The University of New Hampshire (UNH) Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research is a standing faculty committee responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of people who are subjects in UNH research activities. UNH's policy regarding the use of human subjects states: All UNH research activities proposing to involve human subjects must be reviewed and receive written, unconditional approval from the IRB before commencing. This applies to all research activities conducted under the auspices of UNH involving human subjects regardless of discipline or whether the activities are funded.

Several types of activity, both research and non-research, involving human subjects commonly occur at UNH. In order to clarify whether or not an activity is research and/or if it involves human subjects, UNH employs the federal government's definition of human subjects and research.

1. Human Subjects

   Federal regulations (45 CFR 46) provide the following definitions:

   Human subjects: "Living individual(s) 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."

   Private information: "Includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place, and information which has been provided for specific purposes by an individual and which the individual can reasonably expect will not be made public (for example, a medical record). Private information must be individually identifiable (i.e., the identity of the subject is or may readily be ascertained by the investigator or associated with the information) in order for obtaining the information to constitute research involving human subjects."

Using this definition of human subjects, all activities involving prospective collection of information about individuals via intervention/interaction are considered using human subjects and require UNH IRB approval before commencing.

When studies involve the use of secondary/existing data (data/information that exist(s) at the time the research project begins [e.g., previously collected survey data, school records, medical records]), UNH IRB approval is NOT needed to use such data for research purposes if the secondary/existing data do not contain private information. Some common examples of secondary/existing data that are not considered private information include, but are not limited to:

   Some information on the Internet - comments on TripAdvisor; content of public tweets and blogs; information on public Facebook pages; census information; freely-available datasets (whether or not anonymous)

   Archives - identifiable information about individuals in a public archive
Datasets - anonymous datasets, whether privately held or publicly available

IMPORTANT: Researchers should be aware that not all information on the Internet is considered publicly available and not all datasets that are characterized as anonymous actually are. Examples include, but are not limited to: Comments on a non-public chatroom or listserv; restricted-access datasets; or privately held datasets where individuals may be identified, either directly, through a code associated with a name, or through a combination of variables. As the UNH IRB DOES NOT give post-hoc approval, researchers must be certain that the secondary/existing data do not contain private information before use. Further, some journals require proof of IRB approval for research projects that the UNH IRB may not consider to involve human subjects (e.g., use of anonymous datasets). Researchers should check journal requirements before conducting the project and contact the IRB with any questions.

2. Research

Federal regulations (45 CFR 46) define research as, "A systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge."

To apply the definition of research to an activity, one must look at the intent of the investigation, the researcher’s relationship with the subjects, and how the data will be used.

Activities at UNH involving human subjects commonly fall into the following categories:

Research - the purpose of the activity is to contribute to generalizable knowledge and data gathered may be shared with a research community or the public at large. UNH considers any project conducted for an undergraduate honors thesis, a master’s thesis or a dissertation to be research.

Evaluation/Assessment/Service/Reporting - the purpose of these activities is, upon request, to gather data to measure the current situation in regard to a specific phenomenon or set of factors. Data gathered may be shared only with the sponsor/client/requesting party and where appropriate, the faculty advisor, or used for internal decision making or informational purposes.

Classroom Assignments/Educational Inquiry/Practice - the purpose of these activities is the education of an individual student through an inquiry or experiential approach to discover known principles or phenomena. Data gathered may be shared only with the course instructor or faculty advisor, or in the case of an internship/practicum, the collaborating party.

IMPORTANT: Individuals gathering data from human subjects as part of evaluations, assessments, service, reporting, classroom assignments, educational inquiry, or practice abrogate their rights to publish data as research data; if they choose to share observations with others, their actions ought to be governed by the ethical standards of their discipline (e.g., American Psychological Association or American Anthropological Association). Individuals who wish to gather data from human subjects as part of evaluations, assessments, service, reporting, classroom assignments, educational inquiry, or practice AND intend to use the data as research data for the purpose of publishing or sharing with a research community or the public at large, must obtain IRB approval PRIOR to conducting the activity.

The UNH IRB recognizes that human subjects may be harmed by unethical or careless activities resulting from evaluations, assessments, service, reporting, classroom assignments, educational inquiry, or practice. As a board that values the protection of human subjects and the conduct of
ethical behavior, the board strongly disapproves of such unethical behavior. However, the IRB recognizes the limits of its mandate and authority.

Activities involving human subjects within the context of research methods courses generally do not require IRB review, unless the results will be used for research purposes (e.g., presented at the UNH undergraduate or graduate research conferences, used in a thesis or dissertation, research conducted under the auspices of the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research).

Departmental Review Committees (DRC) have been established to facilitate the IRB's responsibility for protecting human subjects by reviewing no more than minimal risk research projects generated within a department. Such authority, when granted, extends only to protocols classified as EXEMPT under federal regulations. Currently, DRCs exist in the psychology and sociology departments.

For more information on the UNH Institutional Review Board or institutional requirements regarding research involving human subjects, contact Research Integrity Services Director, Julie Simpson at julie.simpson@unh.edu or 862-2003. Additional materials are available on the Research Integrity Services webpage at: http://unh.edu/research/human-subjects.