

## Review of Research Products

Conducting research using the secure computer systems at the Texas ERC to analyze confidential data will, from time to time, require the removal of **output** and **results** from the secure environment for inclusion in write-ups, reports, articles, or other research products that are primarily authored in the context of the researcher's non-secure computing environment. An authorized staff member, prior to release from the secure computing environment, must review research products. The process for review is to ensure that released research products do not contain confidential student information, as defined by FERPA. For more information on the particulars of FERPA compliance, see the *Masking Guidelines & Techniques* section.

### Step-by-Step Process: Review of Research Products

1. The researcher must formally request the output or results by completing a questionnaire for each request at the following link: [https://utexas.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_6gskQb6V8ZZ4atn](https://utexas.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6gskQb6V8ZZ4atn). The information from the questionnaire will be automatically be sent by email to the ERC Admin, who will then assign the request to an ERC staff member for review.

#### Information provided in the questionnaire will include:

- a. Folder where the files are located and name of files to be reviewed.
  - b. Number of files to be reviewed in this request.
  - c. A high-level summary of what the files contain.
  - d. A definition of any variables that have been derived or renamed that may not be discernible to the reviewer.
  - e. A description of the masking technique you used to ensure FERPA compliance.
2. The Director or authorized designee will review the requested files for the evidence of any information controlled under the provisions of FERPA, and to ensure that it appears consistent with the researcher's certification of compliance as required above.
    - a. If the reviewer is satisfied that the item appears consistent with the researcher's representation, the reviewer may transmit the files to the researcher by e-mail or any other means.
    - b. If the reviewer has any cause to suspect that the item does not conform to the requestor's certification of FERPA compliance, still has questions regarding definitions, or any other questions, the reviewer will request further evidence of such from the researcher.
    - c. If, after further review, the reviewer is satisfied that the article is consistent with the researcher's certification, the item may be released to the researcher.
    - d. If the reviewer cannot satisfy himself or herself that the item is consistent with the researcher's certification of compliance, or the researcher cannot or will not provide the required certification, the reviewer must refuse to release the item from the secure system.
    - e. The researcher may appeal the reviewer's decision to the Director or ERC primary-investigator. The Texas ERC's decision on the matter is final.
    - f. Each item requested for review is to be recorded in the Released Item Review Log, together with the ultimate disposition. A copy of any items released will also be retained in the directory location designated for that purpose.

### Review Reminders

The Texas ERC would like to also stress the following reminders:

- **It is the researcher's responsibility to make sure all work is FERPA compliant.**
- **The Texas ERC staff reviewer will not perform the masking for the researcher.**
- **The clarity of the file names, descriptors, and variable definitions is directly related to the speed and ability of the reviewer to release the products.**

- The reviewer uses the criteria described in *Masking Guidelines & Techniques* to evaluate the research product.
- Remember, if files are not compliant when first submitted, there will be a delay in the release.
- Each request for review is logged, together with all activity related to review of the item and the final decision made.
- Under normal circumstances, research product reviews are **completed in 7-10 working days**. Please be mindful of the amount of files submitted for review. The amount of time needed for review will depend on the number of requests at the time and the length and number of files. If a researcher requires more immediate action, they can specify this in the questionnaire that is linked above. Please note that **larger documents might need more than ten days for review** and in such cases, the researcher should contact the Texas ERC for a more accurate estimate.

## Common Issues - Reviews

### Unclear Variables or Output

Considering the sheer number of variables and the creation of new variables during the research process (collapsing groups, new categorical variables, or indices), reviewers may not be able to determine if the variables included require masking for FERPA compliance. This requires additional information from the researcher(s).

Researcher(s) should ensure:

- Variables/output are clearly labeled
- Each variable/output includes a definition
- Derived or created variables are identified

The easiest method for labeling and defining variables is to use Microsoft Excel. When exporting output from a statistical software package or creating new output, be sure to include the descriptors. Tables, graphics, and other displays may be done in the same manner.

### Graphics

The statistical packages available at the Texas ERC provide many wonderful options for the visual display of information. The outputs of graphics, however, are often overlooked by researcher(s) when reviewing for PII. The same guidelines (see *Masking Guidelines & Techniques*) apply to visual displays such as graphs or charts. If the graph illustrates aggregated data about a subgroup with fewer than five persons, it must be appropriately masked.

### Degree of Detail

The depth and richness of the dataset available in the Texas ERC database affords research opportunities from the individual to institutional level. This ability is invaluable for several lines of inquiry in education. These same fine-grained abilities of the dataset, however, may necessitate a greater degree of masking. The Texas ERC encourages researcher(s) to consider the following question when determining subgroup/categorical groupings, variable sections, reporting, and other methodological decisions:

- Considering your research purpose, what degree of detail is required to answer your research questions?

For instance, consider a research project focused on high school IB program enrollment and time to completion in higher education. Is it necessary to report the outcomes for all racial/ethnic subgroups, which will require more masking or would it be more beneficial to report the outcome for all IB, which would require less masking? The answer is up to the researcher(s), but the decision may impact the amount of time required to complete the review process.