



# Sam Houston State University

*A Member of The Texas State University System*

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

### **SHSU IRB Guidance: IRB Requirements Pertaining to FERPA Compliance**

In accordance with FERPA ([34 CFR 99](#)), an educational institution has the authority to determine what information may be accessed from an education record. If an institution denies an investigator access to information in an education record, the IRB cannot overrule that decision.

If a student has requested privacy over their education records, no information, including directory information, may be released without the student's specific written consent. Researchers should work with the Registrar's Office to determine if students have requested their information as **confidential**.

Researchers obtaining data from education records beyond directory information for research purposes are generally limited to two options:

1. **Obtaining Written Consent:** Researchers may contact and obtain written consent from each student to participate in the study and authorize the release of their education records for research purposes. A FERPA compliant consent letter must include the following details:
  - Clarification of the specific records that will be disclosed to the researchers
  - The purpose of the data disclosure
  - The people or organizations that will have access to the student data
2. **Anonymized Data:** School officials other than the researcher (such as Institutional Assessment) with legitimate access to the data or information may strip the records of any identifying information and provide the data to the researcher. Under 34 CFR 99.31, education records may be released without consent if all personally identifiable information has been removed. Officials must work with the Registrar's Office to determine if students have requested their information as private.

### Exceptions to Consent Requirements under FERPA

Under FERPA, the following types of studies are eligible for an exception from the consent requirement:

1. **Disclosures to Organizations Conducting Studies:** Disclosures may be made to organizations conducting studies for, or on behalf of, educational agencies or institutions. This is known as the "study exception."
2. **Development, Validation, or Administration of Predictive Tests:** Data may be disclosed without consent for the purpose of developing, validating, or administering predictive tests.

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3. **Administration of Student Aid Programs:** Information may be released without consent to administer student aid programs.
4. **Improving Instruction:** Data may be disclosed without consent for studies aimed at improving instruction.

### Privacy and Security of Non-Directory Data

The following approaches are IRB-approved methods of ensuring data security and privacy with FERPA-related student data (*Gold, 2019*):

## Working With Administrative Data

### Approaches to Ensure Data Security and Privacy

Technique	Description	Examples
Blurring	Disclosing data in a way that reduces the precision of the information.	Reporting ranges of scores as opposed to exact figures. Reporting rounded values.
Masking	Modification of the data in a way that hides specific information while also displaying relevant data.	Perturbation -- adding errors into dataset to mask the real values and prevent disclosure. Data can be recreated with an algorithm.
Suppression	Removal of data from cells with very small numbers of cases and replacing them with an indicator denoting privacy concerns.	Replacing data with an "S" or another value to denote it was removed for security reasons.

### Directory Information

The following are considered directory information and may be released without consent:

- Legal name
- Permanent address
- Major
- Minor
- Home telephone numbers
- Degrees, diplomas, certificates, dates of awards
- Honors and awards
- Classification
- Extracurricular activities
- Weight, height, and related information of athletic team members
- Students SHSU email address

### Conducting Research with Teacher's or Professor's Own Students

A teacher or professor can conduct research with their own students under specific conditions:

- The research must be for the purpose of improving instruction, developing an assessment, or supporting the students with data.

- Teachers or professors may also be part of a state or federal study that has been approved by an IRB.
- Teachers or professors cannot conduct their own research independently for other purposes.

## References

Gold, T. (2019). FERPA: A quick review of the law for researchers and IRBs [Webinar slides]. CITI Program. <https://www.citiprogram.org>.

Sam Houston State University, Office of the Registrar. (n.d.). Student privacy (FERPA). <https://www.shsu.edu/offices-departments/registrar/student-information/student-privacy-ferpa> (Accessed 20 April 2026).

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