

UNCG IRB Recruitment Guide

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Recruitment of Research Participants

Recruitment refers to the process of providing potential participants with information about a study before enrollment, to help them make an informed decision about whether they wish to take part. Investigators are responsible for recruiting participants in a manner that is fair, ethical, and equitable, consistent with the principles of the [Belmont Report](#) and the requirements of [45 CFR 46](#).

All recruitment procedures and materials, including advertisements, emails, letters, verbal scripts, and online postings, must receive IRB review and approval prior to use. Recruitment materials must be consistent with the approved IRB protocol and informed consent language, must accurately describe the study, and must not include misleading or coercive statements.

Ethical Concerns

Investigators must ensure that all recruitment strategies and materials uphold the ethical principles of Respect for Persons, Beneficence, and Justice, as outlined in the Belmont Report and codified in 45 CFR 46. The following considerations should guide recruitment planning:

Respect for Privacy: Recruitment methods should protect individuals’ privacy and maintain confidentiality. Invitations to participate should occur in settings that minimize the risk of embarrassment or unwanted disclosure. For example, screening questions should be asked in private,

and researchers should not leave voicemail or messages identifying a study about a sensitive or stigmatizing condition.

Avoiding Undue Influence or Pressure: Participation in research must be entirely voluntary. Investigators must avoid any recruitment situation in which participants might feel pressured to take part—such as when the recruiter is a supervisor, teacher, clinician, or other authority figure. Incentives or payments must be reasonable and proportionate to the time and inconvenience involved and must not be so large as to compromise voluntary choice.

Unbiased and Accurate Presentation: Recruitment information must present the study in an honest, balanced manner that neither exaggerates potential benefits nor minimizes possible risks. All statements must be consistent with the IRB-approved protocol and informed consent form. Recruitment materials should avoid design features or wording that unduly emphasize participation incentives or benefits, such as using bold, oversized, or highlighted text to draw attention to compensation amounts or “free treatment.” These practices can mislead prospective participants or create the perception of undue influence.

Equitable Selection of Participants: Recruitment methods should ensure that the selection of subjects is fair and appropriate to the research purpose. Investigators should avoid systematically excluding or over-targeting groups without justification and should make reasonable efforts to include underrepresented populations when relevant to the research aims.

Managing Conflicts of Interest and Power Differentials: Extra care must be taken when the investigator holds a position of authority over potential participants (for example, a professor recruiting students, or a supervisor recruiting employees). In these cases, recruitment and consent should be conducted by a neutral third party to minimize perceived coercion or undue influence.

Who May Recruit?

Individuals who initiate contact with potential participants or conduct recruitment activities must be listed as study personnel on the IRB application. These individuals are required to complete [CITI training for human subjects research \(or equivalent community researcher training\)](#) and must possess sufficient knowledge of the study to accurately describe it and answer participant questions.

In accordance with [OHRP guidance on the Engagement of Institutions in Human Subjects Research \(2008\)](#), certain limited activities do not constitute engagement in research. Individuals performing only these tasks generally do not need to be listed as study personnel, provided they have no other involvement in the study:

- Forwarding IRB-approved recruitment materials to potential participants without adding or altering content.
- Obtaining a potential participant’s permission to share their contact information with the research team; or

- Providing a potential participant's contact information to the research team only if such sharing is permitted under applicable privacy regulations and institutional policy.

Anyone whose role exceeds these limited activities, such as initiating direct communication with potential participants, answering questions about the study, or conducting screening, will be considered engaged in research and, therefore, must be listed on the IRB application and complete all required training.

When external collaborators or non-UNCG personnel assist with recruitment, the investigator must ensure that appropriate IRB reliance agreements or other authorizations are in place prior to initiating recruitment.

IRB Submission Requirements

Researchers must describe in their IRB application how potential participants will be identified, approached, and invited to take part in the study. The description should provide sufficient detail for the IRB to fully evaluate the appropriateness and ethical soundness of the recruitment plan.

In Cayuse, investigators must include the following information:

1. The source of potential participants for each participant group;
2. When, where, how, and by whom potential participants will be recruited;
3. The methods or data sources used to identify or contact potential participants (e.g., databases, referrals, advertisements); and
4. Finalized versions of all recruitment materials, including advertisements, flyers, emails, text messages, web postings, social media content, and verbal scripts.

In accordance with 45 CFR 46 and institutional policy, all recruitment materials and procedures must receive IRB review and approval prior to any contact with potential participants. Recruitment materials must be submitted in their final form and approved before use. If materials or methods change after approval, a modification request must be submitted and approved by the IRB through Cayuse before the revised approach is implemented.

Recruitment materials should be appropriately tailored to the study phase and participant population. Multiple versions may be necessary for different groups (e.g., adults vs. parents of minors). When recruitment occurs in non-public settings, such as clinics, workplaces, online communities, schools, or UNCG classrooms, investigators must submit site approval (permission) from the site owner or administrator prior to posting or distributing materials.

Recruitment materials should be written in clear, lay language that is culturally and linguistically appropriate for the target population. If the study enrolls non-English-speaking participants, translated versions of recruitment materials must be provided to, and approved by the IRB before use.

Recruitment Materials

Investigators must submit to the IRB all recruitment materials that will be used to identify or invite potential participants. The IRB must review and approve these materials prior to posting, distribution, or use. This includes, but is not limited to, print advertisements, email or text messages, online and social media postings, flyers, verbal or telephone scripts, and audiovisual materials.

The IRB will review:

1. The information contained in the advertisement or recruitment message;
2. The method and medium of communication (e.g., online, in-person, broadcast);
3. The final copy of any printed, audio, or video materials;
4. The final text and when possible the layout of any website or social media recruitment postings; and
5. The final verbal or written script used in direct recruitment interactions.

Advertising Content Requirements

Recruitment materials should provide concise, factual information that allows potential participants to assess their interest and eligibility. Materials must not mislead or exert undue influence. Specifically:

- Do not state or imply a certainty of favorable outcome or benefits beyond what is described in the IRB-approved consent and protocol.
- Do not include exculpatory language that waives or appears to waive participants' legal rights.
- Do not emphasize payments or incentives using bold, enlarged, or highlighted text.

Please ensure that all recruitment materials contain these UNCG-recommended elements of recruitment:

- Name and institutional affiliation of investigator
- Purpose of the study and a clear indication that it constitutes research
- Summary of inclusion/exclusion criteria
- Summary of study procedures
- Time or other commitment required by participants
- Compensation or reimbursement
- Location of study and name and contact information of a person to be contacted about the study (if other than already provided)
- Please make sure to include a version date.
- Please confirm you have permission to use the photograph.

Email and Online Recruitment

When conducting recruitment via email or online survey platforms, researchers must comply with UNCG's *Survey Contact Policy*: potential participants may receive **no more than three contacts**—the

initial invitation and up to two follow-ups. This ensures respect for privacy and minimizes unwanted solicitation.

Formatting and Readability

Recruitment materials should be written in **plain language**, generally at or below an eighth-grade reading level, and must be clear, culturally appropriate, and accessible to the intended population. If recruitment materials are translated for non-English-speaking participants, the translated versions must be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to use.

Screening Instruments

Any screening instruments or preliminary eligibility questionnaires that collect *identifiable* or *sensitive* information must be submitted to the IRB with the protocol, labeled as screening instruments. If screening uses records (medical, educational), justify access and include any requested HIPAA or FERPA waivers/permissions. If screening occurs before consent and collects identifiable information, explain why the screening cannot practicably be done after consent and whether an alteration/waiver of consent is sought.

Acceptable Recruitment Methods

The following recruitment methods are generally acceptable at UNCG, though this list is not exhaustive. Studies may employ multiple recruitment strategies, and all proposed methods must be described in the IRB application. Each method must align with 45 CFR 46 and be approved by the IRB prior to use.

• Advertisements, flyers, information sheets, notices and/or media

- The final version of all advertisements and recruitment materials must be uploaded as attachments to the IRB application.
- Text and layout must receive IRB approval before posting, oral presentation, or distribution.
- Individuals responding to such materials should contact the study investigators directly.

• Recruitment letters

- Letters may come from a person, agency, or organization known to the potential participant, ideally increasing credibility and minimizing perceived coercion.
- Letters should be concise and include all required ~~recruitment~~ elements of recruitment (noted above).
- The letter should direct interested individuals to contact the study team for additional information or enrollment, or provide them with the next step, such as a link to a survey.

• Snowball Sampling

- When snowball recruitment is used, the preferred approach is for enrolled participants to forward study information to others who may be eligible.
- Study participants should not provide the research team with contact information of others unless those individuals have given explicit permission to be contacted.
- Acceptable alternatives include:

- Providing participants with IRB-approved materials (flyers, information sheets, etc.) to share with others.
 - Asking enrolled participants to obtain permission from potential referrals before sharing their contact details with the study team.
 - Ensuring the study team does not directly contact individuals who have not consented to contact.
- **Participant Pools**
 - Participant pools (e.g., SONA) are acceptable only when individuals have voluntarily consented to be included and have given permission for future contact.
 - Recruitment through such pools must comply with [OHRP guidance on the use of student subject pools](#) and ensure participation is voluntary and not a condition of coursework or evaluation without alternative options (see below).
- **Review of Publicly Available Records**
 - Publicly available data or records may be used to identify potential participants if access does not violate privacy expectations or applicable laws. Examples include public social media posts, professional directories, or voter registration lists.
 - The use of any record source must be justified in the IRB application, and privacy protections should be clearly described.
- **Review of Other Records**
 - Access to non-public records (e.g., educational, medical, employment) for recruitment purposes requires explicit IRB approval and must comply with relevant privacy regulations such as FERPA or HIPAA, as applicable.
 - Investigators must document any permissions or data use agreements allowing record access.
- **Online or Electronic Recruitment**
 - Recruitment via websites, social media platforms, or email lists is permissible when messages are IRB-approved and privacy expectations are maintained.
 - Posts and messages must follow the same advertising content standards outlined in the Recruitment Materials section.

Recruitment Using Short-Format Media (Newspaper, Billboards, Text Messages)

Recruitment through short-format media (e.g., newspaper ads, billboards, radio/streaming spots, and SMS/text messages) is permissible when the content is IRB-approved and does not mislead, coerce, or unduly influence potential participants. Because these formats often have strict character or time limits, the IRB may allow a brief recruitment message that directs individuals to a longer, IRB-approved

recruitment page via a QR code and/or short URL. Final, formatted versions (including layout, font emphasis, and visuals) must be submitted for IRB review prior to use.

A. Minimum content for short-format recruitment messages

When space is limited, recruitment messages should generally include only the information needed for a person to determine basic interest and eligibility, such as:

- A clear statement that this is research (e.g., “Research Study” or “Participants Needed”)
- A brief study purpose/condition (plain language)
- A brief eligibility cue (optional, if space permits)
- The expected time/effort (optional, if space permits)
- A contact method (phone/email) and/or a QR code/short URL leading to full details

Recruitment materials must not overstate benefits, minimize risks, promise outcomes, or emphasize payments through formatting (e.g., bold/large print).

B. QR codes and short links (required safeguards)

If a QR code or short URL is used, it must link only to IRB-approved content, such as an approved flyer, approved study webpage, or an IRB-approved screening/interest form. The IRB submission must include both:

1. the short-format ad (billboard/newspaper/SMS script), and
2. the exact landing-page content the QR code/URL directs to.

Important: QR codes/links should not be used to collect or track personal information unless that tracking/collection has been disclosed and approved (some IRBs explicitly restrict QR codes that collect/track data).

C. Newspaper, print media, and billboards (outdoor advertising)

- Submit the final formatted ad (exact layout, images, and text) for IRB review to assess emphasis (especially around compensation) and overall accuracy.
- If the full set of “recommended recruitment elements” cannot fit, the ad must include a QR code/short URL and/or contact info that connects potential participants to the complete IRB-approved recruitment information.
- The landing page should include the full recommended elements (study purpose, procedures summary, time commitment, compensation, key eligibility, contact info, and voluntariness language), consistent with your Recruitment Materials section and IRB-approved protocol.

D. SMS/Text-message recruitment (special privacy cautions)

Text messaging is inherently less private than some other methods and may not be appropriate for sensitive studies or populations. IRB approval of text recruitment depends on the study context and confidentiality risks.

If text messaging is approved for recruitment:

- Keep messages brief and neutral; do not include sensitive condition details that could reveal private information if seen by others.
- Include a way to opt out of further messages (e.g., “Reply STOP to opt out”), especially when using any automated or repeated texting approach.
- Provide a short link to the full IRB-approved recruitment information (or approved screener), rather than trying to include all elements in the SMS.
- Describe in the IRB application: who will send texts, how numbers were obtained, how many messages will be sent, and how privacy/confidentiality will be protected.

Unacceptable Recruitment Methods

- **Use of Bonus Payments or Referral Fees**

Payments that reward individuals for identifying, referring, or enrolling participants are not permitted. This includes:

- Per-participant referral incentives (e.g., “\$10 for every person you refer”),
- Enrollment-based bonuses or quotas,
- Tiered compensation structures tied to recruitment success.

Such practices create a significant risk of undue influence, may compromise voluntary participation, and can lead recruiters to exert inappropriate pressure on prospective subjects—directly conflicting with the Belmont principle of Respect for Persons and OHRP’s expectation that recruitment be free of coercion or improper influence.

Investigators may not promise, offer, or distribute compensation to third parties for recruitment activities beyond routine, pre-approved study duties described in the IRB protocol.

- **Coercive, Misleading, or Exaggerated Statements**

Recruitment materials and interactions must not include language that:

- Implies guaranteed or highly likely benefits,
- Overstates the study’s purpose, effectiveness, or outcomes,
- Minimizes or omits reasonably foreseeable risks,
- Suggests negative consequences for choosing not to participate,
- Uses alarming, emotionally charged, or persuasive language designed to pressure participation.

Recruitment must present information accurately, neutrally, and in alignment with the IRB-approved protocol and consent form. Statements that manipulate emotions, promise unrealistic outcomes, or suggest personal obligation are not acceptable.

- **Use of Authority or Position to Pressure Participation**

Individuals in positions of authority—such as supervisors, instructors, coaches, clinicians, or advisors—must not directly recruit individuals who may perceive a requirement or expectation to participate. This includes:

- Direct recruitment by a person who evaluates or supervises the potential participant,
- Communications that suggest participation could affect employment, grades, services, or access to resources.

Such recruitment is considered inherently coercive unless strong safeguards and neutral intermediaries are used and approved by the IRB.

Special Issues in Recruitment

Recruitment in Classrooms

When the PI is recruiting from UNCG classes, permission to recruit from classes must be secured from the department chair(s) (email permission should be included with the IRB submission). There are several options for facilitating this work, including:

1. The research becomes part of the course work, and all students enrolled in the course/section are required to complete the work. In this case, the consenting process includes only the request to utilize the course work for research purposes after the semester is over. This option requires planning and is more difficult if the semester has already started, since the inclusion of the research as part of the course grade necessitates inclusion of the item as part of the syllabus. If completion of the work is required by all students, but no grade is attached, inclusion in the syllabus is not required. If the PI is the IOR, additional issues must be addressed.
2. Recruiting out of classes with or without compensation for participation:
 - a. PIs can recruit from courses via Canvas, email or in person using recruitment materials approved by IRB. Students can elect to participate but no course credit is given and monetary remuneration may or may not be offered.
 - b. If either course credit or extra credit is given for research participation, a non-research option of equal credit must also be given.
 - c. Either course credit or monetary remuneration may be offered, but students cannot receive both options for participation. One or the other must be chosen.

When PIs are recruiting from a class where they are listed as the IOR, every effort must be made to remove implied or outright coercion due to power differentials between the IOR (faculty, staff, or graduate students) and students enrolled in the course. In this situation, 2 options are available for

consenting students. These include:

1. A neutral third party (i.e., graduate student, department chair, other faculty not involved in the research) can explain the study to the class and collect informed consent. This person retains informed consent until the end of the semester and after the final grades are posted, the PI is made aware of which students agreed to participate and have their work included as part of the research.
2. The PI can recruit students from another section of the same course for which they are not the IOR.
3. If the IOR of the course is the PI on the IRB but a neutral third party is responsible for grades (i.e., a teaching assistant is responsible for all grading), the neutral third party can collect consent from students and add course or extra credit for research to the grades. However, if the PI is the IOR and is responsible for grading, no course or extra credit can be included for research participation since this does not allow for anonymity and coercion can be implied.

Recruitment of Employees/Students from other Universities

When PIs are recruiting from other universities, they must document permission (i.e., an email or letter) to recruit student (or staff/faculty) participants at other institutions. This should be from the IRB. If no IRB exists, then the signatory that approves research on campus should provide permission. It is not permissible for recruitment to occur by emailing publicly available email addresses of university employees or students either at UNCG or at other institutions, if the explicit intention of the initial email is to request distribution of recruitment/research information to students via university emails that are not publicly available.

Recruitment through Social Media

Recruitment procedures and materials used on social media are subject to the same IRB requirements that apply to traditional recruitment methods (e.g., letters, flyers, emails). All social-media recruitment materials must be submitted in their final form for IRB review and approval **before** posting or distribution. Study teams must ensure their procedures minimize the potential for undue influence, respect participant privacy, and present information clearly at a reading level appropriate for the intended audience.

When proposing the use of social media for recruitment, study teams must address the following:

- **Compliance with Platform Policies:**
Research teams are responsible for understanding and complying with each platform's terms of use, including rules regarding advertising, recruitment, research activities, prohibited content, and privacy. Recruitment activities must meet platform policies or community guidelines.
- **Privacy and Data Security Considerations:**
Study teams must evaluate the privacy, security, and data-handling practices of any social media platform used for recruitment and ensure that use of the platform does not compromise participant confidentiality or conflict with institutional data protection policies. Investigators must recognize that interactions on social media platforms may be visible to others and that

absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed in online environments. Recruitment procedures should therefore minimize the collection of identifiable information through the platform itself and, when feasible, direct interested individuals to a secure, IRB-approved site (e.g., UNCG-approved survey platform or webpage) for screening or further communication.

- **Risk of Broad Dissemination:**

Information posted on social media can be forwarded, shared, or made visible to individuals outside the intended recruitment population. Research teams must take reasonable steps to clearly identify the target population and to ensure recruiting practices support equitable selection of participants.

- **Content Review:**

The IRB will review all social-media recruitment content—including advertisements, posts, images, boosted posts, and direct-message scripts—following the same standards applied to traditional recruitment materials. Content must be clearly identifiable as recruitment, provide accurate study information, and avoid therapeutic misconception or undue influence.

- **Recruitment in Public and Private Groups:**

Recruitment through public or private groups is permitted; however, research teams must follow all group-specific rules and obtain any required permissions from group administrators. Teams must also be aware of any site-level restrictions on recruiting within groups.

Researchers may consult relevant federal guidance for additional best practices, such as the [National Institutes of Health \(NIH\) recommendations for social-media recruitment](#).

List-serv Recruitment

Use of non-public list-servs or distribution lists is permissible only when the list owner or administrator has granted explicit permission for the research team to distribute recruitment materials. This permission should be documented (e.g., an email from the list owner) and included with the IRB application when available.

The IRB application must describe:

- Which list-serv(s) will be used
- How permission was obtained
- Who will send the recruitment message (the investigator or the list owner)
- Whether the research team will receive any member contact information

When using list-servs:

- Only IRB-approved recruitment language may be distributed.
- Researchers may not access or use non-public email addresses without permission from the list owner.
- Recruitment messages should make clear that responding is voluntary, and no follow-up messages may be sent unless the individual initiates contact.
- If the list-serv rules prohibit commercial, research, or unsolicited postings, researchers must comply with those restrictions.

Researchers should ensure that use of the list-serv is consistent with institutional policies, privacy expectations of list members, and the group's stated purpose or posting rules.

These methods are consistent with OHRP's guidance on recruitment and 45 CFR 46.111(a)(3), ensuring equitable and respectful participant selection.