

**San Diego Mesa College  
Research Committee  
Guidelines for Implementing the Research Planning Agenda (GIRPA)  
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

**Q1: Where did the Guidelines for Implementing the Research Planning Agenda (GIRPA) come from?**

During a pivot table demonstration at a Research Committee meeting, several faculty members expressed their concern regarding course-specific data in Excel pivot tables that gave the user the capability to drill down to the course section level and view Student Equity data for individual professors. This incident sparked a deeper concern that San Diego Mesa College needed to formalize the protection of data sensitivity and integrity of research, and, thus, a Subcommittee convened to research and develop a set of principles to guide the use of sensitive data.

**Q2: What is the purpose of the GIRPA?**

San Diego Mesa College encourages research on education issues and believes in making data which are in the public arena transparent and available to faculty, staff, and the general public. At the same time, the college upholds these guidelines on the access, security, use, and dissemination of sensitive data in order to assure the integrity of research and protect the rights and privacy of personnel and students. The GIRPA reinforces the exercise of sound judgment and the professionalism of data stewards.

**Q3: What determines the “need-to-know”?**

The research question determines the “need-to-know.” If a requestor has a research question that can only be answered with Level III data and the requested data are necessary for reasonable operation, strategic planning, or the accomplishment of the requestor’s expected and stated job duties, serving a legitimate educational interest, then there is a need-to-know. Examples include, but are not limited to, schedule development, Program Review, and data-driven decision-making by School Deans or Department Chairs.

**Q4: Where do I consult when I am not sure about the level of confidentiality or sensitivity associated with a research request?**

You should contact the Mesa College Office of Research.

**Q5: What is a “research question”?**

A good research question guides the process of seeking information to contribute to knowledge and/or practice. A research question generally is a problem to be solved, decision to be made, or knowledge to be gained through the gathering, analysis, and consideration of information.

**Q6: Are there any special requirements to obtain research data?**

NO – Faculty, administrators, staff, and students with a “need-to-know” will have access to research data. The level of research data is determined by the research question, and may result in Level I, II or III information.

**Q7: What is the meaning of aggregated/disaggregated data?**

Data specificity is on a continuum with extremes of aggregated data on one end and disaggregated data on the other. The following example illustrates this principle of data specificity: Aggregate data in the extreme would be data such as an institution-wide success rate (Level I). This institution-wide success rate can be disaggregated, or broken out, at the school and program level to yield success rates by school and program (Level II). If we disaggregate further and break it out by CRN, we would be able to see the success rate for a single professor’s class (Level III). We may disaggregate even further and determine the success rates for individual students (also Level III). While aggregate data in the extreme would include data such as institution-wide figures, disaggregated data in its extreme would comprise any data that are personally identifiable to individual personnel or students. Rarely do research questions necessitate personally identifiable information; most research questions can be answered with Level I or Level II data.

**Q8: Can I access Level I data generated for others?**

YES – the Research Office keeps copies of all reports it produces. Your access is dependent upon your need-to-know.

**Q9: Can I access existing data stored online?**

YES – visit <http://research.sdccd.edu/>, the District's Institutional Research and Planning website.

**Q10: My school (as any department, program, unit, discipline, etc.) generates and maintains Level III data. Does GIRPA apply to my school's data?**

YES – good research practices dictate ethical and professional behavior. Level III data, no matter where they exist or what the source, demand adherence to existing GIRPA policy. Although your School's data are not generated or maintained by the Research Office, the GIRPA should guide the access, security, use, and dissemination of sensitive data within your School.

**Q11: What are the consequences for unauthorized dissemination of Level III data?**

Individuals receiving Level III data from the Mesa College Research Office are expected to comply with the GIRPA policy. Standards of good judgment and professionalism are required when working with highly disaggregated information. Existing District disciplinary procedures will be enforced when inappropriate dissemination of Level III data occurs.

**Q12: What is a pivot table? And when will I get access to the Student Equity pivot tables?**

A pivot table is a reporting tool that quickly sorts and summarizes data, independent of the original data layout, in an Excel spreadsheet by dragging and dropping data elements into rows, columns, or summary positions. Student Equity pivot tables for Fall 2006 should be completed by April 2007. The pivot tables will be disseminated to individuals who have been granted access to these Level III data.

**Q13: Do I have the right to share Level III data with my colleagues?**

NO – reproductions and unauthorized dissemination of Level III data are prohibited.

**Q14: How does GIRPA differ from the Institutional Review Board (IRB)?**

Requests for data from the Mesa College Office of Research are under the auspices of the GIRPA. Research involving Mesa students as human subjects must be reviewed and approved by the IRB.

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