
Demystifying Vanier's Research Ethics Board Process

Many Vanier teachers who are interested in doing research find the process of applying for Research Ethics Board (REB) approval a little daunting. In this conversation, teacher-researcher Philippe Gagné, teacher and REB chair Karen White, and pedagogical counsellor Krista Riley discuss the work of the REB and what the application process is like.

KR: Karen, can you start things off by giving a brief overview of the Research Ethics Board and the issues it's here to address?

KW: The REB's main goal is to protect the rights of potential research participants here at Vanier, primarily students, but sometimes faculty or other staff as well. The most important rights are those to

- *avoidance of harm* – participants should not be harmed by providing data to researchers, and if there is any risk of harm, that should be minimized, and clarified to the potential participants.
- *confidentiality* – participants should be assured that private information will not be exposed in a way that might allow others to know who they are.

⁶ NES is the total number of students assigned to a teacher on a weekly basis.

⁷ See Appendix I-1 of the collective agreement for more details.

- *voluntary participation* – potential participants should not feel pressured into providing data, nor should they feel that in some way they will “pay” if they don’t participate (ie: by receiving a lower grade from a teacher/researcher), and they should understand that they can stop providing data at any point.
- *informed consent* – participants should know exactly what they are getting into when deciding whether to participate in a research study, including any risk of harm and any possible lack of confidentiality.

There are usually around eight people on the Research Ethics Board, including teachers from each faculty at the College. We work by consensus, following the ethics guidelines of the Inter-agency Advisory Council on Research Ethics, the TCPS 2,¹ and Vanier Research Ethics Policies. The VCTA and the DG appoint the members, but the Board is a completely independent decision-making body. Decisions can be appealed to a Review Board, and we can be audited by the granting agencies’ Panel of Research Ethics.

We make sure that all research projects are set up to protect the aforementioned rights *before* they begin recruiting participants.

KR: One of the most common questions I get as the pedagogical counsellor responsible for research is about the situations in which a project needs REB approval. The basic answer is that any Vanier teacher who plans to conduct research involving people, or any person who wants to conduct research that would involve Vanier students, staff, or faculty, is required to get REB approval.

But what does “research” mean in this context? Generally, research involves the collection of data (including through interviews, surveys, databases of student information, etc.), as part of a project that will eventually be published or presented outside of Vanier, for example as an academic article, a public report, or a conference presentation. It also includes any collection of data for academic credit outside of Vanier, such as for a university course paper or thesis.

It does *not* include the collection of data for internal course or program improvement purposes: for example, a survey or focus group to evaluate a particular course or program, if that data remains internal to Vanier and is only used to improve that course or program. The REB also doesn’t cover Vanier students who are doing research for a Vanier course. In that case, it is the teacher’s responsibility to ensure that research ethics principles are being respected.

PG: So what is your role in the REB process?

KR: When a Research Ethics Board application is submitted, whether by a Vanier teacher or by an external researcher, it comes to me first. My evaluation focuses on institutional suitability: is the project feasible at Vanier given the resources we have? Is it appropriate? For example, someone who wants to spend more than 20 minutes of class time for a research survey that has no direct pedagogical relevance will usually be asked either to change the survey or to plan to have students do the survey outside of class instead. This practice is in place because Vanier as a college should be focused on teaching and learning, and Vanier’s students shouldn’t have to give up too much in-class time to research unrelated to their class.

Often, when I’m evaluating applications for institutional suitability, I also look at other issues in the research design. While I’m corresponding with the researcher about the changes they need to make in terms of feasibility or suitability, I will suggest other changes to help improve the research. Sometimes I will also alert them to ethical issues with the research – for example, an incomplete consent form – so that they can make those changes before the application is forwarded to the REB.

As soon as everything is together, I pass it on to Karen for the REB’s review.

KW: Once we receive an application, the REB chair decides whether it is “low risk” or not, meaning that there is little or no risk of any of the principles above being problematic. If it is low risk, it’s usually examined by the Chair plus two Board members, each going over the project separately and submitting any concerns or comments to the Chair. If the project is complex or deemed a higher risk for some reason, it has to go to a meeting of the Board. Everyone reads it and prepares their comments ahead of time, and we discuss it, deciding together on any concerns that need to be addressed or changes that need to be made. Sometimes we have research quality suggestions, too, but those are “extras” and are never required.

The Chair prepares a feedback letter to the researchers. If the REB’s suggested changes are very minor, we assume they will be made, and we emit the certificate to allow the recruitment to go ahead. Most of the time, we need to see the changes, and there may need to be some back-and-forth about what is requested and how best to make changes while preserving the research goals and feasibility of the project. Once everything is good, the certificate is prepared, and recruiting begins!

¹ See <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/> for the full document.

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It is extremely rare for a project to be turned down by the REB; I think it has happened twice in the ten years we've had an REB. Our goal is always to get the project into good shape so that it can go forward.

PG: As a researcher, I am interested in students' motivations for learning French as a second language. I "use" the services of the REB once or twice a year. I really see the REB's work as a contribution to the research proposals I submit. A proposal rarely comes back without any comments or suggestions. Even when this feedback suggests modifications that must be made in order to get the ethics certificate, I always perceive these modifications as improvements. For example, if I distribute a questionnaire in my classroom, the REB will suggest having a third party to recruit participants because students may feel pressured to participate if their own teacher is requesting it. I have never had the impression that the REB was some kind of a gatekeeper that was hard to please or fussy on details; much to the contrary! This is important to note because there is a common misperception that REB members at the college level are "*plus catholiques que le pape*," as we commonly say in French, meaning that they are punctilious or painstaking, and that they slow down the research process. A university professor once told me that she was not doing field work in CEGEPs anymore because of that.

KW: One of the things researchers are often not aware of is the extra level of participant protection that has to occur at the CEGEP level. Unlike university student participants, our students are often recruited by their own teachers, or *through* their teachers and classes. This may make students feel like they are under pressure to participate, even when the teachers are super careful to make it clear that they are not. Students may also worry that their teacher may have access to their data, or that a Vanier researcher may at some point be their teacher, threatening confidentiality. We've figured out ways around these issues, often involving the collaboration of the PSI office with recruitment and data analysis, but these projects need a little extra care because of that. And because our students are at an earlier stage of their educational path, they may not be as well informed about how research works as their counterparts in university.

KR: Karen, what are some of the biggest challenges the REB faces in doing its work?

KW: I'd say there are two. One, people often realize they need REB approval quite late in the research process, and then they need to collect data RIGHT AWAY! While we try to not dilly dally over reviews in general, and we attempt to move things along even faster when someone has a legitimate deadline, Board members other than the Chair have no release time for this work, so the work has to be done on top of everyone's usual responsibilities. It always involves multiple people, and often multiple steps, so time is definitely a challenge. The second challenge is when we receive projects from inexperienced researchers; there are often lots of small and medium-sized changes to be made followed by multiple rounds of feedback and fixes. But we get there in the end! And most of the projects are very interesting and engaged with important topics.

PG: As a member of Cégep de Saint-Laurent's REB committee, I have an additional perspective on this work, and I can attest to the fact that Boards try to get proposals accepted with as few delays as possible. During the evaluation process, we can be tempted to judge the academic or scientific value of the projects, but this is not an REB's duty. A Board would intervene with these kinds of judgments only in extreme cases where there are major issues and the committee estimates that participants (students, teachers, or staff members) will invest their time and energy in a project that will lead to poor data and unreliable or invalid results. In that case, it means a researcher would need to go back to improve his or her proposal substantially. This seldom happens, and it certainly does not reflect the vast majority of proposals that I have participated in reviewing.

If you would like to do your own research and have questions about the Research Ethics Board, please contact us!



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Links of Interest:

Application form to apply for Research Ethics Board approval at Vanier: <http://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/psi/innovation/conducting-research-at-vanier/>

Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, which establishes the ethical guidelines followed by Vanier's REB: <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/>

Online Course on Research Ethics: <http://tcps2core.ca/welcome>