

Title: To Control or Not To Control

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Description: For her M.S. research thesis in counseling, Sherry would like to develop and test an educational intervention for students having academic difficulty at the technical college where she is an academic counselor. While Sherry feels having a control group would deny at-risk students the opportunity for improvement, her committee argues that a control group is needed in order to strengthen her research design.

Headings: Study Design and Risk-Benefit Analysis; Experimental designs (randomization, clinical trials); Identifying and Managing Conflicts of Interest; Dual roles of researchers

Case Type: Decision making

To Control or Not To Control

Sherry is embarking on the last stage of her M.S. degree in counseling – her research thesis. She decides to move out of state to join her fiancé. She feels that working with her thesis committee from a distance will not be an obstacle to completing her thesis. Her committee members state that it would be easier if she stayed in residence at the university while completing the thesis, but they agree that Sherry's plan is workable.

Soon after arriving in her new location, Sherry takes a job as an academic counselor at a technical college of 4,000 students. Her responsibilities for this position involve starting an academic counseling center where she will work with students who are experiencing academic difficulty, especially those who are on academic probation facing dismissal from the college if their grade points do not improve.

Because she is the only academic counselor and because many students are experiencing academic trouble, Sherry finds she is seeing students every 15 minutes for six to seven hours per day. This means that her schedule allows meeting with each student only three or four times per term – a total of 45 minutes to one hour per student.

Realizing that this limited contact with each student will not provide enough guidance to help the students improve their grades, Sherry decides to offer a 10-week course on study skills, meeting one hour per week. She will offer this opportunity to students who are in danger of being dismissed from school if their grades do not improve within one or two academic terms. To accommodate the at-risk students who indicate their interest in such a course, Sherry determines that she needs to teach 10 sections of the course with 10-12 students per section. This arrangement will increase her contact with these students to 10 hours per term while providing a structured forum for teaching them skills that might enable them to improve their academic standing.

Sherry decides that this course would make an interesting research topic for her master's thesis. She does a review of the literature and finds that successful results have been reported when teaching

study skills to students in traditional academic settings, but she can find no research on this topic conducted in a technical college setting.

Sherry writes her research proposal in which she discusses the findings of previous research, states her research question and hypotheses, and describes the procedure that she will follow. Her research design will be a "pre-test"/intervention/"post-test" design. The "pre-test" will be the student's GPA prior to the study skills course, the study skills course will be the intervention, and the "post-test" will be the student's GPA at the end of the course.

Sherry does not intend to use a control group who receive no intervention because she feels she has enough evidence from previous research to indicate that the intervention will produce an improvement in most students' GPAs. Since she was hired to work with these at-risk students, Sherry feels that excluding some of them from the course would deny them help that she is obligated to provide in her position as Academic Counselor. She considers using students who choose not to participate in the study skills course as the control group, but she decides that this approach will confound her study because simply choosing not to participate suggests that these students differ from students who choose to take the course.

Sherry meets with her thesis committee members and discusses her research proposal. The committee feels that it is critical to the integrity and power of the research that her design include a control group of at-risk students who do not participate in the study skills course. Sherry feels strongly that she should not use a no-intervention control group in her study. She feels that she has an obligation in her role as academic counselor to do whatever she feels would provide the most help to these students. The committee members maintain their position that for her research proposal to be approved, Sherry needs to have a control group. They suggest that she rethink her design decisions.

If you were Sherry, what would you do?

Questions for Further Reflection

In her role as academic counselor, does Sherry have any ethical obligations to the students with whom she works? If so, what are they? If not, why not?

Does considering Sherry only in her role as researcher change what you believe to be her obligations to the students? If so, in what ways?

Does Sherry have any ethical obligations to her employer with respect to her decision? If so, what are they? If not, why not?

Sherry is concerned that it would be unethical to withhold the intervention from some students. Is her concern legitimate? Why or why not?

Do the consequences of not receiving an intervention make a difference when deciding whether or not to run a control group? In what way?

What might be some alternative research designs Sherry could consider that would help her to avoid her dilemma?