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## What Cooperative Extension Professionals Need to Know About Institutional Review Boards: Recruiting Participants

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### Abstract

As more Cooperative Extension professionals conduct evaluations, needs assessments, and research that is professionally published and presented, there is a need to better understand the process for navigating the university Institutional Review process. This article examines challenges associated with recruiting participants and is the second in a series providing tips for preparation of IRB proposals and the implementation of more sound and productive studies.

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## Introduction

As more Extension professionals conduct evaluations, needs assessments, and research that is professionally published and presented, there is a great need to understand the process for navigating the Institutional Review Board (IRB) review process. Each university has its own IRB whose purview is to review all university-affiliated research conducted with human subjects. While some Extension professionals may have considerable experience with IRBs, others may lack understanding of or struggle with particular issues that are inherent in community-based research typical of Extension professionals.

This article examines challenges associated with recruiting participants, providing tips for preparing an IRB proposal and the implementation of a more sound and productive study. It is part of a series helping Extension professionals through the process and providing tips from a group of authors who have collectively served nearly 20 years on University Institutional Review Boards. (See the first article, in the October *JOE*, "[What Cooperative Extension Professionals Need to Know About Institutional Review Boards.](#)")

## Tips for Recruiting Participants

Essentially, the recruitment section in an IRB submission details the process for obtaining participants in a research project. For example, this is where Extension professionals may explain how they are going to get program participants to be involved in evaluations of particular programs or where Extension professionals conducting needs assessments describe how they will gather samples of local residents. The fundamental issue underlying recruitment is that a potential

participant needs to make a free, informed, and uninfluenced choice to volunteer for the study. Below are some issues that are common, particularly for community-based practitioners and researchers to keep in mind when preparing to submit a protocol to an IRB.

## **Recruiting Vulnerable Audiences**

When recruiting participants, it is important for Extension professionals to remember that several groups of people are deemed as vulnerable by IRBs. Vulnerable participants are minors, prisoners, fetuses, pregnant women, persons who are cognitively impaired, human in vitro fertilization, or persons who are economically or educationally disadvantaged. In terms of recruitment, these audiences may be more vulnerable to being involuntarily forced, coerced, manipulated, or subjected to undue influence in order to participate. Special care is needed when Extension professionals want to include such audiences in their studies.

## **Coercive Recruitment**

One of the main issues IRB reviewers examine is the potential for coercion in the recruitment process. Any risk that a potential participant might feel pressure to participate should be removed or lessened. A situation that is common in community-based research is when a teacher, supervisor, or program coordinator is in a position of authority and that person is directly recruiting participants. For example, staff might feel coerced to participate in a district or regional director's study of the quality of communication within the district.

A person of influence over a potential participant may exert coercive pressure knowingly or unknowingly. In cases such as these, Extension professionals could recruit potential participants through someone who does not have the same influential relationship or could strongly and repeatedly emphasize the voluntary nature of the study to potential participants.

## **Overly Enticing Rewards**

A second situation that could be considered coercive is when the reward to participate in the research is so desirable that people volunteer in spite of potential risks. For example, if parents are promised free program sessions for allowing their child with special needs to participate in a somewhat risky study, this could be considered a coercive recruitment strategy. In this situation, parents may be so anxious to get additional help for their child that they sign up for the project against their better judgment. In such cases, Extension professionals should avoid rewards that are so compelling that potential participants may ignore risks to get the rewards or, at a minimum, clearly explain any potential risks to potential participants.

## **Risk**

If there is risk in the recruitment process, Extension professionals should elaborate on how these risks will be addressed. For example, if potential participants feel compelled to participate because others in their peer group have volunteered, the researcher needs to describe how the risk of this happening will be addressed.

## **Recruitment Confidentiality**

People need to feel that their decision to participate is confidential. If the topic of the research involves any sensitive subjects, the researchers should attempt to protect potential participants' identity. For example, if Extension professionals are trying to recruit for an AIDS treatment project, contact with a potential participant should be made discreetly and the person should not be identified. A remedy in this case would be posting a flyer so individuals could contact the researcher privately if they are interested. If recruiting in a large group, Extension professionals could provide an envelope to each person to return paperwork, whether or not they sign-up for the study.

## **Distinction Between the Program and Study**

Often, Extension professionals are conducting research that evaluates the effectiveness of a particular program. Recruitment efforts need to emphasize that participation in the program is not tied to participation in the research study and that these are separate choices. For example, if recruitment takes place at the beginning of a program, it should be made clear to potential study participants that whether or not they choose to participate in the study will not affect their opportunities to continue in the program.

## **Training Recruiters on the Recruitment Process**

If someone besides the Extension professional is doing the recruitment, such as program staff, the recruiter has to be trained according to approved procedures. It is important to refer to this training in an IRB protocol. If community members are recruiting, again, the Extension professional should make sure they are prepared or even have a script to read to potential participants.

## **Recruitment Approval from a Particular Entity**

If Extension professionals are going to recruit potential participants for a study at or from a particular organization or agency, that entity needs to approve the recruitment. For example, if an Extension professional is recruiting potential participants from a community center, the center needs to approve this recruitment. It is typical to have a letter from an agency official that allows for this recruitment. The letter should accompany the IRB submission.

### **Language-Appropriate Materials**

Recruitment material should contain language appropriate for the potential audience. This is particularly important for younger and more "at risk" audiences. For example, a flyer that is recruiting low-income youth should be simple enough for this potential audience to understand the purpose, procedures, and risks of the project.

### **Details, Details, Details**

Finally, it is important to provide the IRB with very explicit detail as to what will happen when a potential participant is being recruited. For example, what will be said, who will say it, and when will it be said. If potential participants are going to be recruited via mail or through a flyer, Extension professionals should provide a recruitment letter and/or flyer. Or if recruitment takes place in person, they should provide a script of what will be said to a potential participant. When submitting an IRB protocol, Extension professionals should walk the IRB reviewers through exactly what will happen.

## **Conclusion**

Addressing these issues will make for a better IRB submission and ultimately better quality research. Having sound and successful research will strengthen Extension professionals' move toward sharing our unique and important community-based work.

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