

Issues for Instructors Who Guide Student Researchers

As an instructor who might be considering sending your students into the field, there are some important issues you might want to consider.

[**Note for Students:** While this is written for instructors, you will also want to consider many of these same issues as you consider developing an ethnographic field project.]

Q. Should you have your students do community research or service?

There are many opportunities and much encouragement at Elon to engage your students in service learning. Also, for hands-on learning, the local community can be a wonderful field site for your students as it is both accessible and fairly familiar for most of them. In fact, the central mission of PERCS assumes that local fieldwork can be extremely beneficial and relevant to courses across the curriculum. However, before you decide to send your students out into the community as part of their Elon education, ask yourself:

Why do I want to send my students out into the community?

- * For the learning objectives of the course?
- * For the benefit of the community?

Ideally, the answer to both of these questions is yes. For your students, you should have clear goals for them, and a clear rationale for why you want them to engage with the community as part of their formal education (as opposed, say, to encouraging their engagement in extracurricular activities and volunteer service). If the answer to this question is "no," then chances are this is not the best choice, for the students or the community.

Ideally, the community will gain from interaction with Elon students as well. At the least, the community should not be harmed in any way. The IRB (Institutional Review Board) helps to ensure specific harms, but more general ones should be thought of. For example, will sending your students out into the community cause an undue burden on the community and spawn ill-will towards the university? For example, if every semester you require your students to evaluate a non-profit organization in the community, will those organizations eventually find it time-consuming and unproductive to spend the time needed to answer your students questions? Or if you require your students to visit a local religious service and take notes. Might this be read as offensive to the congregation?

Q. What do you want your students to learn?

As you determine whether local fieldwork or service learning is appropriate for your course, your students and the community, you will want to be very specific about what you want your students to learn. Few things are more frustrating to students than to be required to spend time (and with fieldwork, often a LOT of time) doing things without a clear idea why.

Every course will have different learning objectives. However, there are some general benefits to having your students interact with the local community that you might consider when examining your own specific objectives. They include:

- * The development of original research
- * The application of various theories and methods
- * The chance to solve real problems
- * The chance to learn about one's community, particularly one specific segment of it

- * The opportunity to view the world from another person or group’s perspective
- * The opportunity to observe how knowledge is contextually constructed

Q. Group or individual projects?

As with any large scale project, you will want to consider whether the learning objectives can be better and more successfully met if students work in groups. Often, the nature of a research question or project virtually demands group work since a single semester is not a lot of time to conduct in-depth fieldwork. That said, group work can be very difficult since much of fieldwork is a process of personal negotiation between the researcher and the community. You may want to consider some of the following issues when deciding whether to encourage or require individual or group projects:

Group	Individual
Groups can cover more ground, interview more people and reach a larger sample of the community.	Establishing rapport with community members is a fairly individualistic enterprise. Often these relationships are not transferable to other group members.
Field projects tend to have many components and require a lot of time and resources (e.g. transportation). Dividing this work can allow bigger, more in-depth projects.	A student is required to engage in every part of the research process. This will allow a holistic understanding of the field site / research problem.
There is safety in numbers. This could be useful when fieldwork requires work at night or among groups unfamiliar with the research process and protocol.	Students are encouraged to choose low-risk field sites. In those rare instances when a student has some reason to feel ill at ease, the individual researcher must find a friend or colleague to accompany him or her.
Group dynamics can be difficult to negotiate for young researchers making the flexibility often required in fieldwork hard to achieve.	Fieldwork tends to take unexpected turns. Individual researchers can generally adapt more quickly and easily than a group.
Consensus can be very difficult to achieve. However, the negotiation of interpretations among members can help alert the researchers to bias in their work.	Individual students will find it easier to construct a coherent interpretation of the data. However, researcher bias is more likely to go undetected.

Q. The role of the teacher: outside guide or inside co-researcher and mentor?

The role you play will depend dramatically on the nature of the learning experience. Even within these varied roles, you will find that your level of involvement may vary dramatically as well. The graph below attempts to highlight some of the possible relationships you may find yourself in. Rather than leave that choice up to chance, it's a good idea to think in advance what role you want to play and in turn, what role you expect the student to play.

	Detached Guide	Involved Guide	Lead Investigator	Co-Researcher*
Teacher of course	You provide the assignment, guidelines and in-class instruction. The student chooses the field site and develops the project.	You and the student develop the project together, with the student taking the lead. You regularly review the progress of the student and meet one-on-one regularly.	You lead your class in a single research project of your own design. Students function primarily as research assistants under your direction.	You work with your students to develop a single research project that you all work on. You are part of the team. Students are expected to take a full role in all parts of the research project.
Mentor for Individual research (499)				
Head of collaborative research project				

* IRB now requires that only faculty can serve as Principle Investigators. Students may still be the primary researcher in the field; but the faculty must assume primary responsibility for ethical action.

Q. What can you do to ensure student safety during field experiences?

No matter what relationship you and your student researchers decide upon, you will be expected to help your students conduct their research safely. While this is generally fairly easy when the students are in class or lab, it becomes more complex when you turn them loose in the community. Generally, safety will not be an issue, but you need to consider the types of situations that may arise that could pose safety problems for your students. Dangers may be physical or emotional; it is the latter that students may be only marginally aware of.

- * Danger from involvement with specific community members
 - * Working with people who are engaged in illegal activity
 - * Working with people who are at risk such as the homeless where students may have trouble negotiating boundaries of how they can and cannot get involved with their subjects
 - * Working with mentally unstable people
 - * Moving from a professional to personal relationship

- * Danger from specific areas in the community
 - * Working in sites that pose physical danger such as construction sites, wilderness sites, etc.
 - * Working in areas with a high crime rate

- * Danger from nature of research question
 - * Addresses illegal activity
 - * Addresses very personal matters

Dangers to the community members students work with are equally important and are addressed in The Ethics of Fieldwork module (hyperlink).

Q. What is the teacher's role in student field entry, and in negotiating the outcomes or products with the participants?

The tricky thing about ethics is that while it is possible to set guidelines, ethics are not laws set in stone. Ideally, your goal as instructor will be to prepare your students to make carefully thought out choices of their own, helping them become independently responsible researchers. However, this is a learning process and students may need to take steps before assuming full responsibility for their research. As the instructor, you may find it useful, even necessary, to do **some if not all** of the following:

- * Establish strict rules for interaction with participants
- * Require approval for all research topics
- * Require an applied component to the project
- * Require that students produce material that can be shared with the community
- * Require review of all material before it is shared publicly
- * Require IRB approval, whether the data will be made public or not