IRB Guidance on SONA*

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The UMass Boston Psychology Department and some UMass Boston investigators are using the SONA system which is a cloud-based subject pool software for universities to recruit students for participation in human research.

For questions regarding the SONA system, contact the SONA Administrator at sona@umb.edu.

For questions related to IRB submissions, contact irb@umb.edu or visit the IRB web site: https://www.umb.edu/research/research-sponsored-programs/integrity-compliance/irb/

Pre-approval by the SONA Administrator is required BEFORE submitting applications using SONA to the IRB.

- **Step 1:** Researcher receives pre-approval by the SONA Administrator. The SONA Administrator pre-reviews SONA-relevant materials to ensure they meet SONA system use guidelines. This is NOT an IRB review.

- **Step 2:** Researcher submits application (either new study or modification) to the IRB including the SONA pre-approval notice and all SONA recruitment materials. The IRB may have edits to the SONA materials. The IRB may also decide that a specific study is not appropriate for use with SONA (e.g., situations such as this are more likely to occur when the research poses more than minimal risk).
  If pre-approval for SONA is not included, the application may be withdrawn or placed on hold by the IRB until resolved.

- **Step 3:** Researcher submits IRB approval notice and IRB-approved/finalized materials to the SONA Administrator.

SONA Recruitment Materials

All SONA recruitment listings/postings – like any research recruitment materials meant to be seen or heard by participants – need to be included in the IRB submission (as part of the initial "new" study application or via Modification) for review and approval by the IRB prior to use unless otherwise noted. Review *"Advertisements WORKSHEET (HRP-315)"* for guidelines.

Please note that 18 years old may not be the legal age of an adult in the location from where the individual is participating in the research. Therefore, age requirements need to be considered when developing protocol inclusion/exclusion criteria and recruitment materials.

Pre-screening

Any study-specific prescreening materials used to assess eligibility criteria need to be submitted for IRB review.

Course Credits

Departments may use the SONA system and student subject pools for either course credit or extra credit research experience, which may be obtained by participating in IRB-approved studies conducted in the department under the supervision of faculty.

Undue influence occurs through an offer of an excessive or inappropriate reward or other overture in order to obtain compliance such as by over-payment or over-rewarding student participants. For example, participants may be unduly influenced to participate in Study A if it requires only 10 minutes when Study B requires 60 minutes to obtain the same credit.

Therefore, the amount of participant time estimated to complete a study should be consistent across protocols by department for the types of credit, incentive, or compensation offered by the Department. Credit is earned for the participant's effort and not any specific research activity. If a one hour research credit is being awarded, the amount of effort should be one hour or close to it. If 10 points of extra credit are awarded for participation in research, the effort to obtain the extra credit should be consistent from one project to another.

In addition, because research participation must be voluntary, an alternate method of fulfilling that academic requirement or extra credit opportunity must also be made available to students. Moreover, this alternate method must be equivalent in time and effort. If participating in a study for 30 minutes, for example, earns 2 points in extra credit, then the alternative cannot be writing a 5-page paper – it must be something that the student can do exerting no more effort than the research participation required.

Protocol and Informed Consent

The Protocol and Informed Consent form must reflect the availability of **alternatives** to course credit. They should also explain the process for **withdrawing** from an online study.

Alternatives

Indicate in the informed consent form that if students do not wish to participate in this study, there are other studies in which they can participate. They can also contact their instructor to learn more about an alternative way to fulfill the experimental participation requirement. **Include language such as the following in the informed consent:**

> *"If you do not wish to participate in this study, there are other studies in which you can participate. You can also contact your instructor to learn more about an alternative way to fulfill the experimental participation requirement—e.g., through reading a short paper <give an example of alternative>."*

SONA awards credit in .5 units; however, the department may choose how much time and effort each unit represents. Typically, one research credit or unit is equivalent to an hour. This needs to be clearly indicated to students participating in the pool.

Subject pools may also be used to recruit participants for research where monetary incentives are offered. Departments should decide on the best policy for managing recruitment for paying studies, i.e., whether such recruiting will be on the same platform as recruiting for participation credits in courses.

Withdrawals

Some departments may decide to compensate participants who choose to withdraw from an online study. SONA grants credit/s for online surveys through a redirect link (SONA > survey platform > SONA for credit), typically embedded in the End of Survey link. Thus, researchers in these departments will need to develop a plan for enabling participants to withdraw at multiple time points across the online survey, by providing multiple opportunities within the survey to redirect the participant back to the SONA system. The Psychology Department has suggested procedures for how to accomplish this, listed on their SONA website (for Qualtrics Survey System specifically). To notify participants of this option for credited withdrawal, **include language such as the following in the Voluntary Participation section of the Informed Consent**:

> *"To withdraw from the study at any time, look for the item asking you whether you want to Continue or Exit the Survey. When you click to Exit the Survey, you will be asked whether you want your data to be included in the final dataset or removed from the final dataset. After you indicate your preference, you will be redirected to the SONA website and will receive full credit for your study involvement."*

"No Shows"

Federal regulations indicate that research participants **must not be penalized** for a decision to withdraw from research at any time. **Coercion** occurs when an overt or implicit threat of harm is intentionally presented by one person to another in order to obtain compliance. Therefore, no department may penalize students for "no shows" when they have signed up for a study through the SONA system and then fail to attend the research session without cancelling the appointment in advance. Students who are 'no shows' may not be given a failing grade for the no-show or have the number of research participation credits increased as a penalty.

The regulations, however, do allow departments to set a maximum number of times that students can turn to the studies offered to fulfill their academic requirement. In other words, students may be informed that they have a maximum of four opportunities to participate in research to get the credit, and that, should they decide not to participate in a specific study, failure to cancel their appointment in a timely fashion (e.g., 24 hours in advance, midnight the night before the study, etc.) will count as one of those four opportunities. Any unfulfilled research credits will then have to be completed by an alternative research experience once those four opportunities have been used. These procedures, for each Department that uses the SONA System, should be clearly outlined and provided to students in writing in advance.

Other Considerations

- Non-participation in research studies should not impact the student's educational experience.
- Consider when a general sample could be more representative or appropriate than recruiting from student pools to meet the objectives of the research study.
- If a study promises anonymity to the participants, the sign up system needs to be consistent (or the system should not be used for those studies where participation would otherwise be anonymous).

*We thank **University of Massachusetts Lowell IRB** for sharing this resource with us.