Community-Engaged Research and the IRB: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Community-engaged research (CEnR) is a powerful tool for building resilient communities, yet CEnR projects encounter significant challenges during the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process.

A narrative literature review revealed three categories of challenges – understanding, relationships, and processes – and proposed solutions in each of these areas.

Results from the literature review were compared with findings from a survey of 56 community-engaged researchers at MSU, revealing both similarities and contrasts in identified challenges and proposed solutions.

BACKGROUND

- CEnR was developed to address ethical shortcomings of traditional research methods that were often harmful to marginalized communities.

- CEnR poses its own ethical challenges that IRBs are often ill-equipped to address.

- This study explored the challenges community-engaged researchers experienced during the IRB process, the strategies they found effective for navigating this process, and the recommendations they offered for improving the process for CEnR protocols.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS
Narrative literature review

- We conducted a literature search in PubMed, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for English-language, peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2025 in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. that focused on the IRB application and review process for CEnR projects.

- We identified 25 relevant articles after abstract review.

- We analyzed each article by extracting, coding, and organizing content on challenges and solutions, which were then synthesized into themes and meta-themes.

Table 1. Challenges related to IRB review of CEnR projects

CHALLENGE	DEFINITION
Understanding	The understanding and assumptions different parties to the IRB process (IRB staff and board members, researchers, community partners) hold regarding CEnR, research, research ethics, and communities
Relationships	How effectively and efficiently the different parties involved in the IRB process interact to ensure that community-engaged research is conducted in an ethical manner
Processes	The extent to which IRB processes and procedures support or hinder the application, review, and amendment process for CEnR projects

Table 2. Challenges and solutions in the IRB review process for CEnR

CHALLENGES	SOLUTIONS
UNDERSTANDING	
• IRBs are unfamiliar with the co-created, emergent, and iterative nature of CEnR*	» Provide IRB staff and reviewers training in CEnR* » Recruit IRB staff and reviewers with CEnR experience*
• IRBs fail to consider the unique ethical commitments of CEnR†	» Educate IRBs about the ethical commitments of CEnR†
• Community partners have limited knowledge of research ethics†	» Develop accessible and culturally responsive training in research ethics and CEnR for community members†
• IRBs fail to consider community risks and benefits†	» IRBs consider the risks and benefits of research to communities†
RELATIONSHIPS	
• Poor communication between IRBs and CEnR teams*	» Open, frequent, and direct communication between IRBs and CEnR teams*
• IRB-CEnR team relationships are insufficiently collaborative†	» Build collaborative relationships between IRBs, CEnR partners, and local ethics review boards†
PROCESSES	
• Inflexible IRB processes that are unsuitable for CEnR*	» Don't require CEnR protocols to be fully specified for IRB approval* » Allow for submission of CEnR protocols in phases that match the phases of CEnR†
• Delays in IRB approvals*	» Early communication between CEnR team and IRB about project and timeline issues† » Increased IRB staff availability‡ » Guidelines and resources to facilitate the IRB process for CEnR projects†

Note: Literature & Survey (*), Literature only (†), Survey only (‡)

METHODS & ANALYSIS
Survey of community-engaged researchers:

- A survey invitation was emailed to MSU faculty and graduate students, asking community-engaged researchers to describe challenges they experienced, effective strategies, and proposed solutions related to navigating the IRB process.

- Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze the open-ended survey responses.

- Using a consensus-based coding strategy, two researchers independently coded the data, collaboratively refined the coding scheme, and resolved discrepancies in coding through discussion.

- This study was designated "not human subjects research" by the MSU IRB.

RESULTS

- The narrative literature review revealed three categories of challenges: understanding, relationships, and processes (Table 1).

- **68%** of respondents who reported conducting CEnR at MSU said they experienced challenges when submitting applications to the IRB for CEnR projects (Figure 1).

- Selected challenges and proposed solutions are displayed in Table 2.

CONCLUSION

- Both the literature reviewed and the results from our survey of researchers indicate that CEnR researchers face significant headwinds when embarking upon the IRB application and review process, including challenges related to the collective understandings of CEnR that involved parties bring to the process, how those parties interact throughout the IRB process, and how the process itself is structured.

- Both the relevant literature and survey respondents suggest several promising approaches for resolving these challenges.

- At MSU, a team of engaged researchers is working with the IRB to explore, design, and test solutions.