

Web-based Ethics Course in Research with Human Subjects

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The title of our course is [Scientists and Subjects: An Internet-based Seminar on the Ethics of Research with Human Subjects](#).

In offering the [Teaching Research Ethics Workshop](#) annually for the last eight years, we have often heard researchers and administrators opine that time pressures make it difficult or impossible for researchers to undertake extensive ethics training: “I can’t be away from the lab that long.” We are seeking to address this constraint by offering asynchronous but highly interactive training via the World Wide Web.

Participation in the seminar is limited to 15 researchers per cohort to promote interaction and cohesion. We advertise the seminar via direct mailing, the Internet, and announcements in newsletters and journals. Potential participants complete a Web-based application form describing their research focus, teaching focus, and concerns and interests in the ethics of research with human subjects. The application form also asks potential participants to certify that they are committed to contributing actively to the seminar and that they have the necessary computer technology to do so.

Our experience has shown that it is essential for participants to meet face-to-face for an electronic conference to be successful. Therefore, the seminar begins with a short, intensive [retreat](#) where seminar staff offer overview presentations on ethical, legal, and social issues in research with human subjects. In addition, each participant makes a short presentation on her or his concerns in the ethics of research with human subjects. At least one-fourth of the time at the retreat is dedicated to discussion and interaction.

Shortly after the retreat, the Internet-based portion of the seminar begins, using LISTSERV software with a Web interface. Most seminar modules are directed – that is, course coordinators identify a reading and ask specific questions designed to elicit discussion. Some, however, are more free-form.

The seminar runs for three or four months and is divided into four or five modules. A typical seminar might cover the Belmont report; informed consent; the therapeutic obligation in research; and vulnerable populations.

We have contracted with two evaluators, one to appraise the process and one the content of the seminar. Participants know that they can offer confidential comments to the evaluators at any time. The evaluators also monitor the seminar and actively solicit feedback from participants during and after the seminar. We revise and improve the seminar – both the seminar in progress and future seminars – in consultation with the evaluators.