

Increasing On-Campus¹ Research-Related Activities at Penn State as the Risk of Spreading COVID-19 Declines

May 19, 2021

Dear Penn State Research Community,

As we look forward to Summer and Fall 2021, and as we see an increase in the members of our community becoming vaccinated against COVID-19, we have the opportunity to deliberately develop plans to increase our on-campus research-related activities. As always, we remain focused on the health and well-being of our community. With Penn State's announcement that we are planning for in-person, on-campus instruction for the Fall 2021 semester, we anticipate an accompanying increase in on-campus research-related activities. The Office of the Senior Vice President for Research, in consultation with the Vice Dean for Research and Graduate Studies in the College of Medicine, has issued this revised guidance related to on-campus research.

The underlying principles remain the same as when we reduced our on-campus research-related activities in March 2020 and then gradually increased activities starting in June 2020: to protect the health and safety of individuals and to keep our healthcare systems from becoming overwhelmed. We will continue to support on-campus research-related activities while protecting the health and safety of the research workforce, students, and the broader community. With increasing availability of vaccines and as more employees and students become vaccinated, we expect increasing confidence in our ability to safely access research and creative spaces. Penn State continues to [strongly encourage](#) all students, faculty, and staff to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

Scope

This guidance applies to researchers at University Park, the Commonwealth Campuses, and the College of Medicine. College Deans, Institute Directors², Campus Chancellors, or their designees will oversee the research ramp-up process within their respective units.

For members of our research community who work at the Applied Research Laboratory (ARL), please continue to follow ARL-specific guidelines.

If your work adjustment arrangement has been approved to have no in-person teaching component, then the assumption is that you will not come to campus for meetings, events, or to conduct research, and that you will not travel on behalf of the University. If you plan to participate in any of these activities, you must first make a request to your unit executive.

For graduate student assistants or trainees whose special request for adjusted activities have been approved to have no in-person teaching component, the assumption is that they will not come to campus for meetings, events, or to conduct research, and that they will not travel on behalf of the University. If they plan to participate in any of these activities, they must first make a request to the administrator for graduate education in their unit.

¹Throughout this document, on-campus includes any university-owned or leased facility or any field site. Research includes the scholarship of research and creative accomplishments as defined in academic policy AC23.

² The Institute Directors for this plan are the five Directors of the following University Park Institutes: Huck, IEE, MRI, SSRI, and ICDS.

Guiding Principles

- Protecting the health and safety of the research workforce and the broader Penn State community, emotionally as well as physically, is a paramount consideration. We also have an obligation to protect the health and safety of our clinical patients, human-research subjects, and our local communities.
- Granting access to on-campus research activities should be conducted in a fair and transparent manner.
- Ensuring flexible approaches that accommodate the needs of vulnerable populations must be considered in planning.
- Remaining adaptable, flexible, and nimble as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic evolves is critical. Even as we increase research activity, we should be prepared to reduce activity, if, and when needed.

Discovery and Excellence are core values for Penn State. In-person, hands-on training is often essential to the development of skills used in laboratory, field work, and creative works and should be accommodated when possible and safe. On-campus research-related activities will be governed by [University guidance](#) regarding health and safety during the pandemic. Our guidelines will remain aligned with public health recommendations and Federal and State [executive orders](#). In-person activities must follow [business practices](#) and building safety-orders provided by the CDC, the Commonwealth of PA, local governments, and the University.

General Guidance for Research Units (Colleges, Institutes, and Commonwealth Campuses) and Investigators

Unit leaders³, in coordination with Return to Work guidance for [Faculty](#) and [Staff](#), should re-visit existing plans or develop new plans to increase on-campus research-related activities including safe, in-person interactions that support research and training of undergraduates, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows. This includes continued masking and optimizing any required physical distancing and associated occupancy densities. All plans should consider options for vulnerable individuals, if any, including delaying their return to on-campus research in accordance with the Faculty or Staff Work Adjustment Request Process and the Graduate Student Assistant/Trainee Activity Adjustment Request Process.

Summer 2021 will serve as a transition period, and research groups are encouraged to gradually increase on-campus research activities that are currently remote while maintaining current health and safety practices for masking, physical distancing, and hand washing. As State and Federal guidance continue to evolve regarding telework and in-person work, additional guidance can be expected about the impacts on the University's health and safety practices and expectations.

By Fall 2021, on-campus research is expected to operate at or near maximum levels unless limited by a continued need for physical distancing in research spaces. Requests for health-related needs and for workplace adjustments should be made by completing the [Faculty Work Adjustment Request Form](#) or following the [Staff Remote Working Request Process](#) and sending it to the unit HR Strategic Partner or the Graduate Student Assistant/Trainee Activity Adjustment Request Form and sending it to gradstudentaffairs@psu.edu.

Unit plans for resuming and increasing on-campus research must consider the following:

- Plans for increasing use of common spaces that are not currently being used, including options for researchers to have safe places to eat during breaks.
- Updated [guidance](#) on conducting research involving animals, if applicable.

³ Throughout this document, unit leaders are College Deans, Institute Directors, Campus Chancellors, or their designees

- [Revised standards](#) for human subjects research, if applicable.
- Guidance for management of [grants and contracts](#).
- Plans for a quick ramp-down of research-related activities to an appropriate level, if necessary.
- A transparent communication plan regarding access to labs and buildings, especially for spaces that are accessed by researchers from multiple colleges and institutes, while ensuring that CDC and university guidelines are met.

Additional Considerations and Resources

- All researchers should continue to follow Penn State [travel policies](#).
- Researchers at the College of Medicine should follow cleaning guidance provided by the [Office of Biosafety](#).
- Researchers at all other campuses should follow Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) [cleaning guidelines for laboratories and research facilities](#) and [the ramp-up planning guide and checklist](#). Visiting Scholar invitations must follow current [policies and procedures](#).
- Undergraduate students in research spaces should coordinate with their sponsoring unit. We encourage the host laboratory or creative space to provide mentorship of the undergraduate students regarding COVID protocols and best practices. Although there are no specific university-wide requirements for students taking research for credit, some departments have forms that students must complete prior to conducting research for credit. As with employees, we strongly encourage all students working in research spaces to be vaccinated.

Important Contacts

- **University Police:** Report a concern for your personal security and safety to University Police at 911 or 814-863-1111 (at [University Park](#)) or [your campus police station](#).
- **Environmental Health and Safety:** Report a safety concern or contact Penn State Environmental Health and Safety at 814-865-6391 or psuehs@psu.edu or [online form](#).
- **Office of Physical Plant:** Report a building condition or custodial services to OPP Work Reception Center at 814-865-4731.

Thank you in advance for your efforts to keep our community safe,

Lora Weiss, Ph.D.
Senior Vice President for Research
Lora.Weiss@psu.edu

Leslie Parent, MD
Vice Dean for Research and Graduate Studies, College of Medicine
Lparent@psu.edu