

CONDUCTING RESEARCH ABROAD

Key Guidelines

What is a research project?

A research project involves a systematic investigation of a specific topic, question, hypothesis, or theory. The purpose of research is to establish new knowledge or confirm what is already known. The research process involves discovery, documentation, and interpretation using a variety of reliable, scholarly resources.

Under the guidance of a project supervisor, students consult relevant primary and secondary sources, analyze findings, and draw conclusions culminating in a final paper or project that demonstrates the knowledge gained through the investigation. Research typically does not involve applied work, internship, or volunteer activities.

What is IRB?

Any research that involves human subjects will require University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. There is also a review process for projects involving animals. Given the short duration of a study abroad program, **you should select research topics that do not include human subjects and thus do not require IRB approval** when doing research abroad.

The University's IRB process (even an exempt review) is intensive, takes time, and must be completed prior to initiating any research abroad. Since IRB only reviews projects if the overseas project supervisor, full research project, methodology clarification, and required methodological training are confirmed, human subjects research during study abroad programs is highly discouraged (this applies to Learning Abroad Center (LAC), affiliate, and non-affiliate programs). In addition, undergraduate students rarely have completed the level of methodological training to be approved by IRB.

What should I know about conducting research abroad?

Fortunately, **there are many research projects that can be conducted abroad and do not require IRB approval, such as research that focuses on policies, procedures, methods, products, and organizations (instead of people)**. Also keep in mind that projects that focus on observation and documentation may not be considered research and, therefore, do not require IRB approval.

It is *essential* to consult with the overseas staff regarding your project and the approach you plan to take *before* initiating your research. Particularly if you plan to conduct a survey or interviews, you must discuss your questions with the overseas staff and receive approval for all questions in advance. The overseas staff will consult with the LAC, as needed.

Students who fail to modify their project to meet overseas staff and LAC expectations regarding IRB considerations risk receiving a failing grade for that course. It is not appropriate to engage in research that requires IRB clearance without having obtained the clearance in advance.

What should I know about conducting research abroad?

When planning your research, **consider whether the project focuses on the person or on policies, practices, or procedures about which the person is knowledgeable**. Projects that collect information about policies, practices, or procedures—even if the person who provided that information is identified—do not constitute human subject research and do not require IRB review.

Research projects that focus on “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” as well as projects that involve “sensitive populations” are typically subject to IRB review and should not be pursued during a study abroad program. For more details, visit the IRB research web page: www.research.umn.edu/irb/

What restrictions should I keep in mind regarding my primary sources?

Any data about people that you use for your research must be publicly available or previously published. Private medical files, for example, require IRB approval and should not be consulted.

Research projects that focus on policies, procedures, and best practices instead of gathering private identifiable data do not require IRB approval. Interviewing individuals with expertise in the relevant field, as long as the focus is on policies, practices, and procedures, is

also allowed and does not necessitate IRB involvement.

IRB has significant **restrictions on “sensitive populations,” vulnerable populations, and minors.** These populations cannot be consulted or interviewed without IRB clearance and should not be part of a research abroad project.

What if I have IRB clearance from my home university?

Students from other institutions who participate in LAC programs may have received some form of general IRB clearance from their home institution. This does not provide clearance to engage in human subjects research. The overseas staff are not in a position to supervise or approve IRB research projects and may also not have the required specific IRB-required training for that particular subject area. All students must abide by the general guidelines stipulated above.

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