GUIDE FOR RESEARCHERS CONDUCTING RESEARCH
WITH INTRODUCTORY PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

Introduction

It is important that all students taking their first college course in psychology obtain knowledge about how psychological research is conducted. For this reason, Introductory Psychology courses at UAB include a research requirement. Students can fulfill their requirement in two ways: by participating in psychological research studies, or by reading research articles and writing brief summaries of them.

The current document is related to the first option – research participation – and is designed to inform investigators of the guidelines that should be followed in conducting studies that involve Introductory Psychology students. Access to the participant pool is contingent on acceptance of these guidelines. Questions should be directed to Dr. Ed Cook (ecook@uab.edu), PY101 Participant Pool Coordinator.

Investigators are reminded that even though Introductory Psychology students may participate in research to satisfy a requirement, they are first and foremost volunteers. Each student must be treated with respect and concern for their welfare, and must be rewarded for their participation by providing them with an enriching educational experience.

IRB Approval

A. All research involving Introductory Psychology students must have approval from the UAB Institutional Review Board for Human Use (IRB).

B. In preparing their IRB applications, investigators should bear in mind that UAB’s IRB typically interprets the federal regulations to say that those under the age of 18 are children, and therefore require parental consent in order to participate in research. This is relevant to use of the Introductory Psychology Participant Pool because some students in this course are 17 years of age. Investigators who plan to use the participant pool to recruit participants are encouraged to request a “Waiver of Parental Consent” by inserting some version of the following into their IRB protocols:

“We wish to request a waiver of the requirement that Introductory Psychology students who are less than 18 years old obtain parental permission to participate in this project. The reasons for this request are as follows:

• The research requirement in Introductory Psychology is intended to be a learning experience. Participation in approved studies is one of several ways that students can satisfy the requirement. Studies approved for use of Introductory Psychology students involve minimal risk and include both an experiential learning component and a didactic debriefing component that ties the research participation experience to particular topics covered in the lecture. For example, students participating in the present study will learn first-hand about ....[insert topics covered in debriefing that relate to PY101; e.g., learning, memory, conditioning, perception, experimental design, etc.].

• Many students take Introductory Psychology as 17-year-old freshman. Parental involvement in the consent process is not practical for the large percentage of these students who either do not
live with their parents or have parents who are employed. Requiring parental consent of such students raises a barrier to an educational experience that is freely available to their older peers.

- Regardless of their age, undergraduates are not required to obtain parental approval of the classes that they take, the volunteer activities in which they participate, and or virtually any other aspect of their campus life in which they choose to engage. It is reasonable, therefore, to accord them the right to participate voluntarily in approved minimal-risk protocols that meet the standards set by the university and the IRB.

C. It is Department of Psychology policy that the Participant Pool Coordinator reviews projects that intend to use the Pool before they are submitted to the IRB. The PI can pick someone else to serve as formal reviewer but the coordinator should review the materials as well.

Participant Pool Coordinator Approval

A. Upon obtaining IRB approval, investigators should submit to the Psychology Participant Pool Coordinator (Ed Cook, ec Cook@uab.edu) a completed Participant Pool Request Form. This form can be accessed through the Research web page that is linked off the Psychology Department home page. The form should be submitted electronically if possible and should be accompanied by a scanned copy of the stamped consent form.

B. The Coordinator will review your materials and forward to you an approval letter that contains information necessary for you to begin. Included will be a study number, which you will use to set up your study using the SONA system, and research receipt form that should be used as back-up documentation of student participation. Researchers should make copies of the receipt form and give each participant a receipt when they complete their participation and have been debriefed.

C. Note that once a study is approved, that approval remains active until the IRB approval expires. SONA will automatically deny study access when the IRB approval expires. To continue running participants, you will have to renew your IRB approval and send evidence of the updated expiration date to the Coordinator. Again, a scanned IRB approval memo or stamped consent form will suffice. Be advised that continuous IRB approval requires that you submit your Investigator’s Progress Report at least one month prior to expiration. Late submissions can result in sanctions by the IRB for non-compliance.

D. Note also that there are two standard forms of Introductory Psychology participant recruitment within the Psychology Department, (1) prescreening (discussed below), and (2) sign-up via the Department’s online SONA research system. Informal methods of soliciting participants such as stopping students in hallways and asking them to participate in classrooms are disallowed unless specifically approved by the Participant Pool Coordinator. The goal in avoiding non-standard procedures is to provide equitable participant pool access for all researchers.

Prescreening

A. Investigators interested in prescreening participants for their studies should inform the Participant Pool Coordinator at least one month in advance of the first day of classes of the term in which screening is to take place. All studies that involve prescreening must be approved by the IRB and Pool
Coordinator in advance of screening sessions. Thus, investigators must obtain IRB approval well in advance of the term. Introductory Psychology students receive 1 research credit for participating in prescreening.

B. Participating investigators should note that time for administering screening questionnaires may be limited. Thus, they should **streamline their questionnaires** to the degree possible.

C. At reasonable intervals during the term researchers including questionnaires in prescreening can request a database of participant responses from the Pool Coordinator.

D. Once participating investigators have identified eligible participants, they should contact them to schedule an appointment for their participation. In doing so, investigators should adhere to the following guidelines.

1. Potential participants may be contacted by telephone or e-mail. Another possibility is to contact potential participants by e-mail to arrange a mutually-convenient time for a telephone conversation.

2. All contacts should be made with due respect for the individual’s privacy and should avoid anything that might be perceived as harassment. For example, telephone calls to participants should be made at a reasonable hour (e.g., between 9:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m.), and a limited number of follow-up contacts (maximum of 2-3) should be made if the individual does not respond to the first attempt.

3. Regardless of how the potential participant is contacted, you should immediately identify yourself, indicate that you are associated with the UAB Department of Psychology, and (if a student) identify your faculty supervisor. The experiment should be described in general terms and any potentially uncomfortable aspects of the study should be disclosed. The Pool Coordinator may make specific requests that particular elements of your study be disclosed at this initial contact. Potential participants should be given an opportunity to ask questions.

4. If the person agrees to participate, make sure that he or she has the following information: (a) the study number, (b) the researcher’s name, (c) the faculty sponsor’s name, (d) the date, time, and place of the study, and (e) contact information necessary in the event that the person needs to cancel or reschedule. It is advisable that you provide a follow-up e-mail that includes all of this information, even if all contacts have been made by phone.

5. Investigators who recruit based on prescreening data have the option of either manually signing up participants for timeslots on SONA, or giving them an “invitation code” and the study number so they can view all available timeslots and sign themselves up for a convenient time.

6. Note that participants have the option of cancelling their appointments. They should do so via the online SONA system. If they have technical difficulty, they can call the Psychology Department (205.934.3850). If they call, the secretary taking the call will place a cancellation note in the researcher’s or the faculty sponsor’s mailbox.
7. Once investigators have scheduled an appointment, they should insert that appointment into the appropriate timeslot for their study via the online SONA system (see SONA User Guide for Researchers and PIs). They should award credit (through the SONA system) to the participant once he or she participates.

Recruiting Participants via the SONA Psychological Research System

A. Instructions are provided in the SONA User Guide for Researchers and PIs, which is available through the undergraduate research link off of the home page for the Psychology Department.

B. Within the SONA system, studies are identified by number, not by name. They also should not be described in overview. In posting their studies, investigators should avoid phrases like "Fun study!", "Easy credits!", or "Only takes 10 minutes!" designed to attract student sign-ups.

C. Study restrictions (e.g., left-handed females only) are allowed. Some (e.g., regarding sexual orientation) may be sensitive. These must be approved in advance by the IRB and the Participant Pool Coordinator. (The PY315 instructor may approve inclusion and exclusion criteria for projects conducted as part of that course, but such criteria should in general be innocuous.)

D. The SONA system will remind participants of their appointments via e-mail the evening before they are scheduled to occur.

E. Investigators should forewarn participants via phone or e-mail if their scheduled study involves sensitive procedures or issues, such as invasive physiological recording, biological interventions, or questionnaires regarding sexual behavior, drugs and/or sensitive health/medical information.

Running Study Participants

A. Once investigators have recruited participants, they are obligated to meet them at the scheduled place and time, to run them in their study, and to award at least the number of credits that were promised. It is not appropriate to recruit more participants than you can use or to cancel them after they have signed up.

B. If an emergency or some other uncontrollable and rare event prevents you from meeting your commitment, contact the affected participant as soon as possible to reschedule. Once you have made the commitment, it is your responsibility to provide the credits and the educational experience as agreed upon. It is not acceptable to simply cancel an appointment without explanation or an offer to reschedule.

Awarding Credit for Participation

A. Participants should receive one research credit for each half hour that they participated or part thereof. Thus, studies lasting less than 30 minutes should yield 1 credit. Studies lasting between 31 minutes and one hour should yield 2 credits. And so forth.

B. Investigators should award research credits via the online SONA system, following instructions outlined in the SONA User Guide for Researchers and PIs.
C. In addition, investigators should give participants a research receipt created from the research receipt form provided with the study approval letter described above. Investigators should encourage participants to retain the receipt in the unlikely event that credit is not awarded through the SONA system. Participants can check their credit status at any point in the semester via the SONA system.

Debriefing

Experimenters are reminded of their obligation to debrief their participants in person at the end of the study. They should bear in mind that research participation is meant to be an educational experience. Debriefing essentially involves teaching the participant about one’s study. Minimally, investigators should explain the background for their study, the research hypotheses being tested, and the variables being measured. Questions should be encouraged. Anything investigators can do to enhance the educational aspects of research participation is encouraged. Please recognize that the participant pool can only be justified on the basis of its educational value to student participants.

Confidentiality

Participants’ privacy must be protected. Investigators should avoid having participants put their names on forms (excluding the consent form) associated with their study and not place names on the forms or on any other data associated with the participants. Information obtained from participants in the course of research should not be discussed with individuals who are not directly involved in the research.

What if a participant fails to show up for a research appointment?

This has been a serious problem over the years, resulting in immeasurable inconvenience to investigators and sometimes the waste of research funds. Nevertheless, research participants cannot be mandated to do anything, and that includes showing up for appointments or contacting investigators to cancel. Moreover, no sanctions can be applied (e.g., negative credits) when potential participants fail to do these things.

Here are recommended steps when a scheduled participant is a “no-show” and does not provide an excuse:

A. Indicate, in the area where credits are granted on the SONA website, that the individual was an unexcused no-show. (Excused no-shows can also be indicated.) Although we no longer award negative credits, we do track them to determine the extent of the problem and to inform further action regarding this problem.

B. You may try to contact the participant to find out whether he or she would like to reschedule. If you choose to do this, please be courteous in your communications. Regardless of whether the participant reasons for failing to show up are good, bad, or non-existent, they have acted within their rights.

*Note that participants can cancel SONA appointments without explanation up to 24 hours before the appointments are scheduled. If a student cancels later than that or doesn’t show up for an appointment, and it’s clear that no emergency was involved, a gentle reminder of this facility would definitely be in order.

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