NAVIGATING THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) PROCESS
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If you plan to share the results of your SoTL research project (through public presentations or publications, etc.), federal guidelines require you to secure IRB approval for doing research with human subjects or participants. **If you do not get IRB approval BEFORE your begin your project, as a general rule you cannot subsequently publicize your findings, no matter how valuable they may be.** (Your IRB may allow you to use general archival data from previous semesters under some circumstances, but you should not assume that this will be possible.) The IRB process may seem burdensome the first time or two that you go through it, but the process will help ensure that you make responsible use of the data that you collect. In addition to ensuring that your study does not harm students (by giving some students an unfair advantage or disadvantage, for example), the IRB process will help ensure that students provide "informed consent" to participate in your research and that their privacy is protected. Although there is an "Exempt" category that may apply to some SoTL projects, most university IRB's require SoTL projects to undergo IRB scrutiny while "exempting" them only from the requirement of annual reporting and review. **You should always assume that your project requires IRB approval if you are doing research that you plan to publicize with student participants.**

I have posted sample IRBs from SoTL projects at: http://davidjvoelker.com/sotl-resources/. For a recent overview of ethical issues in SoTL, see: Ruth L. Healy, et al., "Being Ethically Minded: Practising the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in an Ethical Manner," *Teaching & Learning Inquiry,* Vol. 1, No. 2 (2013), pp. 23–33.

Here are several tips for navigating the IRB approval process:

1. Start early. Completing the IRB process takes time. If your project needs full board review (unlikely for SoTL projects but certainly possible), you will have wait for the board to meet. Most boards do not meet during the summer, and some chairs do not review proposals during the summer. Find out how your institutional IRB operates and plan accordingly. **Remember, you must receive IRB approval BEFORE you collect any data for your project.**

2. Check with your institution's IRB to find out if it requires human subjects training. If so, complete this online training for doing research with human subjects before you begin your project. Save your certificate as a PDF file for easy sharing. (Some institutions make use of the "Protecting Human Research Participants" certification offered by the NIH.) If you have any research assistants, your IRB will probably require them to complete this training, too.

3. Unless you have experience with SoTL research, consider having a short meeting with the chair of your institution's IRB to ask for advice regarding your proposal. Some IRBs have special procedures to help streamline SoTL work, such as anonymous informed consent processes. You may also benefit from asking a colleague with IRB experience to review your first proposal.

4. Keep careful track of the data management procedures that you agree to in your proposal. Typically, you will need to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of research subjects.