Frequently Asked Questions about the Colby Institutional Review Board (IRB)

1. What is the IRB?

The Colby IRB is a committee of Colby faculty and Waterville community members. It is responsible for reviewing all research projects conducted by Colby faculty, students, and administrative staff that involve collecting information from human subjects, in order to ensure that these projects comply with legal and professional standards for ethical research.

2. Who should apply for IRB approval?

The United States Code of Federal Regulations requires IRB approval for all research conducted with human subjects. It defines “research” as a systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge, and defines a “human subject” as a living person about whom a researcher obtains (a) data through interaction with the person, or (b) identifiable private information. Human subjects research can include projects conducted for scholarly publication or presentation, for independent study courses and honors theses, and for course assignments.

For complete definitions, see:

http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html#46.102

3. If I plan to conduct research abroad, should I apply for IRB approval?

Yes. A faculty member or student who plans to conduct research abroad should apply for approval from the Colby IRB, and from any relevant regulatory bodies in the host country.

4. How can I apply for IRB approval?

Any Colby student or faculty member can apply for IRB approval of a research project by emailing a completed IRB application, along with any relevant supporting materials (e.g., consent form, permission-to-record form, debriefing form, copies of questionnaires or interview scripts), to the Chair of the Colby IRB. The IRB application form (faculty and student versions) and sample materials (including consent form, debriefing form, and permission-to-record form) are available at:

http://web.colby.edu/psychology/resources-for-research

5. As an instructor, if students will be conducting individual or group research projects in my course, how can I obtain IRB approval for these projects?

There are two ways to obtain IRB approval of research projects conducted as course assignments. If the individual students or research groups will all be conducting essentially the same project (i.e., addressing similar research questions using similar procedures), then the instructor can submit a single IRB application for the assignment. However, if the individual students or research groups will be conducting meaningfully different projects (i.e., addressing
different research questions and/or using different procedures), then each student or research group should prepare an IRB application. These applications should be submitted to the instructor, who should then forward them to the IRB chair for review.

6. When can I begin collecting data for a research project?

A researcher should not begin collecting data until after their project has been approved by the IRB.

7. How long does it take to obtain IRB approval?

New IRB applications are typically reviewed in two to three weeks. However, obtaining final approval may require the researcher to revise and resubmit their application in order to address issues identified by the IRB. Some applications may be reviewed more quickly than two weeks, especially if the IRB Chair determines that the project qualifies for expedited review (e.g., because it involves no risk to participants), or is exempt from review (e.g., because it involves only secondary analysis of existing data). If a researcher believes that a project may qualify for expedited review, or may be exempt from review, they can explain the reasons for this in their IRB application, or in a separate memo.

For information about expedited review, see:

http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html#46.110

For information about categories of exempt research, see:

http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html#46.101

8. What are the IRB’s standards regarding informed consent?

Researchers are expected to obtain and document informed consent from each participant (e.g., by having them sign a consent form) before collecting data from them. For participants who may not fully appreciate the benefits and risks of research participation (e.g., children), researchers are expected to obtain assent from the participant, as well as consent from an appropriate representative of the participant (e.g., a parent). For some projects, it may be acceptable to modify or waive the informed consent requirement. When requesting a modification or waiver, the researcher should explain the rationale for this request in their IRB application.

For more information about informed consent, see:

http://answers.hhs.gov/ohrp/categories/1566

For information about requesting a modification or waiver of informed consent, see:

http://answers.hhs.gov/ohrp/questions/7268
9. What are the IRB’s standards regarding data confidentiality?

Researchers are expected to maintain the anonymity (by collecting data in such a way that even the researchers cannot match participants’ identities with their data records) or confidentiality (by reporting the research findings in such a way that participants cannot be personally identified) of their data. If a researcher plans to personally identify participants in a research report (e.g., by attributing an interview quote using a participant’s real name), then the researcher should explain the rationale for this in their IRB application, and should obtain the participant’s active consent to be identified (for an example, see the sample permission-to-record form).

10. If I would like to modify a project that has already been approved by the IRB, what should I do?

If a researcher would like to modify an IRB-approved project, they should describe the proposed changes to the IRB Chair and request approval for them. If the changes are relatively minor, they can be described in a short memo. If the changes are more extensive, the researcher can revise and resubmit the originally approved IRB application for the project, along with a memo summarizing the changes.

11. If I have other questions about the IRB process, what should I do?

If you have additional questions about the IRB approval process, please contact the IRB Chair.