Recruitment of Human Subjects (Participants)

Purpose

The purpose is to outline the policies and procedures for recruitment of human subjects, also known as participants, in research.

General Policy | Email | Social Media | Crowdsourcing, Pools or Panels | Snowball Sampling | Permission Letter Requirement | Campus Access after Approval

Definitions

Advertisement is a notice or announcement promoting a research study, which can take many forms, such as an email message, social media post, web-based forum or site listing, flyer/poster, verbal announcement, telephone call, etc.

Amazon Mechanical Turk or MTurk is a crowdsourcing marketplace that matches *requesters*, with *workers* who perform *Human Intelligence Tasks* (HITS), which often include human research studies.

Crowdsourcing is the act of collecting services, ideas, or content through the contributions of a large group of people, usually via the Internet, for payment or for free.

Human Intelligence Tasks, known as HITS, are virtual micro-tasks that computers are currently unable to perform, and must be performed by humans. Examples in research might be answering a survey or performing a behavioral test.

Human Subject (or Participant) is a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research, (i) obtains information or biospecimens through intervention or interaction with the individual, and uses, studies, or analyzes the information or biospecimens; or (ii) obtains, uses, studies, analyzes, or generates identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens.

Informed Consent is a process by which a knowing, legally effective agreement to participate in research is made by any individual or the individual's legally authorized representative (LAR), and which may be obtained only under circumstances that provide the prospective subject or representative sufficient opportunity to consider whether or not to participate and that minimize the possibility of coercion or undue influence. The informed consent process includes recruitment.

Snowball Sampling is a recruitment technique in which current participating subjects are asked to assist an investigator with identification of future potential subjects from among their acquaintances or colleagues. Thus, enrollment is said to grow like a rolling snowball.

General Policy

Email messages, flyers, social media posts, and other types of notices or advertisements are often used to recruit potential research participants and are considered part of the informed consent process. Such materials must be submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Exempt Review Committee (ERC) for review and approval, along with an explanation of exactly **how and where** they will be used. Both boards have published an Advertising Template, which illustrates recruitment documents such as an email message, the Psychology Department's SONA system, a flyer, etc. The template may be found in the Forms and Templates section of

IRBNet.

Advertisements used in research must:

1. Indicate that the project is research
2. State who is conducting it (investigator and/or facility name)
3. State the purpose or condition under study
4. State eligibility criteria in summary form
5. State the time or other commitment required
6. State the location of activities
7. Provide a brief list of benefits, even if only to the field
8. Provide contact information
9. Not emphasize incentives or payments
10. Allow free and light-colored space to accommodate an approval stamp

Particular types of recruitment are discussed below.

Recruitment via Email

An investigator who proposes to use email for recruitment purposes must submit the content of the email message which includes (1) a subject line, (2) the body of the message, and (3) a statement that the project has been approved by Marywood University's Institutional Review Board or Exempt Review Committee. If an investigator plans to attach a flyer to an email message, the body of the message may be shortened to eliminate redundancy, as long as all required information is present between the two documents.

When planning to use email recruitment, the investigator must explain one of the following:

- A third-party, often the administrator of the LISTSERV or distribution list, will forward the investigator's message on the behalf of the investigator

- The investigator will post to a LISTSERV, but will not have access to its subscribers' individual email addresses because the post will transmit to the LISTSERV's address only

- The investigator will obtain potential subjects' email addresses and transmit messages directly to them, either individually or as a group

When an investigator plans to obtain email addresses, the investigator must state whether the message will be sent from the investigator's (1) own private email account, or (2) from the survey platform itself, where survey responses might be traceable.

When an investigator plans to submit to a group of email addresses rather than a formal LISTSERV, the investigator must utilize the *blind copy (Bcc)* feature to maintain the individuals' privacy.

Note that use of a survey platform to transmit email recruitment messages may result in subject identification if the investigator generates unique, individualized survey URLs for each message. If anonymity is desired or required, one general survey URL should be created and inserted into email messages, and IP address collection should be proactively disabled in the

survey platform.

For email messages, also review our [Permission Letter Requirement](#) section.

Recruitment via Social Media Sites and Applications

An investigator who proposes to use social media sites or applications (apps) must submit the content of the announcement, including sufficient detail about exactly **how and where** it will be posted. The investigator must indicate whether the site or group is "private" or "public" in terms of its parameters, and whether or not comments will be disabled or monitored. Some examples of what to include are, but are not limited to:

- Facebook
  - From which *profile* the post will be made (personal profile, a "page" set up specifically for the study, an official MU account, etc.)
  - Whether using text, flyer, or combination thereof
  - Whether posting to a personal wall, stories, organization page, or group
  - Whether using a formal, purchased advertisement
  - Whether using Messenger communication to friends or to a groups' members

- Instagram
  - From which *profile* the post will be made (personal profile, an account set up specifically for the study, an official MU account, etc.)
  - Whether using an image, flyer, text, or combination thereof
  - Whether using profile bio, stories, highlights, direct message, etc.
  - Whether comments will be disabled

- PacerSpace by Ready Education Inc.
  - From which *profile* a post will be made (personal account vs. on behalf of a host, such as a club, organization, etc.)
  - Whether using text, a flyer, or a combination thereof
  - Whether creating an event or posting to a community (feed)
  - Whether setting the feed to be read-only or using a channel which allows two-way communication, where comments cannot be disabled

- X (formerly Twitter)
  - From which *profile* a post will be made (personal account, an account set up specifically for the study, an official MU account, etc.)
  - Whether using an image, image with text, personal message, etc.
  - Whether comments will be disabled or limited to certain types of users (verified accounts, accounts you follow, etc.)

For posts to social media groups, also review our [Permission Letter Requirement](#) section.

Recruitment via Crowdsourcing, Pools and Panels

Recruitment through digital crowdsourcing, pools, or panels may be approved on a case-by-case basis. If the platform is unknown to the IRB or ERC, it may request additional information from the investigator about where the business is officially registered, what information it collects and retains, how the research will be displayed or promoted to its users (i.e. settings), and data ownership. By using a given platform, an investigator attests to having read and adhering to its terms of service and/or privacy policy.

When using crowdsourcing, pools, or panels to recruit, the investigator will often be required to include specialized consent form language related to the platform.

AMAZON MECHANICAL TURK (MTurk)

Due to its cost effectiveness and ability to yield a large number of "workers" (subjects) in a short period of time, Amazon Mechanical Turk's platform is popular for human research use. However, since it was not developed with academic research in mind, it may present limitations to data quality and subject privacy. Therefore, its use may be permitted on a case-by-case basis.

Rejection of workers' HITs is prohibited, because it imposes a penalty which possibly affects workers' approval rates, reputation, and earning potential. This may impact some workers' livelihoods, since there is no mechanism for reversing such rejections within their accounts. The solution would be to set up one or more attention checks with a skip or branch logic, whereby a failure of a check or series thereof would route affected individuals to the survey's end without a completion code (needed for payment), where they would then be reminded to return the HIT so as not to be penalized through an abandonment rate. The investigator would need to include detail about such a procedure in the application and informed consent form.

An investigator must clearly state in the informed consent process that a worker must return a HIT if they accept the work but then change their mind or withdraw after reading the consent form or after beginning the work.

The investigator must include detail about the announcement's properties in the IRB or ERC application form. Required MTurk language for informed consent forms is described in the IRB and ERC's informed consent template.

When proposing use of Mturk, the investigator must inform the IRB or ERC about:

- All inclusion and exclusion criteria, including specific MTurk qualification thresholds such as HIT approval rate (e.g., 98%), number of HITS completed (e.g., >500), Masters Qualification, location (e.g., US only), or prohibition of use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)

- Allotted time to be displayed in the MTurk description, which should be longer than the estimated completion time so that it does not expire and affect abandonment rate (Note: Some workers accept numerous HITS at once, queueing their work, whereby timers could easily run out before completion.)

- What will appear in the announcement's *instructions* area

- Clarity in the MTurk description about specific tasks, such as a writing, watching videos, interacting with others as part of a game, etc.

- Clarity about compensation and bonuses

- Whether subjects will be compensated for any screening processes

- Whether HIT approval is automatic or must be reviewed, and length of time to approval and payment of the worker

- Whether attention checks will be used, and what happens when failed

- Whether the HIT will use the internal MTurk platform for a survey/interaction or will link to an external platform (e.g., Qualtrics)

- If third-party software is required to complete the task (e.g. Javascript or Inquisit)

- If paying subjects, that the HIT will be structured with "assignments"– one HIT for multiple workers with a stated capacity/maximum number of subjects able to accept that HIT (Note: If you offer payment and do not set a maximum number of assignments, you may end up with a steep MTurk fee.)

MTurk worker IDs are identifiable information, and research shows that they can be linked to individuals' Amazon profiles. Investigators should not collect worker IDs unless absolutely necessary. If there is a need to collect them, the investigator must ensure that the consent language describes the reason and the confidentiality measures that will be in place, such as deleting worker IDs after payment and not linking them to individual survey responses.

SONA SYSTEMS

In most circumstances, the IRB and ERC will allow recruitment via the Marywood University's SONA Systems platform (Psychology Participant Pool), where course credits may be earned. An investigator proposing to recruit via SONA must use the SONA advertising template and explain in the application form how the system will be used, such as to:

- Advertise and then schedule an in-person meeting

- Advertise and remotely collect data (SONA hosts; no other survey platform involved)

- Advertise, but use a third-party survey platform to remotely collect data (e.g., Qualtrics, REDCap, Survey Monkey, etc.).

When SONA is used, the consent form must inform potential subjects that credits may be earned through alternate means (e.g. alternative assignment at the discretion of their professor). No penalties, such as deduction of previously earned credits, can be assessed for failure to show up for a scheduled appointment without notice by a specified deadline. SONA subjects must be free to communicate their decisions not to participate in research in whatever way they choose, including by simply not showing up for the research. See the Office of Human Research Protections' Letter to SONA Systems for details.

Per the Psychology and Counseling Department's policy, students earning credits via SONA are ineligible to receive additional compensation if it will be offered.

Recruitment via Snowball Sampling

Use of a snowball sampling technique may be acceptable on a case-by-case basis. The application form must clearly explain how this technique will be utilized and justify its use in

the context of the target population. Care must be exercised to ensure that the potential subjects' privacy is not violated, especially with sensitive or highly personal topics, and that undue influence to participate is minimized. The preferred sampling choice would be whatever method minimizes risk.

Current subjects may not receive incentives or compensation for referrals. Where applicable, the informed consent process should make it clear that agreeing to contact others is not a requisite for participating in the research.

Depending on risk, the best snowball technique might be one of the following:

- The investigator proposes to provide information to subjects and encourage them to pass it on to others who might be interested or eligible. The information, such as via forward of the investigator's initial email message, a flyer or an information sheet, must be approved by the IRB or ERC. Potential subjects could then contact the investigator for more information and possible inclusion, or in the case of an online survey, could proceed to the web-based platform to read the informed consent form and advance to the survey on their own.

- The investigator proposes to ask participating subjects to obtain permission from their acquaintances or colleagues prior to disclosing their contact information to the investigator. In this scenario, the investigator would not have access to any information about the referred/potential subjects and would not directly contact them without their advanced permission.

When snowball sampling is approved, existing subjects may inform their networks in simple terms that a study is being conducted. However, because "advertising" is part of the consent process, investigators need to exercise caution. Existing subjects might not accurately describe the research and its purposes or might prepare other subjects to provide particular responses. Subjects should avoid becoming engaged in research activities by thoroughly explaining or answering questions about a study, because that is the role of the investigator and/or research team (e.g. research assistants), which requires evidence of ethical training.

Permission Letter Requirement - Recruitment, Data Access, or Site Usage

An investigator who plans to recruit human subjects or access their data at a location (e.g., a university/school, business, doctor's office, hospital, community event, etc.) must secure and submit a permission letter from an appropriate official at each assisting location. Permission is also required for recruitment or data access on Marywood University's campus. Please refer to the *Permission Chart* on our [Helpful Tools and Guidance](#) webpage for a list of contact information.

All permission letters must:
1. Be presented on the *permission granting entity's* letterhead
2. Be hand signed by the authorized official (no signature fonts)
3. Show the official's title and contact information
4. State the official's awareness of the research and agreement to subject or data access

5. State exactly how recruitment or access will take place (e.g., entity will forward an email message on behalf of the investigator; entity will allow the investigator to attend a meeting, etc.)

    a. For use of campus email list-serve(s), name exact one(s)

    b. For use of campus email list-serve(s), state the number of times it will be sent (maximum is 3)

6. Be scanned as a PDF or saved as a photographic image and attached with an IRBNet submission

Investigators must use the IRB or ERC's Permission Letter Template for Access to Data or Subject Recruitment which may be found in the Forms and Templates section of IRBNet.

Officials must send the signed permission letter directly to the investigator, who must then upload it to the IRBNet package as a scanned PDF or photographic image.

Formal permission letters are also required for research activity sites, if applicable. For instance, a letter would be required if an investigator were to propose interviews or interventions within a private office building.

There may be circumstances where a *formal* letter or a letter placed on *letterhead* may not be the norm, such as:

- **Private Business Location which Allows Public Posting:** Where advertisements will be posted at a private business which allows such posts without the owner or management's permission (e.g., supermarket bulletin board), a permission letter may not be required. However, the investigator must identify the specific location by name and describe its policy for not securing a letter.

- **Public Location which Allows Public Posting:** Where advertisements will be posted publicly (e.g., public library), a permission letter may not be required. However, the investigator must identify the specific location by name and describe its policy for not securing a letter. Keep in mind that that some municipalities or counties may prohibit posting in public spaces such as a park or on telephone poles, even though considered public.

- **Social Media Groups:** Where announcements will be posted to informal social media beyond the investigator's own wall (Facebook) or account (e.g., Instagram, X, etc.), a permission letter may not be required if the group is informal and would not typically utilize formal business communications (e.g. an informal group of those living with lung disease vs. the official American Lung Association's page). The investigator must identify the specific group by name and describe its policy or "rules" for not securing a letter. The investigator must also read and adhere to the application's Terms of Service and/or Privacy Policy.

- **Web Forums/Bulletin Boards:** Where announcements will be posted to informal forums or boards, a permission letter may not be required (e.g., Reddit or a group formed by private citizens for a particular issue). The investigator must name the forum and describe its policy for not securing a letter. The investigator must also read and adhere to the site's Terms of Service and/or Privacy Policy. However, if the investigator plans to post to a forum or board which is part of a professional organization with membership

dues or exclusive access to the forum behind a paywall, the investigator must secure a permission letter from an authority at the organization.

- **No Letterhead:** Where a small business or organization needs to write a letter but does not have letterhead, the IRB or ERC may waive the *letterhead requirement*, provided that the investigator adequately explains why it is not available. A signed permission letter containing all other required elements will still be required.

Campus Access after Approval

ACCESS TO MARYWOOD UNIVERSITY'S LARGE EMAIL LISTSERVS

After final IRB or ERC approval has been secured, an investigator who is ready to post to one of the large campus e-mail distribution lists managed by the Provost's Office must contact **Adrienne Mullikin at ajmullikin@maryu.marywood.edu**. The investigator must supply Ms. Mullikin with (1) the final IRB or ERC approval letter, (2) the recruitment permission letter stating to what lists the investigator needs access, and (3) the approved email recruitment message. No other individuals should be contacted for access *unless* a smaller, specific list not managed by Ms. Mullikin will be used (e.g., Veterans' list, departmental list, etc.).

ACCESS TO MARYWOOD UNIVERSITY'S OFFICIAL SOCIAL MEDIA (MAIN ACCOUNTS)

Instead of creating a social media group page or event, the Marketing Department requests that investigators post to its official Marywood University pages. With tens of thousands of followers, studies will receive greater exposure, possibly increasing participation. After final IRB or ERC approval has been secured, an investigator wishing to access Marywood University's Official social media pages must contact **Christa Ann Vinciguerra, Digital Marketing Specialist, at 570-340-6019 or cavinciguerra@marywood.edu**. The investigator must supply Ms. Vinciguerra with (1) the final IRB or ERC approval letter, (2) the signed recruitment permission letter, and (3) the approved announcement. No other individuals should be contacted for access *unless* the social media managed by another department will be used.

ACCESS TO MARYWOOD UNIVERSITY'S BULLETIN BOARDS

After final IRB or ERC approval has been secured, the IRB or ERC will apply its approval stamp to flyers or posters. This stamp must appear on posted versions, and no other stamps are required. The **Office of Student Engagement (OSE)** had changed its stamping policy and no longer requires its stamp for *research-related* bulletin board posts only. It will still require its stamp for posts unrelated to research.

History

08/19/2015:   Updated information about permission letters
04/29/2016:   Updated temporary contact person for access to email distribution lists
08/05/2016:   Removed temporary contact person for access to email distribution lists
03/29/2017:   Updated email requirement to include subject line
07/28/2017:   Clarified email list access outside of OIT
08/16/2017:   Updated LISTSERV access contact (Ms. Nealon removed)
12/13/2017:   Updated Social Media contact

04/04/2019:   Updated Marketing Department contact and social media page information
11/07/2019:   Updated policy relating to Social Media and email information
02/26/2020:   Updated LISTSERV access contact
02/27/2020:   Updated Facebook methods and information needed for email recruitment
10/15/2020:   Updated LISTSERV access contact
06/14/2021:   Updated LISTSERV access contact
10/11/2023:   Added purpose and brief definitions; clarified recruitment permission and social media requirements; added two new sections for crowdsourcing, pools, panels and snowball sampling; updated Office of Student Engagement's stamp policy