**ACM Symposium: Protecting Human Subjects in Student Projects**

**Homework assignment – Please return to Jo Beld (**[**beld@stolaf.edu**](mailto:beld@stolaf.edu)**) by Feb. 1, 2012**

**What happens when investigators don’t protect research participants?**

*Case studies in research ethics in student projects with human subjects*

***Instructions:*** *Among the challenges of protecting human subjects in student projects is that students often do not understand the deleterious consequences of* ***not*** *protecting their subjects, especially in projects that won’t be disseminated outside their institution. The purpose of this ‘assignment’ is to collect examples of the consequences of failure to**protect human subjects that can be turned into an educational handout for students. Your task is to provide one example of a bad outcome. Think about a student project you have heard about or worked with, and sketch out a brief description of the project and what would have happened (or what DID happen) in relation to any one of the following issues, had the student not taken appropriate steps to protect subjects. Just write your example right on this document and email it back to me with your name at the top. Feel free to partner with someone else at your institution in preparing your example. I will consolidate all the examples (but without names or institutions). There are two examples already included at the end of this document, to give you an idea of what we are looking for.*

***Risks:* What happens when risks are not minimized?**

***Privacy:* What happens when a participant’s privacy is not protected during project recruitment?**

***Data security:* What happens when confidential information is accidentally disclosed through poor data security?**

***Confidentiality:* What happens when a paper, poster, or presentation includes information that allows others to identify one or more of the research participants?**

***Example:***

An undergraduate research team at a midwestern university proposed a project studying the graduate students of the university’s Peace Studies program.  The 23 graduate students were all pursuing a master’s degree during a one-year program that required them all to live together in a 12-unit apartment building.   
  
The research team visited the apartment building and conducted group interviews and mingled with the subject group, sometimes having one-on-one discussions.  At no point did the students disclose the final outcome of their research and with whom the research would be shared.   
  
The research team wrote a paper based on their study and submitted it to their professor.  They also sent a digital copy of the paper to every one of the graduate students. In the paper, a graduate student is quoted making a joke about Islam.  The quoted student was easily identifiable by the description of his nationality and by the description of his roommate as a Muslim.   
  
Offended by this comment in the paper, other Muslim students confronted the graduate student described in the paper, who denied that he made the comment.  The breach of trust that ensued caused a dramatic rift in the graduate student cohort that was not repaired.  In addition, there were calls made by Muslim students for the expulsion of the student researchers.  One of the graduate students, in solidarity with the Muslim complaint, sent an email to the researchers that could have been interpreted as very threatening.  Department administrators were very surprised by this response and suggested that they could expel and sue the student who sent the email.

***Informed consent:* What happens if participants are not given all the information they need to make a free and informed decision about whether or not to participate in the project?**

***Example:***

A student decided to enroll in a study abroad program in Africa to undertake research on the impact National Parks have on local communities.  He planned to interview residents of several villages around two National Parks.  Before he left for Africa, his on-campus advisor suggested that he seek IRB approval for his project.  The student examined his institution’s IRB documents and decided, without seeking input from his advisor or a member of his institution’s IRB, that his project did not meet the criteria for requiring IRB review.  He went to Africa and undertook a large number of interviews.  Upon returning to campus and beginning analysis the interviews, his faculty advisor learned that the student had obtained access to interviewees from a village elder, and that the interviewees may not have felt that they had the right to decline the interview.  The faculty advisor and student brought the case to the campus IRB, and the IRB decided that the student had not obtained informed consent from the interviewees.

*Consequence for the individuals who were interviewed and for their community:* The participants’ right to make a free and informed decision about whether to participate was violated by the investigator. This may mean that the individuals involved will be less likely to participate in future interview projects, even if such projects might be likely to result in great benefit to the individuals or their larger community (for example, interviews about educational needs, economic development, or public health concerns). The situation may also have compromised trust in the relationship between the village elder and those who were interviewed.

*Consequence for the student:* The consequence was that the student could not use the interviews in an honors thesis and in a publication he hoped to produce from the work.  If the student had taken the time to ask his faculty advisor or his campus IRB to review his research plan, this problem could have been avoided.