Inquiry Projects Involving People:
Ethical Principles, Practical Applications, and Investigator Obligations

Inquiry projects that involve collecting information from or about people through surveys, interviews, observations, tests, existing records, or other methods of data collection or analysis must include specific provisions for the ethical treatment of the people being studied. St. Olaf College is accountable to a federal agency, known as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP), for the ethical conduct of these inquiries. The purpose of this document is to introduce the key ethical principles and design features that all St. Olaf College investigators – faculty, staff, and students – must incorporate in any inquiry project involving people.

Ethical principles

St. Olaf subscribes to a statement of ethical principles that the federal government uses in public policies protecting people who are the subjects of federally-funded research investigations. These principles are described in a federally-commissioned report, “Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research,” issued in 1979 by a diverse team of professionals in medicine, law, ethics, and social policy. Informally known as the “Belmont Report” (because the commission’s meetings were held at the Smithsonian Institution’s Belmont Conference Center), this document is at the core of St. Olaf’s commitment to the ethical conduct of inquiries involving people. In fact, St. Olaf maintains a written assurance to the federal government that it will apply the Belmont principles in all inquiry projects that involve gathering information from or about people, irrespective of whether the project is supported by federal funding.

The ethical principles to which St. Olaf subscribes are as follows:

- **Beneficence:** Participants’ well-being should be protected. Investigators need to anticipate all potential harms to study participants (including hidden harms, or harms that might be more likely for some types of participants than for others) and take steps to eliminate or at least minimize them. Investigators also need to consider the costs of participation (including the time they are asking participants to commit). Finally, investigators must maximize the potential benefits of a study, both to the participants and to the broader society.

- **Respect:** People should be able to make fully-informed and completely voluntary decisions about whether to participate in a study, and they should have control over the information about them that is shared with others. They should understand what they will be asked to do, and they should know what will happen to the information that is gathered about them. They shouldn’t be pressured or bribed to participate. People should also have a say about the information about them that is shared with others, not only after the study is completed, but before and during the data collection period. People who are less able to make informed and voluntary decisions (such as children and adolescents) need special protections.

- **Justice:** Investigations should not sustain societal injustices, or cause unfair advantages or disadvantages to specific groups or categories of persons. The history of research includes many examples of investigations that replicated or reinforced unjust social structures and
stereotypes. Investigators must consider the groups or categories of persons they will be studying, and ensure that their inquiry project does not unduly burden, or unfairly benefit, any of these groups, taking into account larger social patterns of power and privilege. Participants should not be asked to bear the burdens of research just because they are members of a group that is socially disadvantaged or often exploited. Neither should people be unfairly excluded from participating in projects that provide some kind of benefit.

Practical applications and investigator obligations

These ethical principles have practical significance for the way any project is designed and carried out. Here are the specific protections that investigators must build into the design of their projects.

1. **MINIMIZING RISK:** Your project participants should not be exposed to unnecessary risk *(beneficence).* There are many kinds of risks that might be posed by participation in a research study, some of which may not be immediately obvious or may depend on the group being studied. For example, a series of questions about family life that would appear innocuous to most people might be distressing for survivors of physical or sexual abuse. The principle of beneficence requires that investigators minimize the risks and maximize the benefits of a research project. Investigators need a thorough understanding of what the potential risks are – psychological, legal/social, and physical – in order to accurately identify and minimize them. A project that involves greater risk of harm or discomfort than people would normally experience in daily life require special review and approval before the investigator can invite people to participate.

2. **RECOGNIZING COSTS:** Your project must acknowledge the time cost to the participants *(beneficence).* Whatever the type of study you are conducting, your participants will be giving you the gift of their time by completing your survey, focus group, interview, or test, and they won’t necessarily reap any kind of reward for doing so. The ethical principle of beneficence requires investigators to think carefully about the justification for asking people to volunteer their time and energy to assist the investigator. This is especially true if your project engages participants who are not members of your college community.

3. **RESPECTING PRIVACY:** Your project must not intrude on people’s privacy, even during the process of inviting people to participate in it *(respect).* One of the first challenges investigators confront in conducting a study that involves surveys, interviews, or other methods of collecting information from people is finding people who are willing to participate. The ethical principal of respect requires investigators to protect people’s privacy throughout a project, including the recruitment phase. Some methods of project recruitment, such as putting up posters or asking the head of an organization to advertise your project to the organization’s members, don’t intrude at all on people’s privacy. Other methods, such as sending an unsolicited email to the members of an organization you don’t belong to, might (organizational membership lists and addresses are typically not public information, so prospective participants might legitimately wonder how you knew they were members of that organization, how you got their address, and who gave you permission to contact them).
4. **Providing Information**: Your project participants need complete and understandable information about what you are asking them to do and why (respect). The federal regulations about protecting human subjects include specific requirements for the information that an investigator must provide to prospective participants so they can make an informed decision about whether to participate. The principle of respect suggests that anyone being asked to participate in a research project should be entitled to the same kind of information, such as the purpose of the project, who is conducting it, who is supervising it, what method you’ll use to collect the data, how long it will take, whether there are any risks to their participation, etc. People are also entitled to information they can understand; the information should be clear, jargon-free, and for some populations, translated into another language. If people can’t understand the information you provide, they can’t really make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

5. **Honoring Agreements**: You must make an agreement with your project participants concerning what will happen to the information you gather from them, and then you must abide by that agreement (respect). Participants are the “owners” of the information they share with you, and the principle of respect means that they should know, and agree to, the methods and audiences for dissemination. Participants should not stumble across a report posted on the college website, or see a poster in the student center, that has personal and identifiable information about them that they didn’t know would be publicized. In addition, they should be assured that roommates or office co-workers won’t see interview transcripts or identifiable survey responses lying around or left up on a computer screen. Investigators need to tell participants in advance how results will be shared and with whom, and how their information will be protected during and after the study. Investigators also need to make a specific agreement with the participants about whether people will be able to identify them in any results or reports.

6. **Seeking Fairness**: You must consider the groups or categories of persons to which your participants belong, and make sure that your project does not impose undue burdens or provide unfair advantages for any of those groups or categories (justice). As indicated in the Belmont report, people who are members of groups that have been historically subject to discrimination, exploitation, or injustice should not be urged to participate in a project “simply because of their easy availability, their compromised position, or their manipulability, rather than for reasons directly related to the problem being studied.” For example, inviting only students who receive federal financial aid to participate in a time-consuming project with even a modest monetary incentive limits the burden of participation to students who are less well-off, and may make it more difficult for them to decline to participate because they may feel they need the money. Surveying only female employees about the frequency with which they take time off to care for sick children, and then disseminating the results, may reinforce stereotypes about women putting caregiving ahead of contributions in the workplace.

7. **Acknowledging Vulnerability**: If your project involves the study of people under the age of 18, people who are educationally or economically disadvantaged, or people in hospitals, prisons, or nursing homes, special protections and procedures are required (beneficence, respect, and justice). The principles of respect and beneficence come into play for certain types of “vulnerable populations” such as these. The federal regulations use the term “vulnerable” to indicate that under some circumstances, a person asked to participate in a research project
might be vulnerable to coercion or undue pressure, or unable to evaluate accurately the risks and benefits of participation in the project. Investigators must take special measures to respect the rights and well-being of “vulnerable subjects.” For example, investigators may need to secure the informed consent of a parent or guardian to allow children or underage adolescents to participate in a project. A study of nursing home residents may require screening by staff so that only residents who can make a fully-informed decision to participate are invited to do so.

8. **CONSIDERING CONTEXT:** Your project procedures must be appropriate to your participants’ cultural and community context (*beneficence, respect, and justice*). All three principles of *beneficence, respect, and justice* require investigators to consider carefully the ways in which a participant’s culture or community might affect their experience in your project. You may need to adapt the way you recruit participants, the questions you ask, or the way you secure their informed consent. For example, answering questions about membership in political organizations might be harmless in one country but be potentially dangerous for participants in another country. In some communities, even talking with outsiders could compromise a person’s reputation or social standing. Some cultures require community authorities or family leaders to consent to the participation of community members in a project. It is particularly important to consider the context in projects conducted outside the US, where legal requirements or social norms about research ethics may be very different than laws and norms within the US. However, projects in the US that involve immigrants or other diverse communities may also require additional knowledge of cultural context. Investigators who undertake such projects incur special obligation to understand the local context and the social and ethical norms that must be respected.

These principles of beneficence, respect, and justice are wholly consistent with the larger mission and commitments of St. Olaf College. They enable investigators not only to “seek truth,” but to do so as “responsible and knowledgeable citizens of the world.” This brief document serves only as an introductory summary of the principles and their practical significance for the design and conduct of an investigation. Each is treated in much greater detail in the training programs, project planning forms, and review procedures established by the St. Olaf Institutional Review Board (IRB). Please visit the [IRB website](#) for further information, including links to the original *Belmont Report* and the federal *Office for Human Research Protections*. 