HRPP Policy Number: 1601 Version: 4.0 Effective Date: 08/15/25	**Research Utilizing Surveys & Internet Research**	**Supersedes Document Dated: 12/01/16, 01/23/18, 07/26/19**
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Section 16: Research Utilizing Surveys and Internet Research
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16.1 Research Utilizing Surveys

Research utilizing surveys, varying from brief and informal to lengthy and large-scale questionnaires designed for large samples, has been one of the most used data collection tools in the social sciences. What was once done using paper-based surveys is now being accomplished using the Internet, and due to the relative ease of Internet distribution, it results in a large increase in the number of surveys people are asked to complete. Some researchers feel that over-surveying has led to survey fatigue and a widespread decrease in survey response rates. Therefore, to ease the potential for survey fatigue and to assure a good response rate for the survey, consideration should be given to:

1. Choose a target audience and attempt to limit the people who will receive the survey to those who will provide the most relevant data.
2. Have clarity and brevity in the communications. Be clear regarding why the participants are getting the survey, how long it will take to complete, and how the data will be used.
3. Have an efficient survey design; the survey should be no longer than absolutely necessary.
4. Regardless of how surveys are distributed, the IRB must review the proposed research, including the survey, to evaluate subject recruitment methods, the informed consent process and document, data collection and storage methods, risks of participation, and other features of the research to assure adequate subject protections. Therefore, the appropriate IRB forms must be completed and submitted. Research involving the use of surveys is usually minimal risk and can be reviewed as expedited or exempt, unless the survey questions are sensitive, potentially provoking psychological distress, or could potentially result in civil or criminal actions against a subject.

As stated previously, there is always a requirement to obtain informed consent from research subjects. Researchers must discuss the study purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, the voluntary nature of participation, researcher contact information if subjects have questions, and the other required elements of informed consent. However, the regulations allow the IRB to approve a waiver or alteration of the consent process in which some of the required elements may be omitted and/or the method of obtaining and documenting consent altered (**See Section 6.7 Waiver of Informed Consent and Waiver of Documentation of Consent**).

For research utilizing surveys, approval is usually granted for an informed consent process that includes a consent document in the form of a cover letter that is at the beginning of the survey. In this consent cover letter, subjects are informed about the study and told that they can opt out of the research simply by not continuing to the survey questions, and they may withdraw at any time by exiting the survey. The requirement for

obtaining written documentation of consent (a signature) is waived as subjects agree to participate, as signified by completing the survey.

Researchers who utilize email surveys must add the following information to their message:
1. The word "Research" should be in the subject line.
2. The message should state at the outset where the email addresses were obtained.
3. Include either a statement that there will be no future mailings or an "opt-out" message that directs the researcher to remove the subject's name from future mailings.
4. If there will be future emails, add the statement, "If you do not respond to this survey or return the "opt-out" message, you will receive repeat email messages X times during the next Y weeks.
5. Include a contact email address and telephone number in the last sentence of the email message.
6. Use a "blind copy format" so that the list of recipients will not appear in the message header.

16.2 Internet-based Research

Internet communication is extensively used and provides access to an enormous amount of information to "Internet communities." Access to these communities and the information associated with them raises a number of ethical questions and challenges for researchers and the IRB. Perhaps the biggest challenges that are faced relate to privacy and informed consent. In an AAAS workshop on the topic of Internet-based research, workshop attendees provided a list of recommendations for improving "the quality of Internet-based research while promoting adherence to sound ethical research practices" and taking privacy and informed consent concerns into consideration.

In their research proposals, University researchers should, at a minimum, describe:
1. The Internet methods and technology that will be used to interact with "Internet communities."
2. Potential risks and benefits of the research and how risks will be minimized.
3. The informed consent process that will be used, i.e., how Internet community members will be informed that research data is being collected, how community members can "opt-out" of having their data collected, etc., or justify why a waiver from the requirement to obtain informed consent is appropriate.
4. The methods they will use to assure the protection of privacy for subjects and how confidentiality of the data will be provided.

Proposals for Internet-based research may meet criteria for exemption from IRB review. However, other issues may dictate a higher, more stringent level of review, such as:
1. The complexity of reducing potential risks.
2. Protecting privacy and confidentiality.
3. Obtaining true informed consent.
4. Justifying a waiver.