements.

6. Continue to conduct occasional conversations with IRB members related to your study so that they come to know you for the expertise that you developed. Over time IRB members will come to view your research proposals with greater confidence because you will write better proposals and you will establish a reputation as a knowledgeable researcher.

7. Before IRB meetings listen carefully to IRB members talk to you about research and ethics. Be prepared in non-public, non-confrontational ways to share your concerns regarding their statements or written comments. If they have learned to trust and respect you personally, they will have a higher comfort level with your guidance.

In conclusion, when the Institutional Review Board process is seen as a collaboration between IRB regulator and researcher, the relationship will lead to a smoother transition between research planning and the actual conduct of the research.

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