

SRP and the IRB

Projects undertaken for the purpose of completing an SRP do not automatically have to be submitted to the IRB. There are 3 questions to ask yourself about your project first.

1. The first question is whether the project constitutes human subjects research, as defined in federal regulations.

Research is a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

One way of thinking about the meaning of “designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge” is to consider whether the intent is to publish the results (e.g., in a journal that the students from SIS publish called Journal of International Service or a peer-reviewed scholarly journal) or present them at a professional conference. If so, the project is research. If not, in particular if the main intent is advancing the student’s research training, then in the eyes of the IRB, the project is not research. The responsibility for monitoring it lies with the faculty supervisor (who should complete human subjects ethics research training), not the IRB.

A human subject is a living individual **about** whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains

1. Data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or
2. Identifiable private information.

The word “about” is important here. Asking a subject what she or he thinks about the IRB process at American University, and collecting this information anonymously, would not constitute research with human subjects because the information is not “about” the subjects but rather about the IRB process.

2. Second, consider whether your research involves vulnerable populations (children, prisoners, pregnant women, or handicapped or mentally disabled persons). If so, it should be submitted to the IRB, regardless of whether it meets the federal definition of human subjects research.

3. Third, consider whether your research poses minimal risk to participants. Minimal risk means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. If the research is more than minimal risk, it should be submitted to the IRB no matter what.

In sum, if your SRP project is minimal risk *and* does not involve a vulnerable population *and* does not meet the federal definition of human subjects research, then it does not have to be submitted to the IRB and can instead be supervised solely by your faculty advisor.

If you have any questions about the application of this analysis to your project, contact the IRB coordinator Matt Zembrzuski at irb@american.edu.