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Research Town Hall

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**This post has been edited to update links to the newly released phased plan and [updated messaging](#) from the OVPDGS. 5-29-20.*

The **COVID-19 Research Continuity Task Force** recently held a virtual town hall and received many questions from the UMaine research community. This document [highlights as many of the questions and their answers as possible at this time](#). More resources and information are coming soon.



COVID-19 Research Continuity Task Force

- Tammy Crosby**, Chair, Special Assistant to the VPRDGS
Amanda Ashe, Director of Research Compliance
James Beaupre, Director of Industrial Cooperation
Peter Drown, Operations Manager, ASCC
Nuri Emanetoglu, Associate Professor of Electrical & Computer Engineering and Co-Chair of the Faculty Senate Research & Scholarship Committee
Mark Hutton, Associate Dean for Research, NSFA
Deborah Saber, Assistant Professor of Nursing and Co-Chair of the Faculty Senate Research & Scholarship Committee
Kristy Townsend, Associate Professor of Neurobiology
Tammy York, Grant & Contract Administrator III, ORA

The task force is continually working to develop the [phased plan](#) and moving forward as fast as we can. There are many submissions that need to be reviewed to ensure safety. Questions can be sent to [Tammy Crosby](#).

Multiple steps and many people are involved in making the final decisions on whether or not research conditions are safe. These include the individual researchers themselves. A risk management process is overseen by an advisory board. Also involved are the emergency operations center, human resources, UMS safety management office, the Chancellor and President and federal and state guidelines.

Phased Planning and Return to Research

The [phased plan](#) will be a transparent process and has been posted online.

We are currently doing multi-level and multi-option planning to get ahead of potential situations. Right now, we are assessing everything from being fully open to not being open at all – and everything in between. If we do start earlier, we will be able to deal with that decision when it comes.

Some human-subject research does not require face-to-face interaction and can continue remotely via Zoom or other models. There is no restriction on that activity, as long as all modifications to protocols have IRB approval.

For face-to-face interaction on campus, we will follow the status of safe reopening according to the Governor's plan and UMS directives. For off-site work, you will follow the guidelines enforced by the organization hosting the meetings after approval on a case-by-case basis. You can contact the [Office of Research Compliance](#) to request a review from the IRB on a case by case basis.

What is essential?

The task force reviews requests to determine whether research is essential – but that is not the only consideration for research to be able to continue. One example is if the facility where the research takes place is open or not. Further explanation will be included in the phased plan.

University-sponsored activities such as fieldwork that need to be performed on a timely basis and support infrastructure such as agriculture have been approved.

On approved research projects, students listed as employees in the lab are allowed to work.

Safety

Testing is under active evaluation on multiple levels. Any testing on campus at this time will go through a private provider and medical provider.

Restrooms are cleaned on a regular basis with specially trained teams and equipment to do it. All restrooms will have a posted cleaning schedule.

Laboratory cleaning will need to be done by the laboratory managers as cleaning is not provided for individual workspaces at this time.

If social distancing cannot be followed we require the use of face masks. This includes going to other places on campus, such as the bookstore. We have ordered over 10,000 face coverings as well.

Melissa Maginnis leads the science advisory board, which reports to the Chancellor on the current science and medicine research as the University reopens.

Phase 2 corresponds with the Governor's reopening Stage 2 with guidance from the System. Levels of criteria for different types of activities will be reviewed by the task force, the EOC and other groups reviewing activity happening on campus. Phase 3 would see the start to transitioning the management more locally by existing safety plans for units, colleges, centers and labs.

We are in litigation and risk mitigation daily and plan to have a gradual reopening that is science-based and data-based. We cannot afford to reopen while the risk is still high.

We are working to retrofit different areas to make them safer, making sure there is hand sanitizer available and plexiglass barriers.

Academics

We are doing the best we can to have plans in place to best meet the teaching and research missions of the University – and not at the expense of one over the other.

There is no expectation for scholarship for the 2020 spring semester and the tenure-clock for pre-tenured faculty has been stopped for one year. We encourage faculty to speak with their chair and peer committees about the impacts they are experiencing. Document the types of teaching, research and scholarship you have accomplished during this period, including how you shifted methods and tactics or if you had to fully stop. Be sure to communicate this documentation with leadership and reach out to the [Office of Research Development](#) for support. ORD can connect you with resources to navigate situations you experience as a researcher and scholar – as well as help with proposal development.

We try to look at academics and research in an integrated manner instead of competing resources. We will continue to meaningfully support both – knowing that one impacts the other.

Graduate School

For graduate students who were supposed to graduate this spring and have been delayed or could not finish their research to fulfill their degree requirements we are encouraging faculty to grant an incomplete for that work which allows students to finish in the summer without having to re-register for additional credit. We have also expanded eligibility for the dissertation fellowship program to give an increased number of partial and full awards to help students finish their dissertations this summer. [Graduate School](#) staff has office hours available via Zoom every weekday at 3:30 p.m. and responds to phone and emails. For those experiencing difficulties related to lodging, meals and other personal issues we are working with the Dean of student life.

International Students

There is no travel ban or restriction on any students holding temporary visas, including F1 and J1 visas. We anticipate the return of international students to campus this fall. If classes are in a remote-learning environment we expect graduate students to participate just as they would in in-person classes.

Financial

If a student is unable to complete the work under the grant in time due to COVID-19, our recommendation is to reach out to the sponsor, update them on the situation and ask for additional or supplemental funds or try to negotiate a reduced scope of work. Sponsors have been very flexible and may offer other solutions as well. If you have questions you can contact the [Office of Research Administration](#).

MEIF

Purchases on MEIF startups can continue for items necessary and work currently taking place. Ideally, most purchases such as equipment can wait until our return to campus and can be made through Marketplace. Purchases through Marketplace require an additional level of approval and may require additional information.

If startup funds are set to expire in June 2020, faculty can email [Jenn Baker](#) to request an extension. They should include information on the startup package such as what date they need it extended to and what the current balance is.

There are no institutionally-designated funds available to assist PIs and ramping up research activities – including the turning on of equipment. Cosponsors will allow ramp-up cost as allowed on the grants or contracts but there is no assumption that all funds will be available from the sponsors to offset these costs. We recommend PIs reach out to their sponsor and update them on the situation and ask for supplemental funding or negotiating a reduction in the scope of work. Sponsors may have other options. Please reach out to the [ORA](#) for assistance.

Congressional work

The President's office and the Research office are actively engaging with our congressional delegation to let them know what the impact on the research enterprise is during COVID-19 operating conditions.

We are collecting examples to incorporate into materials we are assembling to present to our congressional delegates. Many federal agencies have special funding opportunities right now and we have been impressed with the number of proposals that have gone out from faculty. Many different disciplines are represented and the opportunity for interdisciplinary research is high.

If you have examples to share or ideas for research opportunities please reach out to [Jason Charland](#).

Hiring Graduate Students

There is no restriction on hiring graduate students this summer. As long as there is a work plan in place for the graduate research or teaching assistant, they can be hired. They may need to conduct work remotely unless their work falls under the allowed provisions.

Events

The planning committee for the 2020 UMaine Student Symposium (UMSS20) is looking at different options to hold the symposium. One option could be a virtual scenario. More details will be released on the [UMSS website](#).

Share this:     

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