

Student subjects earn credit

By Colleen Pohlig
Emerald Reporter

Graduate student Carene Davis-Stitt is doing research on intergroup relations as part of her dissertation. She hopes her results will be published in a psychology journal when it is finished this fall.

For the past two years, graduate student Peter Grossenbacher has researched how people perceive emotion expressed by body posture. His research was inspired by working with brain-damaged patients at a local hospital.

Grossenbacher shows his subjects various photos of body posture, and the subjects are expected to identify the emotion they think that individual is feeling.

Both psychology students are helped by a readily-available "human subjects pool" of students who participate in research experiments for part of their class grade.

For the past eight years, students in 200-level psychology classes have been required to either participate in various research experiments or write a paper on a pertinent topic.

"The pool is an absolutely necessary resource for what we do in social psychology," Davis-Stitt said. "Everyone is always cooperative and helpful."

Robert Mauro, head of the psychology department's Human Subjects Pool Committee, said his department's philosophy is that research is important in psychology.

Grossenbacher said his research, when finished, could have the potential for cross-cultural use.

"People who speak different languages may be able to communicate by interpreting emotions through body posture," he said. "This might help different cultures to communicate."

Although students in the entry-level classes are required to participate in experiments, professors who teach other psychology classes may encourage their students to be subjects.

Sophomore George Williams, a student in a 300-level Child

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second in a series

Development class, said he is participating in three experiments to earn extra credit.

Williams said he doesn't mind the experiments because he enjoys helping graduate students with their research.

Sophomore Ry Koteen, a student in the entry level Mind and Brain class, said he believes the requirement is unnecessary and a waste of time.

"It's a weak way to make us learn because we have to do these to pass the class," he said. "They should let us learn something because we want to, not because we have to."

The average requirement in the entry-level classes is four experiments, or a paper on a professor-approved topic. The paper option is for students who object to the experiments.

The subject pool is used by anyone in the department who gets approval to conduct research involving humans.

Two committees must approve the research proposal before the researcher, or "investigator," is permitted to use students from the subject pool.

When an investigator — usually a professor or graduate student, but may be an undergraduate — comes up with a research idea, he or she is required to fill out a description of the experiment and identify any possible risks.

The Psychology Department

Human Subjects Committee then reviews the proposal. This body, made up of three department professors, is separate from the subject pool committee.

Dr. Robert Wyse, committee chairman, said the committee takes three things into consideration: how the investigator plans to protect participants from any identified risks, confidentiality, and assurance that the investigator will adequately inform the participants about the experiment.

If the committee agrees the experiment is safe and ethical, the proposal goes to the University Institutional Review Board.

The board, which reviews all research conducted on campus, again checks the experiment proposal for ethics and safety.

If the board finds everything in check, the investigator is then free to ask the Psychology Department for use of the subject pool.

Experiments done by graduate and undergraduate students have to also be approved and supervised by an adviser.

The different levels of approval required to conduct research is necessary to safeguard the participants, Wyse said.

"As far as trying to protect people, it's fairly safe," he said. "If anything, it errs in the direction of being overly cautious. But I believe that's a good thing in research using human subjects."

Wyse said students may back out at anytime.

The research requirement is valuable for both students and investigators, Mauro said. The experiments give students an understanding of research, while providing investigators with willing subjects.

Psychology Professor Don Tucker, who is researching brain waves, said he believes the requirement is a good idea, especially for researchers.

"This is how the University education differs from a small college education," he said. "Students can actually conduct research and create new knowledge. We don't just teach here, we make new knowledge."

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