



Research Ethics Board

REB Guidance and Information Document

SOP File #	REB.INFO.506
Title	Use of Bonus Points as Incentives
Effective Date	March 2022
Next Review	2027
Next Administrative Review	2025

1. Purpose

This document is to be used as guidance when researchers choose to use course bonus points as an incentive for research study participants.

2. Definitions

See the MSVU REB **Glossary of Terms (REB.INFO.001)**

3. Background

The University Research Ethics Board (REB) at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) has reviewed the practice of issuing bonus points to students who participate as research participants. Several issues have been brought to the attention of the REB, such as the dual roles of professor/researcher, free and informed consent of student participants, the use of bonus points as an incentive to participate, and penalties. In response to these queries, the REB contacted the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (PRE) to render an interpretation on the soundness of using student participant/participant pools in research in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS). The REB sought to receive a more defined interpretation prior to implementing a formal policy at MSVU. The REB agrees that the experiences of student research participants have significant educational value and therefore, with PRE's response and the information gathered by the REB on other universities' practices, we have developed a university-wide policy that will govern the use of bonus points in courses where students participate as research participants.

4. Notice to Researchers

The information in this document is for information and guidance purposes only. Each research study poses unique properties and/or situations that may require additional or different guidance than what is presented in this document. The information in this document is meant to provide general situational advice and does not constitute research ethics compliance in absolute form. If you have any questions, please contact ethics@msvu.ca.

5. Research Requiring Ethics Review or Teaching vs. Training Exercise

University courses often include a research component. The issue is whether the involvement of students in research projects is for teaching purposes, a training exercise, or

whether the activity is actual “research involving humans.” In-class teaching/training exercises do not **normally** require research ethics review. If the activities involve or constitute “research involving humans”, of the TCPS requires that it undergo prospective and continuing research ethics board (REB) review.

6. Voluntary, Informed Consent and Undue Influence

- a. As noted, Article 3.1 of the TCPS states, “Free and informed consent must be voluntarily given, without manipulation, undue influence or coercion.” Awarding credits to students for participating in research studies raises ethical issues in the absence of a comparable alternate activity that gives students the opportunity to earn an equivalent amount of points.
- b. To ensure that the participation in research is voluntary and to minimize the risk of undue inducement, professors/researchers must provide a comparable **alternative** activity, with comparable time and effort for comparable reward, for students who do not wish to participate in the research. The alternative activity shall be of comparable time and effort by the student so it will not be viewed as a potentially coercive influence to participate in the research study in its stead.
- c. Students who feel that they must participate in the research component of courses may be regarded as a dependent or captive population. Informed consent to participate in research must be **voluntary**.
- d. Students and professors, similar to participants and researchers, often develop relationships grounded at least partly on trust. Professors must be mindful of the power imbalance that exists when their students are asked to serve as a research participant as part of the curriculum. REB review of a teacher’s recruitment of students as participants into research projects are intended to ensure that such trust relationships remain free of confusion or exploitation.
- e. Professors may not recruit prospective participants from their classes, or students under their supervision, without prior REB approval. In circumstances where this cannot be avoided, the researcher should include in their ethics application the alternative arrangements whereby recruitment, screening or consent process will be conducted by another member of the research team.

7. Penalties

Penalizing students for failing to participate in a research project is inconsistent with the principles of the TCPS. Researchers must give assurances to the participants that they are free not to participate and have the right to withdraw at any time without prejudice or penalty. A penalty for withdrawal from the study is a coercive influence on voluntary participation in research. Students who have agreed to serve as a research participant in a research study but then withdraw at any point may not be penalized by losing other credits already earned in the course.

8. Guidance/Information/Procedures

- a. Students may be eligible for a maximum of two (2) bonus points in a participating 0.5-unit credit course for participating in a research study as a participant (or through comparable alternate activities). Specifics of this must be clearly laid out in the course syllabus.
- b. The value of bonus points or alternate activity must be clearly stated and should be

valued as follows:

- Less than or equal to 1 hour of participant time = 1 bonus point
 - More than 1 hour of participant time = 2 bonus points
- c. Details of bonus points issued for participation as a research participant or other comparable activity must be clearly stated in the course syllabus and the research ethics application.
- d. The issue of confidentiality for students participating as research participants must be clearly addressed in the research ethics application.
- e. Students shall not lose points or have their academic standing compromised in any way for their refusal to serve as a research participant in any course.
- f. Students who agree to participate but then withdraw after going through the information and free and informed consent session shall still be awarded bonus points.

9. References

- [Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans – TCPS 2 \(2018\) \(ethics.gc.ca\)](#)
- TCPS Interpretations – See #3 under Consent Interpretations - [Consent: The Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics \(PRE\)](#)

10. Acknowledgements

The development of this document has benefited directly from similar documents made public by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS).

11. Modification History

INFO Number & Version	Key Changes	Effective Date
REB.INFO.506	Revised to a guidance document, formerly SOP.120. Minor housekeeping and updating	March 2022
REB.SOP.120	Original Version	August 2007

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