

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a federally-mandated, locally constituted review body designed to protect the rights and well-being of human subjects who participate research. Cornell faculty, staff, and students who collect or analyze research data collected from human subjects are legally and ethically obligated to respect and protect their project participants. The Cornell College IRB assists researchers in carrying out these obligations.

Doing research that involves human subjects is a privilege, not a right. Any member of the Cornell community (faculty, staff, and students) planning to conduct research using human participants must have that research reviewed and approved by the Cornell IRB. This holds for all research involving human subjects, whether the research is funded or not. Furthermore, research projects must be approved prior to subject recruitment and data collection.

How do I get IRB approval?

First, determine whether your project involves research, and if so, whether the research involves human subjects.

The federal government defines research as a "systematic investigation . . . designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge." The general test of whether a project constitutes research is based on whether the findings will (or possibly might) be presented outside of the classroom.

Human subject refers to a living individual about whom the researcher obtains data from (a) intervention or interaction with the individual or (b) identifiable private information.

Second, if your project is research and involves human subjects, read the Cornell IRB Handbook. We also strongly encourage you complete the training program on protecting human subjects that is offered by the National Institute of Health. The NIH estimates three hours to complete this training. However, this is a one-time training with NIH certification upon completion.

Third, complete an IRB Application and supporting materials (including Informed Consent forms) prior to initiating your project. The IRB cannot approve any research retroactively. If you collect data without prior IRB approval, you will not be able to present your findings in a public forum, including Student Symposium.

The IRB will work with applicants on meeting the federal requirements. Remember, however, that the primary responsibility of the IRB is to protect human subjects. Treating this as an opportunity for ethical reflection, rather than an irksome requirement, will foster greater social responsibility among the Cornell community.