Section 14: Research Utilizing Surveys and Internet Research

14.1 Survey Research

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, 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 wide-spread 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 that will provide data most relevant.
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 efficient survey design; the survey should be no longer than absolutely necessary.

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 by an expedited process or deemed exempt from IRB review, 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
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 is signified by completing the survey. Researchers who utilize e-mail surveys must add the following information to their message:

1. The words "Research" should be in the "Subject" line.
2. The message should state at the outset where the e-mail 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 e-mails, add the statement, "If you do not respond to this survey or return the "opt-out" message, you will receive repeated e-mail messages 'X' times during the next 'Y' weeks.
5. Include a contact e-mail address and telephone number in the last sentence of the e-mail message.
6. Use a "blind copy format" so that the list of recipients will not appear in the message header.

14.2 Internet 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 IRB. Perhaps the biggest challenges that are faced relate to privacy and informed consent. In an AAAS workshop on the topic of Internet research, workshop attendees provided a list of recommendations for improving "the quality of Internet research while promoting adherence to sound ethical research practices" and take 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 protection of privacy for subjects and how confidentiality of the data will be provided.

Proposals for Internet 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.