Guidelines for Determining the Differences between Research and Program Evaluation

Amy Harder, Professor and Director of the Program Development and Evaluation Center

What is Research?
Research is defined as “a systematic investigation (including research development, testing and evaluation) designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge” (UF Institutional Review Board, 2018, “What is Research?,” para. 1). Attempting to answer a scientific question or prove/disprove a hypothesis, for example, are clear indications that an activity is a systematic investigation (UF Institutional Review Board, 2018). Collecting data with a clear intent to share information through a poster presentation, at a conference, or in a journal publication is considered contributing to generalizable knowledge. Activities that both attempt to answer a question or prove/disprove a hypothesis and are conducted with a clear intent to contribute to generalizable knowledge (as opposed to merely sharing the findings with the “local” stakeholders and program developers, participants, or sponsors) are likely going to be considered as research.

What Should be Submitted to IRB?
It can be difficult to determine what qualifies as research needing to be reviewed by IRB, and what activities are simply program evaluation. Even program evaluations should have oversight to evaluate any ethical or protections issues, subject to the supervising unit/department and its disciplinary guidelines. The IRB Board has the ultimate authority to make decisions about what should be submitted for formal review and should be consulted when questions arise. However, a UF/IFAS Extension faculty member can consider the following when deciding if it is appropriate to seek IRB approval, or at least consult with the IRB to determine if review is appropriate, for a proposed research or evaluation activity:

- For what purpose(s) will the data be used?
  - Activities that are conducted with a clear intent to present or publish the data to contribute to generalizable knowledge should be reviewed by IRB 02, regardless of survey population.
  - Activities that began as program evaluation, but are now suspected to have value for contributing to generalizable knowledge, may be reviewed “retroactively” to determine if the data can be shared publicly.
  - Activities that collect data only for internal use, such as to review program effectiveness, typically do not need to be reviewed if they do not otherwise meet the definition of research.

What is Program Evaluation?
Program evaluation can be a systematic investigation, but typically is not designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge. Instead, program evaluation seeks to assess participant reactions and the degree to which educational objectives were accomplished. Program evaluation is typically conducted for internal purposes, such as program improvement or annual reporting. Examples of program evaluation would be to assess knowledge gained by adults enrolled in Master Gardener training, an assessment of the adoption of water conservation behaviors by homeowners, or participant reactions to an agricultural field day. Infographics developed using evaluation data to promote the value of a program are not considered to meet the definition of contributing to generalizable knowledge.