TO: ECU Community
FROM: Dr. Michael R. Van Scott
Interim Vice Chancellor
DATE: 13 March 2020
SUBJECT: Research & Sponsored Programs Continuity Guidance

As we prepare for operational impacts of COVID-19, laboratories, core facilities, and other sponsored programs should create and implement continuity plans that operationalize guidance posted by UNC and ECU on slowing transmission of COVID-19, while minimizing impacts on normal operations. The measures should protect the staff (including faculty and students), study subjects, and integrity of ongoing studies, training programs, and other sponsored activities. Investigators and program directors should consider the following actions:

- **Delay or postpone non-critical experiments, studies, and training.** If the studies are externally funded and proposed changes would significantly alter the deliverables, scope, budget, or completion within the project period, the PI and Office of Research Administration should jointly discuss the proposed changes with the sponsor and obtain written approval for the changes. In some sponsoring agencies, program officers do not have the authority to change the award agreement, and the grants administration office must formally approve changes in budget and scope of work.
- **If activities cannot be delayed or postponed due to contractual obligations, subject welfare, or irreparable loss of data integrity,** document that staff and subjects are healthy and that necessary precautions are taken to limit transmission of COVID-19.
- **Require that all personnel who are feeling unwell or have travelled to locales with active disease (Level 2 or higher) stay home** until they no longer have symptoms.
- **Remind all personnel to practice recommended personal hygiene measures** including washing hands frequently, using hand sanitizer, avoiding touching their face, and covering coughs.
- **Explore and implement measures to reduce density and allow “social distancing”.** For example, increasing spacing between researchers where possible to >6 feet, having personnel come to the lab in shifts, allowing every other bench to be unoccupied, etc.
- **Review opportunities for personnel and support staff to work remotely** - both to allow for social distancing or in case they need to self-isolate on short notice. Have personnel test remote setups before they are required. All ECU employees, including undergraduate and graduate research assistants and fellows paid through the university, have access to TEAMS, One Drive, Pirate Drive, VPN connection, and remote desktop.
- **Increase disinfecting of laboratory and communal spaces,** including lab benches and chairs, equipment, common rooms.
- **Curtail travel and attendance at meetings and conferences,** and attend meetings via phone or videoconference.
• **Cancel or postpone field research trips** that present risks because of shared housing, eating meals together, and challenges to “sending someone home” should they become ill during an extended trip.

**Note:** Researchers are not to take materials other than laptops, data storage devices, etc., offsite (e.g., to their homes) to ensure research continuity during a curtailment. All essential research must continue within the confines of appropriate laboratory space.

**Sponsored programs in support of community and healthcare clinics.**

Students and fellows paid through the university to perform specific duties are considered employees and are subject to the rules and guidance for employees at large. In cases where students are paid under a contractual obligation to staff a clinic, ECU will need to explore options with the sponsors, understand how the clinic is safeguarding against transmission of COVID-19, and then make a decision on whether to continue placing students in the clinic. If the clinic is deemed unsafe for students, then suspension or termination of the contract will need to be discussed or negotiated between ORA and the sponsor. If there are no alternatives to students being physically present in the clinics, the student is unwilling or cannot work in the clinic, and the student compensation cannot be transferred to other funds, then the student would relinquish their assistantship funding. Decisions regarding training environments and continuation of training programs are under the authority of the dean. When graduate students are involved, the dean of the academic unit and the dean of the Graduate School would coordinate to reach a final decision on continuation of the training/clinical program.

**Assumptions to use for planning:**

- Life, safety, and the good health of our research workforce and research subjects – animal and human - will remain the highest priority.
- Essential research infrastructure such as power and telecommunications, will be maintained.
- The Office of Research Administration will continue to provide service such as proposal preparation and submission and award management. ORA will communicate any known changes in proposal deadlines to the campus community.
- The Department of Comparative Medicine, Office of Human Subjects Protections, and Environment, Health & Safety (EH&S) will maintain their critical oversight functions, with back-up plans should the campus go into curtailed access.

**PIs should prepare for the following possibilities:**

- Laboratory workforce becoming ill or being required to self-isolate.
- Decontaminating the workspace of an ill researcher in your laboratory.
- Core facilities and other fee-for-service resources becoming unavailable.
- Shortages and delays in obtaining critical supplies. PIs should work with their building manager to coordinate essential deliveries.
- Limited or suspended access to the building or laboratory. The campus will notify the affected communities as soon as possible. Assume that essential access for equipment maintenance and critical laboratory experiments will continue. Such access will be coordinated through building managers. REDE will be developing a list of critical access needs in the near term to minimize disruption.
- Delay in repairs performed by Facilities Services and other campus and non-campus service providers.
- Delay in processing visas by the federal government.
Implement steps to ensure continuity of critical functions in case of a severe outbreak:

- Identify procedures and processes that require regular personnel attention (e.g., cell culture maintenance, animal studies).
- Assess and prioritize critical laboratory activities. Create an accurate inventory of laboratory chemicals and sensitive laboratory instrumentation and equipment, and share this information with your building manager and EH&S.
- Identify any research experiments that can be ramped down, curtailed, or delayed.
- Identify key personnel able to safely perform essential activities to ensure the continuity of your laboratory’s research capability.
- Ensure that you have access to up-to-date email and telephone contact information for your critical staff.
- Cross-train research staff to substitute for others who may be out sick or unable to come to work.
- Ensure staff have the appropriate, up-to-date training.
- Encourage all researchers to be familiar with each other’s work if an absence would threaten the loss of experiments (such as which cells need transferring to new media, etc.).
- Coordinate with colleagues who have similar research activities to identify ways to ensure mutual support and coverage of critical activities.
- Review contingency plans and emergency procedures with researchers and staff.
- Maintain a sufficient inventory of critical supplies that may be impacted by global shipping delays. Inform your building manager if your lab relies on regularly-scheduled supplies such as liquid nitrogen, dry ice or helium. Coordinate those deliveries with building management.
- Consider installing remote control monitoring devices for critical equipment (e.g., -80C freezers, liquid nitrogen storage dears, incubators).
- Communicate significant planned absences and/or lab closures to your EH&S safety advisors, business offices, and other key administrative units.
- Contact your departmental leadership, building manager and EH&S staff if you need assistance in reviewing your continuity plans.

Other safety considerations:

- Ensure that individuals performing critical tasks have been adequately trained and understand whom to contact with technical or safety questions.
- Avoid performing high-risk procedures alone. When working alone is necessary, exercise extreme caution.
- Ensure that research team members notify colleagues of their schedule when working alone for an extended period of time.
- Ensure that high-risk materials (radioactive, biohazards, chemicals) are properly secured.

Coronavirus research on campus:

- Note that all PIs must have Biosafety Committee approval prior to performing any coronavirus research or work on campus (including to help state and federal agencies to screen patient samples). This includes requesting or accepting COVID-19 samples (patient or otherwise).
**COVID-19 Guidance for Research**

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**Acknowledgement:** The guidance above was compiled from information posted by the University of California, Yale University, MUSC, and Clemson University.