

HPRB Policy Regarding Anonymity/Confidentiality in Research at PLU*

Maintaining participant anonymity is a higher standard than maintaining confidentiality. It offers a greater degree of protection when no one, including the experimenter, can link a participant's responses with his or her identity. (The consent/debriefing and HPRB forms will identify a level of either anonymity or confidentiality, but not both.)

Maintaining Anonymity

To assure anonymity, you may use procedures such as avoiding demographic questions that can result in identification of an individual with unique characteristics, issuing writing utensils to participants to avoid unique ink as an identifier, maintaining signed consent forms and completed research materials in separate containers, aggregating completed research materials in random order in a large group before examining them and ensuring that neither you nor anyone else sees participants' responses during data collection. You can do this by seating participants with sufficient distance between them and by adding a cover sheet to your research materials that can be used as a shield.

Example of text for Item 9 (HPRB form):

"It will not be possible for anyone, including the investigator, to link individual identifiers with study results. No participant names will be written on research materials except for the consent form which will be kept separate from research materials. No identifying ink will be used on written materials. Completed research materials will be aggregated into groups of no fewer than 10 participants' materials and will be shuffled in order before examination by the investigator. Participants will be seated with sufficient distance from each other to prevent them from seeing each other's responses. (and/or A cover sheet will shield participants' responses from the view of others."

Note: If demographic data can identify individuals, and the data are not variables but are being used to describe the sample, then demographic questions can be included on a sheet of paper that is kept separate from the consent forms and from the raw data sheets.

Maintaining Confidentiality

If you cannot maintain anonymity, and you will be able to link identity with research data, you may assure participants that their responses will be held confidential. You must prevent others from gaining access to participants' data. This includes assignment of a code to replace the participant's name on materials, keeping the key to the code in a separate location from the materials. It also includes keeping the raw data in a secure location and preventing others from seeing a database that you may create and that may contain identifiers such as demographic information that is linked to research data. You must be specific in your informed consent procedure that you will be asking for sensitive information, if this is the case, and you must provide examples of sensitive materials.

Example of HPRB proposal text for Item 9:

"The investigator(s) will be able to link individual personal identifiers with study results. Results will be kept confidential by keeping all responses to research materials in a secure location to which no one but the investigator(s) will have access. No names will appear on any study materials except for the consent form which will be kept separate from other materials and will be unable to be linked to them. A code will be assigned to each individual and will appear on study materials and in the computer database for the study. The key to the code will be kept in a secure location separate from the materials. (And if applicable) The database, which will contain demographic information that may allow identification of individuals, will be kept secure and will be seen by only the experimenter(s)."