

The Michael S. Rapaport
Everyday Ethics Across the Curriculum Initiative

Final Report for Course development Grant
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Psychology 300 seeks to educate students about the various research methods in psychology. In addition to discussing the scientific method and the ways in which it differs from other methods of inquiry, specific research techniques including observational designs, surveys, correlational or quasi-experimental designs, and true experiments are discussed in detail. Students are taught how to design, conduct, analyze, and disseminate quality research, with the course culminating in students designing a research project that tests an hypothesis based on the literature. The students are then required to construct a fictitious data set that supports their hypothesis, analyze the data, and then and disseminate their “findings” by way of both a presentation and a research manuscript.

Obviously, the course lends itself to considerable discussion concerning both the ethical treatment of human and animal subjects in research, and scientific integrity and fraud among investigators. As the course was previously taught, however, ethical issues were only briefly discussed, with those discussions centering primarily on procedural details for securing permission to conduct psychological research at Union College. I added two main components to the course which allowed students to gain a deeper understanding of the ethical issues involved in psychological research. I devoted one class period and one laboratory period to the discussion of ethics. The first class period was used to present some of the major issues involved in human research, including informed consent, the risk/benefit ratio, the notion of minimal risk, the use of deception in research, coercion, and debriefing and desensitization. Following the brief lecture, several very different research scenarios were presented and students discussed the ethical considerations of each scenario. I was pleasantly surprised by the extent of class discussion these scenarios generated, and we only covered about half of the scenarios.

As noted above, students in the class are required to design a fairly sophisticated psychological study. I required students to submit for a grade a human subjects research proposal for their final project. They used Union College’s human subjects research proposal form for this purpose. In addition, they were required to give a short presentation of their research and defend their proposals to fellow students in the class who were acting as members of an Internal Review Board (IRB). Each student played both the role of researcher and IRN member. This allowed students to witness first hand the risk/benefit trade-off involved in psychological research.

Although the presentations were generally well done and the proposal submissions were fairly impressive, I wasn’t completely satisfied with the assignment. The main problem was that the various research projects selected by the students varied considerably in terms of the ethical issues involved, with some projects posing essentially no risks, and others demanding attention to numerous ethical issues. This made fair grading of both the proposals and the presentations very difficult. Hence, I have decided to change the project in the future. Instead of requiring students to submit and defend a human subjects proposal for their final research project, I will require them to submit and defend a proposal for one of several preselected research projects. This will allow me to manipulate the ethical issues involved in each research scenario.