Student Researchers’ Attitudes Regarding Their IRB Committee and Tolerance for Research Malfeasance during a Time of IRB “Crisis”
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Background: A fair amount of past research has addressed researchers’ views regarding their IRB committees. Keith-Spiegel, Koocher, and Tabachnick (2006) created the IRB Researcher Assessment Tool (IRB-RAT) to measure views regarding ideal and actual IRB performance. Reeser et al. (2007), using a sample of biomedical researchers, found rankings that deviated from Keith-Spiegel et al.’s (2006) national sample. To date, no published study has reported on the views of student researchers. Further, a relationship between obstructionist IRB bureaucracy and tolerance for research malfeasance was posited by Keith-Spiegel and Koocher (2005). However, little is known regarding the relation between IRB interactions with student researchers and their tolerance for malfeasance.

Research Questions: How do student researchers’ views of their ideal IRB compare to national benchmarks? Second, what are the differences between ideal and actual ratings when student researchers are served by an under-resourced IRB committee? Third, are negative perceptions of IRBs related to tolerance for research malfeasance?

Methods: The survey took place at a small graduate college offering a clinical psychology (PsyD) degree. At the time of the survey, the IRB committee was significantly over-extended, resulting in substantial delays (four weeks to six months) in approval of protocols. These delays could delay student advancement to clinical internship, which would have financial and other ramifications on students’ careers. The present (IRB-approved) survey was conducted to measure students’ ratings of their ideal and actual IRBs using the IRB-RAT. Students were emailed the link for an online and anonymous survey of IRB effectiveness. Overall, 62 students provided useable surveys. It is not possible to calculate the actual response rate, since it is not known how many eligible students actually received and opened the email solicitation.

Results: On virtually all IRB-RAT items, student responses were significantly higher than benchmark standards, showing that these students expected more from their ideal IRB. In a second analysis, students’ ideal and actual ratings were compared using repeated-measures t-tests. Actual ratings were significantly lower on almost every item (with large effect sizes), highlighting the performance shortcomings for this IRB at this critical juncture. Regarding tolerance for malfeasance, those who reported substantial IRB delays were significantly more tolerant of malfeasance on several items describing hypothetical research ethics transgressions.

Conclusion: Student dissatisfaction with excessive IRB dwell time appears to be associated with a concomitant increase in their ratings of ideal IRBs, a widespread reduction in IRB performance ratings, and an increased tolerance for research malfeasance. After a presentation of the results, the college administration released more resources to the IRB, thus highlighting an important application of the IRB-RAT that has not been addressed in the literature.

Limitations: Results are correlational in nature, and are the product of a volunteer sample.