EXEMPT RESEARCH PROTOCOL

(v.27AUG25)

Most Commonly Applied Exemption Categories at George Mason University

1. Education Research

a. This is a research activity conducted in established or commonly accepted educational practices.
b. This research involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instructions, such as an evaluation of an educational practice, or an assessment of program designed to assist instructors with classroom management.

May include minors if the research meets other criteria.

X 2. Minimal Risk Interactions

a. This research only includes interactions involving educational tests (e.g., aptitude, diagnostic, cognitive, or achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior. This can include visual or auditory recordings.
b. The research must protect privacy by:
    i. Recording the information in such a way that the identity of any participants cannot be ascertained readily (either directly or indirectly); OR
    ii. Ensure that any disclosure of the responses outside the research would not reasonably place any participants in danger, facing criminal/civil liability, or be possibly damaging to the participants' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; OR
    iii. Have other adequate provisions to protect the privacy of participants and to maintain the confidentiality of data.

May include minors if it is limited to educational tests and observation of public behaviors where the investigator does not participate in the activity being observed.

3. Benign Behavioral Interventions

a. This can involve behavioral interventions in conjunction with the collection of information through verbal or written responses or audiovisual recording.
b. Cannot include data gathering with devices (EEG, ECG, MRI, etc.).
c. Participants must all prospectively agree to the behavioral intervention/recording.
d. Must be brief in duration, harmless, painless, not physically invasive, and not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on the participants (e.g., playing a game online, solving a puzzle under various levels of noise conditions, or decision-making such as dividing an amount of cash between themselves and another person).

e. The investigator has no reason to think the intervention will be embarrassing or offensive to participants.
f. The research must protect privacy through:
    i. Recording the information in such a way that the identity of any participants cannot be ascertained readily (either directly or indirectly); OR
    ii. Ensure that any disclosure of the responses outside the research would not reasonably place any participants in danger, facing criminal or civil liability, or be possibly damaging to the participants' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation, OR
    iii. Have other adequate provisions to protect the privacy of participants and to maintain the confidentiality of data.
g. The research cannot involve deceiving the participants regarding the nature or purposes of the research unless the participant has been informed, they will be unaware or misled regarding the nature and/or purpose of the research.

May not include minors.

4 Secondary Research without Consent

a. This is for research that involves the use of either identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens.
b. This information or biospecimens must meet one of the following criteria:
    i. Publicly available; OR
    ii. Recorded in such a way that the identity of the participants cannot readily be ascertained, the investigator will not contact the participants, and the investigator will not re-identify the participants; OR
    iii. Involves only information collection and analysis involving the investigator's use of identifiable health information when the use is regulated under §§45 CFR 160 and 164, subparts A and E, for the purposes of "health care operations" or "research" as those terms are defined at 45 CFR §164.501 or for "public health activities and purposes" as described under 45 CFR §164.512(b).
    iv. The research is conducted by, or on behalf of, a Federal department or agency using government-generated or government-collected information provided for non-research activities and meets specific criteria if there is identifiable information to be generated.

May include minors if other criteria are met

EXEMPT RESEARCH PROTOCOL
(v.27AUG25)

PROTOCOL TITLE:
STUDY00000827: Investigating the Use of AI to Promote Neurodiverse-Inclusive Instructional Design

VERSION DATE:
02 October 2025

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
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IRB TIP

Note that undergraduate and graduate students are not allowed to be the Principal Investigator on a research study (see University Policy 4012). Adjunct faculty members, affiliate faculty members, part-time, fixed-term faculty, and post-doctoral fellows may only serve as Principal Investigator with the permission of their Dean or Department Head on a case-by-case basis.

Is this study part of a dissertation or thesis?	Yes ☐	No ☒
Is this study part of a capstone project?	Yes ☐	No ☒
Is this study an assignment for a class?	Yes ☒	No ☐

If yes, what class? EDIT 891 – Design Research Independent Study: AI Approaches to Learning Gaps

1.0 STUDY PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

1.1 Describe the purpose of your study. Include a description of your objectives, aims, and/or research question/hypothesis being tested. (500 words or less)

Purpose
The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine how instructional designers at George Mason University meet the needs of neurodivergent students, including those with ADHD and autism, in their instructional designs. This stems from an urgent need for more evidence-based and inclusive instructional practices that support cognitive diversity, alongside the emerging opportunities and challenges presented by artificial intelligence (AI) in this field.

Objectives
Two main objectives guide this study. First, it seeks to examine current practices, knowledge, challenges, and attitudes of instructional designers at GMU when designing for neurodiverse learners. Second, this study seeks to explore their perspectives on the potential of AI's role in closing learning gaps for this group.

Aims
There is a notable gap between the growing awareness of neurodiversity in higher education and the real-world implementation of inclusive practices by instructional designers. Research connecting theory to practice in this area is limited, and professionals must adapt to changing standards, regulations (such as ADA/504), and emerging technologies. This study aims to investigate that gap by conducting original qualitative research with practitioners to provide practical insights and inform future AI-supported inclusive design efforts. Previous work in universal design for learning and neuro-embracing frameworks will provide a strong theoretical foundation. Additionally, this study aims to document designer knowledge (theories, best practices, legal regulations), decision-making strategies, practical constraints (tolerances), and future visions for employing artificial intelligence to close learning gaps.

Research Questions
1. How and to what extent do instructional designers at GMU consider neurodivergent learners in their instructional designs?
2. What theories, best practices, and regulatory frameworks guide their work?
3. How do designers make design decisions and tolerate constraints?
4. What are their attitudes and visions for AI-supported neurodiverse-inclusive design?

Hypothesis
Instructional designers at GMU demonstrate gaps and strengths in knowledge and practice related to neurodivergent learners, face significant constraints in implementation, and view artificial intelligence (AI) as a promising but underdeveloped tool for advancing inclusion.

1.2 Is there an intent to generalize the findings of this research to others beyond this study? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Explain your selection (i.e., why the findings will or will not be generalizable)**:**

This is an exploratory study with a limited number of participants, 4-6. Results are intended to be used to develop, test, or support theories, principles, and statements of relationships, or to inform policy beyond the study.

IRB TIP

Generalizable knowledge means: The information gained from the research is expected to expand the knowledge base of a scientific discipline or other scholarly field of study and yield one or both of the following:

- Results that are applicable to a larger population beyond the site of data collection or the specific subjects studied
- Results that are intended to be used to develop, test, or support theories, principles, and statements of relationships, or to inform policy beyond the study

2.0 PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

2.1 Describe the recruitment process for the study. Include when, where, and how potential participants will learn about the study and be asked to participate. Explain the strategies and materials that will be used. If a screener will be used to determine participant eligibility, describe that here.

On their page titled "Our Team," GMU lists its digital learning team (click here for the Our Team webpage). A list of potential participants will be created from those identified as "Instructional Designers" at the bottom of their page. Then, GMU's "People Finder" webpage (click here for the People Finder webpage) will be used to compile a list of email addresses for the potential participants.

Potential participants will be recruited through email. The email will include a summary of the study and a link to the digital consent and participant screening form. Responses to this form will be reviewed by either the principal investigator or the student researcher.

3.0 CONSENT PROCESS

3.1 Describe the process you will use to obtain informed consent (written, verbal, online, etc.) from participants, including where and when the consent process will occur. If you will obtain consent in different ways for different participant groups or study phases, describe the consent process that you will be using for each participant group or study phase.

Participants will be provided a copy of the informed consent form at the beginning of the online form. After reading the entire informed consent, the participants will select "I agree" or "I disagree". To honor any participants' requests for a signed informed consent form, the researcher will provide contact information.

4.0 STUDY PROCEDURES

4.1 Complete the table below and identify all the study procedures that will be conducted in this study:

Check any **applicable** boxes:	
☐ Normal Educational Practices	☐ Taste and Food Quality
☐ Surveys	☐ Educational Tests
☒ Interviews	☐ Benign Behavioral Interventions
☐ Observation of Public Behavior	☐ Secondary Use of Data or Specimens
☐ Deception	☐ Focus Groups

4.2 Describe the study procedures in detail (i.e., what the participants will be asked to do), including the expected duration of each procedure. If there is no participant interaction (e.g., observation of public behavior), describe the location(s) where observations will take place and what information will be recorded/collected by researchers.

Potential participants will be asked to complete an online screening form, which takes approximately five minutes. This form aims to ensure that participants meet the inclusion criteria, select their two preferred interview days, and provide contact information for scheduling purposes. The screening questions on the online form will serve as research data for those who enroll in the study. Responses from those who are not eligible will be immediately destroyed.

Based on the form responses, they may be asked to participate in a one-on-one, semi-structured 45-60 minute interview to explore how they approach the needs of neurodivergent learners in instructional design and their perspectives on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in inclusive instructional design. The interview will be recorded virtually, and a transcript will be generated in real-time via Zoom in a secure session. If a participant declines to be recorded, detailed written notes will be taken during the interview instead.

The total estimated time for participation is approximately one hour and five minutes.

4.3 If the study involves interviews or focus groups, provide the following information:

- Where the interviews or focus groups will be conducted
- If virtual, what platform will be utilized
- Whether the interactions will be transcribed and/or recorded
- If the interactions will be recorded, whether both audio and video will be recorded and at what point the recording will be destroyed
- What device will be used to make the recordings (Note: if collected on a non-GMU owned device, recordings must be transferred to GMU-operated server as soon as possible)

The interviews will be virtual and conducted using the Zoom platform. The interactions will be recorded and transcribed using the embedded Zoom features. All responses will have a digital video recording with audio tracks. The responses acquired during the interview and the corresponding transcript text documents will be downloaded to a password-protected George Mason University Microsoft OneDrive cloud server account associated with the principal investigator. The

recordings will be deleted as soon as the transcriptions are finalized. Transcriptions will occur via Zoom's embedded features. Only the principal investigator and the student researcher will have access to the data collected. After five years of retaining the files, all documents associated with this research project will be deleted.

5.0 STUDY POPULATION

5.1 Provide the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study populations that will be targeted for enrollment or data collection.

Inclusion Criteria: at least one year of experience as an instructional designer, direct responsibility for designing instructional content, employed by GMU, willingness to participate

Exclusion Criteria: less than one year of experience as an instructional designer, not involved with designing instructional content, employed outside of GMU, unwillingness to participate.

5.2 Does your study population include children under the age of 18? ☐ Yes ☒ No

5.3 Enrollment Targets

How many participants will be enrolled?	4-6
If obtaining pre-existing records for secondary analysis, how many subject records will be obtained or received?	N/A
If obtaining pre-existing biological specimens for secondary analysis, how many subject specimens will you receive?	N/A

6.0 STUDY LOCATION

6.1 List the locations where the research will take place.

- If study procedures are taking place in person, list physical location(s)
- If study procedures are taking place virtually, list platforms (e.g., Zoom, Qualtrics, etc.)

The study procedures will take place virtually on the Zoom platform.

6.2 Will this research occur at an external or non-GMU entity? ☐ Yes ☒ No

If yes, you may need to provide a site authorization or permission document if the research is taking place in an external or non-GMU location.

7.0 STUDENT EDUCATIONAL RECORDS / FERPA

☒ **N/A**

<<Complete this section ONLY if you are accessing student records for the purpose of this research. If not, check N/A above.>>

IRB TIP

A ***student education record*** is defined as any records that are directly related to a student and that are maintained by an educational agency, institution, or by a party acting for or on behalf of the agency or institution (e.g. class rosters, assignments, grades, test scores, classroom artifacts)

7.1 Complete the table below

Details	Yes	No	N/A
The research will involve accessing **identifiable** student education records for research purposes.	☐	☐	☒
Written student consent will be obtained prior to accessing/using student education records for this research. *Note:* FERPA **allows electronic consent**, but this requires reliable authentication of the person providing consent and verification of the signature's integrity.	☐	☐	☒
Students will be provided with a signed copy of the consent document that discloses: • the student education records that will be disclosed, • the purpose of the disclosure, and • the party or class of parties to whom the disclosure will be made prior to their participation in the research.	☐	☐	☒
Education student records will be **de-identified** before being provided to the investigator by the authorized office or affiliated instructor. List Office or Instructor: [Enter your response]	☐	☐	☒
The researcher intends to utilize information George Mason University has designated as directory information to recruit research participants.	☐	☐	☒
List all the data points you are obtaining or requesting from student education records: [Enter your response]			

8.0 RISKS AND BENEFITS

8.1 Describe the reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, hazards, or inconveniences related to the participant's participation in the research. Describe the likelihood that each of the risks will occur and what steps will be taken to reduce the likelihood and/or severity of the risks.

There are no foreseeable physical, psychological, legal, or financial risks. Participants are free to skip questions they do not wish to answer as well as cease participation at any time.

8.2. Describe any benefits related to the research. Do not include incentives or compensation as a benefit. It is often the case in low-risk research that there will be no direct benefit to participants, but there may be societal or scientific benefits to consider.

There are no benefits for participating in this study other than to further research in improved neurodiverse-inclusive instructional design practices.

IRB TIP

When describing the risks and benefits of research participation, you only need to include those that are related to the study procedures themselves, as opposed to risks and benefits related to non-research related factors.

For example, let's consider a study in which researchers will survey students at a local yoga studio to assess whether regular yoga practice has a positive impact on mental health. The survey is optional, and it is expected that only a portion of the students at the yoga studio will consent to be in the study.

The risks and benefits to include in the protocol should only be those directly related to the research procedures (the survey) versus the risks and benefits related to taking a yoga class since taking yoga classes is not part of the study procedures.

9.0 PARTICIPANT COMPENSATION

9.1 Describe any compensation that will be provided to participants. This includes any item of value given to participants to compensate them for their time and effort (e.g., cash, gift cards, course credit, swag, etc.). Address following information as applicable:

- Describe the specific form(s) of compensation (e.g., cash, gift card, course credit, etc.)
- When and how the compensation will be provided
- Whether partial compensation is available if the participant does not complete the study
- If attention checks are used in a survey, advise how many checks will need to be passed to receive compensation
- If course credit, describe the non-research alternative to participation

There will be no compensation for participation.

10.0 PERSONALLY IDENTIFIABLE INFORMATION

10.1 Complete the table below. If you have a data collection document or spreadsheet that includes the variables you will collect, it should be provided as a Word or PDF document with your RAMP submission.

Identify all personally identifiable information (PII) or protected health information (PHI) you will receive, collect, or record ***even if you plan to anonymize the data or specimens*.** Check any **applicable** boxes.	
☐ **None**	☐ IP addresses
☒ Names	☐ Dates of birth
☒ Email addresses	☐ Zip Codes
☒ Phone numbers	☐ Social security numbers
☐ Medical record numbers	☐ Student or employee numbers
☐ PHI	☐ Web URL
☒ Other - Describe: positional title, years of experience, educational level, additional training in instructional design, and typical course design type	

11.0 PARTICIPANT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

11.1 Describe the plan for protecting participant privacy. Privacy refers to a person's desire to control the access of others to themselves. Some examples may include conducting the research in a private room or limiting the collection of sensitive information to the minimum necessary to achieve the aims of the research.

All data in this study will be confidential. The participant's name will not be included in the collected data, as a pseudonym will be placed on the collected data. Using the pseudonym, the researcher will be able to link the form, the virtual interview, and the data to the identity. Only the researcher will know the link between the participant's identity and the linked pseudonym. Data collected from the form and virtual interview (conducted via Zoom) will be stored on the GMU OneDrive secure cloud account associated with the student researcher. Only the principal investigator and student researcher will have access to the recording documents.

The researchers will use several online platforms to conduct this study. Zoom will be used to host, record, and transcribe the interview. Microsoft365 OneDrive will be used to communicate, send emails, send electronic forms, and securely store any data collected or files created. Dedoose will be used to analyze and synthesize the transcripts. Participants may visit the following websites for information regarding their privacy practices: Zoom at https://explore.zoom.us/en/privacy/; Microsoft at https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/trust-center/privacy; and Dedoose at https://www.dedoose.com/platform/data-privacy-and-security.

11.2 Describe the plan for ensuring data confidentiality, including data storage and retention. Discuss:

- Where and how the data will be stored (specific servers, encryption, password protection, individuals with access).
- The plan for data retention after the study has been completed. Note: data must be kept a minimum of 5 years (or 6 years for studies involving HIPAA regulated PHI) after study completion or as required by study sponsor.

The online form will be conducted via Microsoft Form on the OneDrive cloud servers. Participants' responses will be exported and downloaded in Microsoft Excel file format, containing only the pseudonym, and stored on a password-protected GMU OneDrive cloud server account associated with the student researcher.

Virtual interviews will be conducted via Zoom in a secure session, with the audio recorded in real-time using the student researcher's laptop microphone. Before the meeting begins, the student researcher will enable Zoom's live transcription feature to generate an automatic transcription of the recorded audio.

Once the meeting ends, the video and transcription files generated by Zoom will be securely stored in Zoom's GMU cloud storage. The student researcher will then download the files, review and edit the transcription for accuracy, and upload them to a password-protected GMU OneDrive cloud server account associated with their own account. All interview transcripts and other study-related files will be kept on a password-protected GMU OneDrive cloud account and deleted five years after the study ends.

While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmission. The de-identified data could be used for future research without additional consent from participants.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee that monitors research on human subjects may inspect study records during internal auditing procedures and are required to keep all information confidential.

11.3 ☒ **Check here to confirm that data will be maintained and stored in accordance with George Mason's Data Classification and Storage Policy.**

IRB TIP
As a reminder, be sure to upload all additional materials supporting your protocol to their corresponding locations in the 'Local Site Documents' in RAMP. **This may include, but is not limited to:** • Data collection instruments • Letters of support/permission

- Debriefing forms
- Data use agreements
- Conflict of Interest (COI) management plans
- Data security plans
- Recruitment materials (i.e., flyers, social media posts, etc.)
- Consent forms/information sheets