

Editorial: Research Participation Pools in Introductory Psychology Classes: Maintaining an Educational Benefit and Avoiding Coercion

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ABSTRACT. Many colleges and universities require students in introductory psychology classes to fulfill a research participation requirement. Recent research has described the common practices used by colleges and universities that require research participation. Several recommendations are provided to encourage departments to follow best practices that enhance the likelihood that students will learn from the experience and support the autonomy of the student participants.

Keywords: research participation, introductory psychology classes, ethics, participant autonomy, pedagogical recommendations

Recruitment from department research participant pools has been a long-standing practice in psychology departments (Sieber & Saks, 1989). This can benefit the student by giving a more accurate understanding of the research process, and it can benefit researchers at the institution by giving them access to a pool of participants for their studies. However, if not conducted thoughtfully, this requirement might simply seem like an additional hoop to jump through, and it might strike the student as being coercive, reducing their sense of autonomy. Departments should follow ethical guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association (2013), which specify that researchers must take steps to protect student participants from the consequences of declining or withdrawing from research, and that adequate alternate opportunities to research study participation must be provided when research is a requirement for a course. Well-founded principles of voluntary participation dictate that students have autonomy when deciding whether to participate in a research study.

Current Practices of Research Participation Pools

To gain a sense of current practices in this area, Flynn and Rocheleau (2022) replicated the descriptive study of Sieber and Saks (1989), surveying 604 psychology department chairs regarding their use of undergraduate participant pools. Among 4-year institutions, 68%

use a pool, with no variation by geographic location. Institutions with a graduate program are more likely to use a pool (80%) than undergraduate-only departments (59%). Public institutions (81%) are more likely to recruit from pools than are private (58%). The most highly used research activities were participation in an experiment (96%) or a writing assignment (90%); the next most common activity came in a distant third place, which was participation in a simulated study (16%). Over one third of departments also reported that instructors could select additional research options for their class.

On the issue of potential coercion, the extent to which research activity was a requirement of the course and, if so, how research activities influenced the course grade are areas impacting perceived coercion. Of departments utilizing undergraduate participants, 84% required research participation for introductory psychology courses, regardless of geographic location, public/private standing, or presence of a graduate program. How research participation factored into a student's grade varied. The most common practice was that research activity reflected 5% of the total grade, followed by 10% of the total grade. A similar number responded that the completion of research resulted in a pass/fail portion for the class, in that failure to complete the research requirement resulted in a grade of "Incomplete" for the class. The duration of requirements also varied, and the vast majority of responses

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(92%) reported 6 hours or less as the requirement for the course. Extra credit for research participation was also granted by 77% of departments.

The benefits of using an undergraduate research pool typically point to educational goals within psychology. One-third of departments provided an extended debriefing for pool participants, above those required for IRB approval for human subject research to provide a detailed educational component to research participation. However, a mere 16% of departments assessed the educational value of research participation. From a student perspective, undergraduate students writing a reflection on their research activity spontaneously wrote positive to negative learning experiences at a ratio of 5:1, indicating some benefit to student participants (Moyer & Franklin, 2011). However, few departments reported identifying or assessing the expected learning outcomes (Flynn & Rocheleau, 2022). Also, participants in undergraduate research reported a similar level of autonomy in research activities as for exams in the course and reported significantly less pressure for the research activity as compared to a class exam (Rocchi et al., 2016). Undergraduate students also reported that they gained significantly more knowledge from participating in research than in studying for exams. Most students (87%) reported that research participation was worthwhile, whereas 27% reported that the course requirement was coercive (Miller & Kreiner, 2008).

Ethical and Pedagogical Recommendations

The two most likely reasons undergraduate students reported for not partaking in a research activity were that it was not worth the time or effort and that they did not know research was a requirement for the course before they registered for it (Rocchi et al., 2016). These results support that framing a context for a required research activity in a psychology course should be emphasized to enhance the participants' experience. To ensure that research participation has a pedagogical benefit and respects the students' autonomy, researchers can place greater emphasis on identifying educational goals and reducing coercion for those students contributing their time for class requirements.

We recommend the following to ensure that students fully understand the research requirement and comprehend the value of research participation as part of an introductory education in psychology:

1. Instructors should convey the goals of research activities via course syllabi and continuing reminders of this throughout the semester, and they should assess the outcomes of these goals. This should not merely be stated as a requirement, but with an

articulated description of its educational benefit. The sources cited above will support this point.

2. Learning objectives should be developed to enhance student participant expectations of the value of participating. This will also allow for data collection to determine whether or not the stated benefits are actually being fulfilled and, if not, lead to an assessment of how to better incorporate this experience into the class.
3. Undergraduate students must be informed about their role in advancing the field of psychology. This will provide a context for the course requirement and educational expectations.
4. Instructors should set a reasonable number of hours for research participation. Conservative hours of research requirements are prudent given that no research has examined the level or impact of the number of hours required on the educational benefit. Moreover, setting a high number of research hours may lead to feelings of exploitation and perceptions of reduced autonomy to consent and participate.
5. A justified and logical rationale for how research requirements factor into the course grade should be articulated, either in the syllabus or verbally in the class. This should balance between meaningful contributions for students' time yet not overly weighted.
6. If the instructor is collecting data for their own study, research assistants should serve as proxy data collectors in recruiting participants. This will reduce coercion in the power balance between faculty members and undergraduate students and increase autonomy of participants to elect to participate or to withdraw.
7. Debriefing strategies that go beyond typical IRB debriefing should be developed to increase the educational aspects of the required research participation and yield greater benefit to student participants. For example, students could receive information that connects the study they participated in to specific content covered in the textbook or lectures.
8. Educate students about the research benefits that have resulted from the research participation pool. For example, a newsletter or a discussion about the accomplishments of researchers in the department in some of the lectures over the semester would help students understand their role in the research enterprise of the institution.

These efforts can extend a core learning goal of scientific inquiry outlined for undergraduate psychology programs by the APA (2013).


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