

Guidelines to Sustaining Safe, Research-Related Activities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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

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— These instructions will be updated regularly. Please check back often. ----

As circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic continue to evolve, our focus remains on the health and well-being of our community. In March 2020, we rapidly reduced on our-campus¹ research-related activities, and in May 2020, we began a gradual increase in these activities. Now, we must be prepared to reduce activities again, if needed. It remains critical that all researchers and units have a responsive and responsible plan for conducting research that ensures a balance of safety and health while also continuing research developments, with the former outweighing the latter.

While we would prefer not having to implement another ramp-down for research, we must recognize that COVID-19 is a very infectious and complex disease, and we must have a contingency plan in place if circumstances warrant a ramp-down in research activities.

During this pandemic, ***all research-related activities that can be conducted remotely should continue in that manner.*** By working remotely, we can de-densify campus and other locations and enable research that requires explicit on-campus access to continue. The underlying principle is to help ensure that our healthcare systems do not become overwhelmed. In advance of the need to reduce research-related activities, each Unit leader (College Dean, Institute Director², and Campus Chancellor) will complete a ramp-down plan, post it³, and inform the Senior Vice President for Research that a plan is in place for all of the research activities within their purview.

Ramp-up of research activity will likely occur sooner after the ramp-down than the situation in March 2020. Ramp-ups will be aligned with circumstances observed within the COVID-19 Operations Control Center (COCC) and include evaluating if numbers of infections are moderately decreasing or if impacts are campus-wide.

Scope

This guidance applies to Penn State researchers, including those at University Park, the Commonwealth Campuses, and the College of Medicine.

¹ Throughout this document, on-campus includes any university facility or 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.

³ Please use this shared folder for posting your Unit's plans:

<https://pennstateoffice365.sharepoint.com/:f:/r/sites/ResearchRamp-up/Shared%20Documents/General/Sustained%20Research%20Plans?csf=1&web=1&e=A7Ka6W> (please email ajs52@psu.edu or rim100@psu.edu if you or a proxy need access to this folder.)

Members of our research community who work at the Applied Research Laboratory (ARL) should continue to follow ARL-specific guidelines, which ensure critical national security needs are maintained while following appropriate COVID-19 related guidelines.

Principles

The following principles should be considered:

1. Colleges, campuses, institutes, and individual laboratories and research teams should plan for a phased ramp-down that balances safety, community responsibility, and research productivity to best sustain critical research while maintaining the health of individuals. This should be conducted in accordance with University and Commonwealth guidance, on the availability of personnel to safely conduct and support the research, infection trends (local, state, national), local healthcare system capacities, and testing and contact tracing status.
2. If a Unit lacks a plan and if an immediate ramp-down is warranted, the Unit will adopt the plan implemented in March 2020; the preferred path is to implement plans developed by the Units.
3. All data analysis, computer work not requiring specialized hardware or software, seminars, group meetings, and one-on-one meetings that can be conducted remotely must continue to be remote.
4. Unit-specific ramp-down plans should have a clear, responsive, and transparent approach to sustaining critical research activities amidst the ramp-down.
5. Human subjects research should continue to adhere to the [Revised Standards for Human Subjects Research and related FAQs](#). This guidance applies to human subjects research that is conducted both on-campus and off-campus, and in-person and remote.
6. Consider making plans that are reversible for when research ramps-up, again. Ramp-up activity could also adopt re-using plans from the May 2020 ramp-up of research activity.

Preparing Ramp-down Plans

Each Unit (College, Commonwealth Campus, and Institute) should develop Unit plans to sustain safe, on-campus research-related activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unit-specific ramp-down plans should include both a moderate (i.e., 50% reduction in personnel density from the level on the date that the ramp-down is announced) and an ultimate phase that limits research activities to only the most critical research, while maintaining necessary safety and health practices (~75% reduction). These two ramp-downs roughly correspond with Off-Ramp 3 and Off-Ramp 4⁴, respectively, of the Off-Ramp Decision Framework being developed by the COVID-19 Operations Control Center (COCC), although it is possible that research may continue in its current state during either of these off-ramps. For example, we may reduce students' on-campus academic presence, but allow research to remain at current levels (a hybrid of Off-Ramps 2 and 3). In conjunction with decisions by the COCC, the Senior Vice President for Research will provide university-wide guidance if Units need to ramp down in response to pandemic conditions.

These plans should be completed and posted ***as soon as possible, but no later than September 25, 2020***. If a Unit lacks a plan or if an immediate ramp-down is warranted, the Unit will adopt the plan implemented in March 2020; the preferred approach is to implement plans developed by the Units.

Unit plans should be developed in consultation with facility coordinators and Pandemic Safety Officers and should consider other uses of buildings (e.g., shared spaces, classrooms) when determining the density of personnel in spaces. Unit leaders should consult with other colleges, institutes, or campuses

⁴ See §Additional Information for descriptions of the COCC draft Off-Ramps

when facilities are in shared buildings, or with other offices when the research is governed by other policies, e.g., Institutional Review Board (IRB), Animal Resource Program (ARP), or other units that may also be ramping down. Facility coordinators should consult with the Office of Physical Plant (OPP) and Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) and should focus on operations directly within their control. Where appropriate, physical security and Enterprise Network and Communication Services (ENCS) and Information Technology Services (ITS) should be engaged. All research activities should be consistent with University safety guidance, OPP and EHS guidance, and unit-specific guidance. Research conducted at off-campus facilities should also comply with any site-specific guidance.

Personnel change information should be updated by the unit; a roster should be maintained at the unit level. These are the same rosters currently coordinated with OPP and Human Resources (HR).

Care must be taken to avoid situations in which it is unsafe to have a single person carrying out research in isolation. Contingency plans should include absences of individuals due to COVID-19 or other illnesses, especially for critical work and activities that must be maintained (e.g., animal care). An approach for communicating the plan must also be developed.

If a rapid reduction in on-campus research becomes necessary, very limited access to on-campus research facilities will be maintained so that **critical** research-related activities can continue under stringent social distancing guidelines. Units must determine what is considered critical research, such as the maintenance of equipment, samples, reagents, and materials. Existing animal populations should be maintained as much as possible, but without compromising personnel safety.

Individuals who believe aspects of their research may constitute critical activities should consult with their academic dean, institute director, or campus chancellor, or in the College of Medicine, their department chair. In the case of externally sponsored research, it is recommended that PIs work with their unit's grants and contracts administration office to assist in determining whether flexibility will be granted by the sponsor regarding contractually required deliverables. An inability to obtain relief from contractually required deliverables, particularly for Federally-funded research, may be a factor in assessing criticality of research, but this decision must be made by the dean or chancellor in consultation with the Office of Sponsored Programs, and not the PI; again, safety takes priority over access to facilities.

New proposals should also include tasks that can be conducted remotely.

Next Steps for Unit Leaders (College Deans, Institute Directors, and Campus Chancellors)

- Determine which research activities are critical in the event of a rapid reduction to critical research (consider 50% and 75% reductions). **All research activities must be re-evaluated to determine which activities should be included in these levels, and unit leaders need to be transparent.**
- Develop a research ramp-down plan to reduce on-campus research-related activities to a level that is 50% and 75% of the level of activity on the date that the ramp-down is announced. This can be accomplished by reducing the number of approved personnel, by adjusting schedules, or by other mechanisms. Consider making these plans reversible for when research ramps-up, again.
- Provide confirmation of these plans to the Office of the Senior Vice President for Research and posting the plans⁵ by September 25, 2020. Failure to provide confirmation of a plan will result in the Unit operating under the March 2020 instructions.

⁵ Please use this shared folder for posting your Unit's plans:

<https://pennstateoffice365.sharepoint.com/:f:/r/sites/ResearchRamp-up/Shared%20Documents/General/Sustained%20Research%20Plans?csf=1&web=1&e=A7Ka6W> (please email ajs52@psu.edu or rim100@psu.edu if you or a proxy need access to this folder.)

- If a ramp-down is warranted, then undergraduate students, graduate students, external visitors, and visiting scholars must receive prior approval from the relevant academic dean for them to continue on-campus research.
- Faculty members cannot and should not require undergraduate or graduate students to come to campus, and undergraduate and graduate students who conduct on-campus research must be included in the research reductions and approaches to de-densification.
- Maintain contact information for your students, postdocs, faculty, and staff, and review contingency plans and emergency procedures within the unit.

Additional Information

Core Facilities – Penn State operates centralized core facilities supporting scientific measurements and characterization for researchers across units, campuses, and local businesses. Plans should consider elements of these core facilities as critical. Professional staff who work in these facilities will support critical research activities with increased social distancing or reduced hours. Only approved researchers from other units should have access to the facilities. Available access hours will be limited. When possible, PIs should consider accessing these facilities remotely, e.g., with samples or specimens provided to the professional staff and following specific procedures. Deference and support must be provided to this professional staff to ensure that we maintain core functionality during any reduction in on-campus research. PIs are encouraged to use the professional staff whenever possible, which will allow for better density management within our facilities.

Animal Research – Units should be prepared for a gradual reduction in animal research. Conditions permitting, active studies may continue to their conclusion and breeding activities maintained. In the case of a significant reduction in the number of personnel available to care for research animals, more severe restrictions may be necessary. Decisions regarding termination of animal studies and reduction of animal populations should be made in consultation with the Animal Resource Program (ARP) (University Park – 814-865-1495, arp@psu.edu; College of Medicine, 717-531-8460, Dr. Ronald Wilson rwilson2@pennstatehershey.psu.edu). Additional guidance is [here](#).

Human Subjects Research – All human subjects research that can be conducted remotely (e.g., via phone or Zoom) must be conducted remotely. The Revised Standards for Human Subjects Research are regularly updated and includes guidance for human subjects research that may be conducted in-person, associated review and approval processes, and applies to all human subjects research, regardless of location, and including international sites. The [Revised Standards](#) may change if a ramp down of research is warranted. Researchers and Unit leaders must consult with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before making changes that affect human subjects research.

Key Guidance from EHS –

- [COVID-19 Updates from EHS](#)
- [Cleaning Guidelines for Laboratories and Research Facilities](#)
- [Guidelines for Cleaning Computer Products](#)
- [EHS Ramp-down checklist](#)
- [Signage for Potential COVID-19 Case Reported](#)

Non-compliance – Deans, Chancellors, and Institute Directors are responsible for ensuring their faculty, staff, and students comply with each of their units' plans. If an individual is aware of any non-compliance, they should report it to the appropriate Dean, Chancellor, or Institute Director, or to the unit's Pandemic Safety Officer. Alternatively, they can report the situation to their facility coordinator who will communicate

with the appropriate Dean, Chancellor, or Institute Director and Pandemic Safety Officer. Persistent non-compliance, when confirmed by the appropriate Dean, Chancellor, or Institute Director, may result in removal of the individual’s approval for conducting research on-campus or at other facilities.

Procedures in the Event of a Suspected or Confirmed COVID-19 Case – Any individual who has symptoms consistent with COVID-19 should report to their supervisor. The supervisor will follow University guidance, available [here](#). If someone has any doubt about whether they could be ill, they must NOT work on-campus.

Travel Considerations – Faculty and staff traveling within the state of Pennsylvania must carefully review the [PA Dept of Health Travel guidance](#) and follow all unit, college, and university guidelines for personnel safety while traveling.

The most up-to-date **domestic** travel information is available [here](#).

The most up-to-date **international** travel information is available [here](#).

Latest Penn State COVID-19 Updates

The latest guidance and information for the Penn State research community related to COVID-19 will continue to be posted at [here](#). For University-wide news and updates, visit [here](#).

Draft Off-Ramps for Decision Frameworks (to be updated by COCC)

Overview	Off-Ramp 1	Off-Ramp 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Decision Frameworks are based on five situations. Each situation contains an overview of impact to students and campus operations The situations and frameworks are arranged from Off-Ramp 1 to Off-Ramp 5. Off-Ramp 5 is the most severe. Each campus has specific metrics, as needed 	<p>Situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small number of COVID positive individuals. Epidemiology and contact tracing suggests this can be contained, isolated and remediated <p>Operational Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited to cleaning of a few areas <p>Student Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> May need to isolate or quarantine a few students. Others unaffected 	<p>Situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moderate number of impacted individuals. High confidence can contain situation <p>Operational Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce operations in specific areas. Cleaning of areas Programs or areas remain curtailed to prevent additional exposures <p>Student Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A large number of students could be impacted Situation may involve multiple floors, classes, or building
Off-Ramp 3	Off-Ramp 4	Off-Ramp 5
<p>Situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small outbreak in a defined population. Large number of individuals impacted May be difficult to identify everyone and all the spaces for remediation Moderate confidence can be contained <p>Operational Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not campus-wide, but specific classes or programs may need to be move on-line. Areas may need to be closed. Non-residential students may be asked to stay off campus Some employees may be asked to return to remote work <p>Student Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many in isolation and quarantine. Others need to stay in rooms or shelter-in-place Box meals 	<p>Situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A significant outbreak is occurring. There is limited confidence this can be contained. It is likely in-person classes will not resume <p>Operational Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All programs and classes move online Campus access is restricted Non-resident students directed to stay away from campus Employees switch to telework and stay away from campus <p>Student Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All residential students will be sent home, if permitted by the State Department of Health. Move-out plans will be implemented 	<p>Situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> On-going campus and community spread is occurring. Governmental actions restrict travel <p>Operational Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Similar to Off-Ramp 4 impact. May have residential students on-campus for extended stay <p>Student Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residential students will not be allowed to travel. They will be asked to shelter-in-place.