RCT SHORT COURSE OUTLINE
Version August 29, 2016

Audience and Scope

- This course will be designed for potential producers of RCTs rather than entities that might seek to have others conduct them.
- In addition, the course will be designed primarily for legal researchers—but not necessarily empirical legal studies ones—who are interested in the idea of field research on legal topics.
- The course would neither prioritize the justification of RCTs nor delve too deeply into the mathematical side of the methodology. Rather, we want to guide attendees through the many questions one has to ask before conducting a field experiment as well as advise on best practices with institutional actors (e.g., IRBs) and field-level stakeholders.

The Course Modules

I. Fundamentals of RCTs

- Definitions with helpful vignettes/thought experiments
  - Units
  - Randomization point
  - Treatment
  - Timing of treatment assignment
  - Outcome variables
- Examples of successful RCTs and “spectacular failures” in the realm of observational studies

II. Persuading Stakeholders

- The main idea here is to explain what potential attendees will be “up against” in obtaining assent from necessary players in the field.
- Stakeholders, especially those that have not already designed and embraced the idea of intervention will need to be convinced that the RCT model is the right one for evaluating the effectiveness of that intervention.
- We will discuss:
  - The history of why the legal profession remains so hostile to RCTs;
  - Our own experience handling questions and comments focusing on the “deprivation of benefits”;
  - The concepts of scarcity and equipoise; and
  - Handling pushback from lawyers who are skeptical about embracing knowledge and expertise from non-lawyers
III. IRBs

- This module will first reiterate concepts like scarcity and equipoise for purposes of communicating with IRBs.
- We then will discuss the protocol drafting process at a sufficient level of generality.
- We will conclude with a note on the professional responsibility dimensions of randomizing in the law.

IV. Outcome Measurements/Types

- This module will cover common sources for obtaining measurements: court files and administrative records constituting the vast majority.
- We then will review the types of outcomes one might want to study:
  - Adjudicatory outputs
  - Socioeconomic outcomes
  - Procedural justice
  - (Humanizing) effects on decision makers
  - System cost effects

V. Analysis Techniques

- This module will not delve deeply into quantitative issues or review mathematical formulae. Rather, we will focus on explaining the fundamental concepts for each topic, providing examples. The main topics include:
  - Inferences based on:
    - Assignment mechanism only;
    - Fisher exact / permutation tests;
    - Normal approximation – look at mean, variance, standard errors
    - Modeling
      - Instrumental variables and exclusion restrictions
      - Intention to treat
      - Potential outcomes
      - Intermediate outcomes

VI. Common Problems

- Logistical
  - Funding sources and framing the study to be of interest to a wider set of funding sources
  - Building relationships
  - Getting all relevant stakeholders to the table and getting oneself to the table with them at the earliest possible time
- Analytical
  - Observation volume
  - Power calculations
- Noncompliance
- Monitoring
- Violations of Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption (SUTVA)