

SoTL and the Ethics Review at the University of Calgary

“The responsibility of teachers to provide safe and effective learning environments for students provides an impetus to have strong ethical standards by which to judge both scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning.” —Mark MacLean & Gary Poole, “An introduction to Ethical Considerations for Novices to Research in Teaching and Learning in Canada”

The 2014 [Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans](#) (TCPS 2) —Canada’s primary policy about ethical standards for human-subjects research—was created for the Tri-Council’s three major agencies (SSHRC, CIHR, and NSERC) to ensure that all human-subject research is conducted ethically. Researchers must comply with this policy if they receive funding from any of the agencies or are affiliated with a university that receives funding from any of these agencies.

The University of Calgary’s [Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board \(CFREB\)](#) administers ethics applications and approvals for research from all Faculties, except Nursing, Kinesiology, and Medicine.¹ The CFREB is comprised of faculty members and graduate students from a range of disciplines, research ethics analysts, and community members. Their [“Ethical Considerations for Research in University of Calgary Courses”](#)—a must-read for anyone doing SoTL—outlines five key considerations SoTL researchers must consider:

Managing the Dual Role of Instructor/Researcher	<i>“it [should] be clear to students that your first priority is the course and that your secondary role as a researcher will not infringe upon their course experience”</i> [emphasis added, p1].
Recruitment	<i>“all recruitment activities should be carried out by a third party who is not associated with the course (e.g., a research assistant, a graduate student, a departmental colleague, etc.)”</i> and via email or online, which <i>“eliminates peer pressure and allows students who are not interested in participating to easily decline with anonymity”</i> (emphasis added; p2).
Eliminating Undue Influence	<i>“The influence of power relationships...on the voluntariness of consent should be judged from the perspective of prospective participants, since the individuals being recruited may feel constrained to follow the wishes of those who have some form of control over them”</i> (emphasis added; TCPS2 3.1 qtd in p2).
Incentives	<i>“The offer of incentives in some contexts may be perceived by prospective participants as a way for them to gain favour or improve their situation. This may amount to undue inducement and thus negate the voluntariness of participants’ consent”</i> (TCPS2 3.1 qtd on p3)

¹ All research undertaken in Nursing, Kinesiology, and Medicine are reviewed by the Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board (CHREB). Consult with them (chreb@ucalgary.ca) about processes and forms.

Minimize Intrusion of Research Activities

“In-class activities that are not normally part of the course curriculum will be carefully reviewed by the CFREB for their impact, *especially from the perspective of students who choose not to participate in the research*” (emphasis added, p5).

An informed consent process in which students learn about the research and decide whether they’ll participate addresses the above concerns about their perceptions.

Chapter 3 of the TCPS 2 — “[The Consent Process](#)”—is useful in understanding the ethical complexities of doing research in the classroom, and the CFREB’s [customizable template](#) for informed consent gives explicit instructions to address many of these issues.

The following strategies can help with an effective informed consent process:

- include a student from another or a former class on the research team to represent student perspectives throughout the process—and tell the students in the class to be studied,
- openly discuss the research project and its goals in the class,
- use someone other than the instructor to recruit participants and maintain the list of who consents and who doesn’t,
- recruit electronically (highly recommended by the CFREB),
- ensure the instructor doesn’t see the results of the recruitment, at least until after grades are submitted,
- if possible, analyze the data collected from class after the course grades are submitted,
- use the CFREB’s template for the informed consent form,
- share the results of the research with the students—and tell them from the beginning that you’ll share these results.

For inquiries regarding the ethics review process, please contact cfreb@ucalgary.ca

The following strategies can help ensure participants’ identities remain private:

- assign pseudonyms to students participating in the study,
- if taking up a survey or other document during class, have all students hand in the document (in an envelope, folded, etc), even if it’s blank,
- store data in a secure location (e.g., password-protected computer, locked file cabinet) only accessible by the researcher,
- aggregate or combine the data (useful in a large-scale survey), and/or
- destroy data upon completion of the research.

The chosen method for protecting participants’ privacy should be included in the informed consent form, making participants aware of what will happen to their information.

Application Process

Complete the CORE Tutorial

Everyone on the research team (not just the principal investigator) must complete the [Tri-Council’s Course on Research Ethics \(CORE\) tutorial](#), a self-paced online tutorial with eight modules of readings, interactive exercises, and quizzes. Completing the CORE tutorial takes, on average, a minimum of three hours.

Submit Application Materials through IRISS

IRISS, or the [Institutional Research Information Services Solution](#), is the online submissions portal for University of Calgary ethics applications. Log in to IRISS [here](#).

In IRISS, SoTL falls under the category of “research in courses” (not to be confused with “course-based research”).

Applicants will first need to fill out a user profile that requires uploading their CV and the CORE tutorial’s certificate of completion. Then, they will fill out a series of forms about the study, the participants, and the informed consent process. (To view application forms, visit the [IRISS Sandbox](#).) Remember: the diversity of the CFREB committee means that applications should be jargon-free and written as clearly as possible.

Applicants will also upload all documents relevant to the project, such as

- recruitment materials,
- the informed consent form,
- any instruments or documents used to collect the data (e.g., surveys, assignment instructions).

The CFREB’s [“Description of the Application and Review Process”](#) describes the specific steps of submission, review, feedback and revision, and approval, as well as renewals and modifications.

Most SoTL projects will be review by the CFREB chair or the chair and a delegated smaller group, rather than the full committee. There is no deadline for these smaller reviews, but applications are reviewed on a first-come, first-serve basis, with responses usually within three to four weeks—depending on the number of applications under consideration at that time.

Applicants should expect and plan for an iterative process: the committee will request some clarifications and revisions—not intended to hinder or delay the research, but instead to allow the committee to work with applicants in ensuring the Tri-Council’s principles and policies for ethical research are upheld. (Approximately 95% of applications go back and forth between the CFREB and the researcher.) Using the CFREB’s informed consent template and explicitly addressing all of the “Common Issues and How to Avoid Them” in an application can facilitate a smoother review.

To access the IRISS user guides, start an application, or review or modify an existing study, [click here](#).

Modifications

If a new member joins the research team, or a new instrument is applied, or the project extends to a new or different context, the researcher should simply submit a modification through IRISS, rather than a new application. (If in doubt, email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.)

Necessary Readings from the CFREB

- [“Ethical Considerations for Research in University of Calgary Courses”](#): a 3½-page document written by the CFREB for SoTL researchers
- [“Common Issues and How to Avoid Them”](#): the frequent mistakes and gaps in ethics applications—and how to avoid them
- [“Description of the Application and Review Process”](#): an explanation of submission, review, feedback and revision, and approval, as well as renewing or modifying an application
- [“CFREB Consent Form Template”](#): According to “Common Issues and How to Avoid Them,” “Researchers should use the [informed consent] template unless there are compelling reasons not to”

Recommended Readings

- The CFREB has prepared a variety of resources to assist in the process and to answer specific questions. See the links at the bottom of [their website](#).
- Chapter 3: [“The Consent Process”](#) from the [Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans](#)

References

- Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. (December 2014). [Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans](#).
- Healey, R. L., Bass, T., Caulfield, J., Hoffman, A., McGinn, M. K., Miller-Young, J., & Haigh, M. (2013). Being ethically minded: Practising the scholarship of teaching and learning in an ethical manner. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal*, 1(2), 23-33.
- MacLean, M. & Poole, G. (2010). An introduction to ethical considerations for novices to research in teaching and learning in Canada. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 1(2), 1-10.
- MRU Human Research Ethics Board. (January 2012). [Ethical considerations for dual-role research: Conducting research with students in your own classroom](#).