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**Research Laboratories and Facilities and the COVID-19 Pandemic**  
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**From Mark T. Harris, Vice Provost for Research**

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented us with a truly unprecedented challenge on many fronts. This is a difficult time for all of us, in part because the current situation is fluid and changes as we learn more information and receive directives from governmental leaders.

The onset of the disease has triggered various campus plans regarding continuity of operations, including plans for dealing with infectious disease. We must take steps to mitigate the spread of the disease. In light of the campus announcement of restricted access to campus, it is advised to suspend or ramp down all ongoing research requiring campus facilities as soon as possible and to prepare for various possible scenarios, including a shutdown of many of our research facilities and reduction of personnel to those essential for operations.

With that in mind, I want to provide updated guidance for researchers beyond the material included in the Academic Affairs and the Sponsored Program updates. Our primary concern is for the safety of everyone in the UWM community (faculty, staff, students, and their families). There are three major strategies: (1) work from a remote location unless there is an essential need; if on campus, increase “distancing” among individuals to safe distances; (2) shift to on-line meetings to reduce close face-to-face interactions; and (3) plan for various contingencies.

1. **Work remotely unless there is an essential need to be on campus**  
First, all employees who can work remotely need to work remotely. Only essential employees should come to campus (for animal care, finishing experiments that cannot be terminated, securing equipment, etc.). If individuals do come to campus, they must maintain a physical distance (6’ minimum) from each other. These steps are critical to decrease the transmission of the disease.
2. **Shift to on-line meetings**  
To further limit disease transmission, campus meetings of all sizes have moved to on-line platforms. In addition to the capability to conduct teleconferences through a variety of tools (Zoom, Skype, conference calls), UWM has recently made Microsoft “Teams” available to campus, which makes such remote discussions and file sharing even easier.
3. **Plan for various contingencies**  
It is important for researchers to plan for various contingencies. I ask you to clearly analyze this in the context of your research (see below). We must reduce the number of people on campus to those who are essential. You need to “ramp down” activities now. You must also plan on how to deal with a full shutdown of research laboratories and facilities.

What you need to do:

1. If you have not yet done so, analyze your research operations. How can members of your lab work remotely? What, if any, on-site work is essential? How many researchers can work safely in the space? What are the cleaning protocols? How will you manage casual encounters as colleagues move through the space? To what extent is shared equipment a potential point of spreading the virus? Can the essential members travel safely

from their homes to the research space? I ask each lead researcher to do this analysis and develop a plan for their research operations as soon as possible. Hopefully, many of you have done this already.

2. If your work is essential, your dean or division head is authorized to grant permission for you to access your campus research space. To obtain permission, you will need to contact your dean after you have completed the analysis of your operations. If allowed to return to your building and the building is locked, you will need to contact the building manager for safety reasons. If you have a lone researcher in your lab and on a building floor, consider asking the person to periodically contact another lab member. It is important to keep up with “best practice” advice as it emerges in coming days, given the fluidity of the pandemic and the understanding of the disease.
3. Research leaders should immediately set up a Teams site for their research group. This will provide a platform for team communications, sharing files and conducting remote meetings. There is extensive support information available through campus IT support (<https://uwm.edu/o365/the-teams-project/>; go to Help and Resources) and probably within your unit.
4. Expect some lab members to be absent for extended periods due to either self-quarantine or illness. Plan for how you will deal with the absence of personnel. How would this impact remote work? If you have essential operations, how would you handle those functions if you lost key personnel for a couple of weeks?
5. Make a plan for a full shutdown of your laboratory or facility. What procedures will you use? Who will be responsible for securing the lab or making decisions in case of shutdown? Who are the essential personnel? Which activities are essential and how will they be sustained during a shutdown (animal care being the most obvious)? How will this be accomplished?

Please see University Safety and Assurances’ document “Research Continuity Guidance for Laboratories and Research Facilities” (<https://uwm.edu/safety-health/covid-19-guidance-for-laboratories-and-research-facilities/>) for a more detailed set of questions to guide your thinking as you work through these questions.

In addition, I want to articulate some other important points for researchers:

- For projects with human subjects, the safety of *both* the subjects and the research staff need to be considered. Some labs have already begun to “ramp down” due to these concerns. I recommend contacting Melissa Spadanuda (spadanud@uwm.edu) or other IRB staff if you have any questions about this. You should also consult the IRB’s “Research Continuity for Human Subjects Research” (<https://uwm.edu/irb/covid-19-guidance/>).
- For projects with animals, sustaining animal care is essential. Contact Berri Forman (berri@uwm.edu) or other Animal Care staff for advice on this issue.
- Most granting agencies have provided guidance on research delays of this type, including offering no-cost extensions and carryover appeals to assure that funds are available when your research ramps up again. I recommend consulting the Office of Research information page (<https://uwm.edu/officeofresearch/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-updates-related-to-sponsored-programs/>) for information on specific agency guidance and contacting your program officer. The Office of Sponsored Programs is available to help you with this.

Finally, I ask you to recognize that this pandemic is rapidly developing. I have been struck by how quickly advice and responses have evolved. The safety of our entire community is our first concern. Please take care of yourself and your family. Continue to watch for campus updates and check campus resources for news. My office is here to help and support you, as are other campus units.