Use of Research to Support Understanding of Student Learning and the Student Experience

Belmont University maintains an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to evaluate the use of human subjects in research projects. Under federal law, projects that qualify as research and thus have to be reviewed by the IRB Committee are those which are characterized by a systematic investigation of a problem or situation and include in some form the development of a specific research question, testing or other forms of data collection, and evaluation, the results of which contribute to develop what is known as “generalizable knowledge” or something that provides findings that could be broadly applied to various fields of knowledge.

University faculty members who wish to design and develop research projects that use information collected from their classes, classes taught by colleagues, and data collected for the University by the Office of Assessment and Institutional Research (OAIR) will typically have research projects that are considered exempt from IRB review. These projects meet at least one of the following federal standards for exemption:

- The research is conducted in commonly accepted or established educational settings;
- The research employs educational tests, surveys, interviews, focus groups, etc. with the direct and indirect identifiers for particular subjects removed;
- The research uses existing records, documents, or data already publically available or the information collected by the investigator cannot be linked to any of the subjects who were engaged in the study.

In other words, if a faculty member wants to create a research question to determine if one kind of test question produces more thorough answers, the use of students’ test results is exempt from further review as long as the identities of the students and the specific test results are reported as anonymous learning outcomes. In addition, if the faculty member wishes to publish the results, there is no violation of FERPA as long as the information about the students’ identities and the students’ specific course performance is not published.

Regardless of whether the faculty member believes the research is exempt, Belmont University requires the principal investigator to complete an IRB review application through our Axiom Mentor system found at (URL). In general, the IRB Committee will not collect and will not review results of the exempt projects.

When conducting research based on students enrolled in a particular class or classes, it is essential that no additional academic credit or other rewards be offered to the enrolled students for participating in the research project. Likewise, students should not be penalized for declining to participate in a project in which they feel
their self-efficacy is affected. Faculty members must also avoid any environment in which coercion to participate in a project is perceived or is present. That is, students should not feel they were unduly influenced to participate in the research project and there must be no harm or chance of harm to students who voluntarily decline to participate in a specific research project. In cases in which participation in a course is tied to a specific activity which will be the subject of research, the IRB Committee recommends completion of an Informed Consent Form prior to the scheduled project activity. The Informed Consent form will include the option to decline participation in the specific activity without penalty to the non-participating students.

For additional information on IRB Review, definitions and federal regulations, please see 45 CFR 46 at www.HHS.gov

Note: This circular also houses important information about the rights of human subjects in medical research and the appropriate means and methods of biological samples collection and analysis. Because this area is subject to frequent changes and updates, please consult the regulations cited above before designing your study and submitting an IRB request.