University Guidance on Research at UNI During the COVID19 Pandemic
23 March 2020

GENERAL GUIDANCE FOR RESEARCHERS

The following guidance is offered to faculty, staff, and student researchers across campus to assist in addressing the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 virus and supporting compliance with University, state, and federal guidance and requirements for operations during the COVID-19 outbreak. As the circumstances have been evolving rapidly, be sure to visit the UNI COVID-19 website regularly for information and updates. In addition, information regarding funding and project management for sponsored projects can be found on the RSP Website.

Currently, university guidelines require that all teaching activities take place in virtual settings and that faculty, staff, and students avoid being on campus as much as possible. Researchers should consider the possibility that this disruption to campus activities may continue for months to come and make contingency plans accordingly. In addition, preparations and a contingency plan must be developed in the event that the campus is ordered to shut down entirely, where no one other than critical personnel are allowed to physically go on campus. These guidelines are being offered to assist you in developing and implementing plans for both circumstances. In the event of a campus shutdown, recommendations below (things that “should” be done) will become requirements.

In general, researchers are encouraged to be strategic about how they plan and conduct their research at this time. Depending upon the nature of their research, they might consider: a) prioritizing the work that is essential; b) advancing work in progress to the point that it could be paused if necessary; and c) identifying the work that has the highest future potential.

It is not permissible to conduct research that creates significant risk of disease exposure to staff, students, or study participants (in the case of in-person human subject studies). However, most research and creative activities are encouraged to continue, if they can be conducted in such a way as to adhere to the CDC’s guidelines for social distancing. Specifically, the following actions are recommended or required (as noted):

- Researchers should work from home as much as possible.
- Research activities that can be performed remotely can and should continue to move forward in remote settings. All researchers are encouraged to find ways to advance research agendas that do not require being on campus. This can include writing reviews, analyzing data, drafting manuscripts, and writing grants.
- Researchers should prioritize campus work to focus only on the most critical experiments and research activities, especially those that are required for a graduate student to make progress on their degree. While practicing social distancing, researchers should avoid performing high-risk procedures alone and should notify colleagues of their schedule when working alone for an extended period of time.
- Activities that require campus facilities and laboratories should ensure that social distancing is practiced, e.g., by creating shifts of two to three researchers to ensure the CDC-outlined distance of six feet between people is maintained.
• Research spaces should only be accessed by personnel who perform critical procedures, processes, or equipment management that require regular personnel attention to maintain laboratory viability (e.g. liquid nitrogen tank filling, animal support, maintaining shared computational equipment, etc.).
• No travel is allowed except in exceptional circumstances – see university guidance.

All faculty and staff should also immediately begin contingency planning to prepare for curtailing all but the most essential on-campus research and creative activities over a longer term. Two forms have been developed for use by lead researchers and/or lab managers: 1) Lab Shutdown Checklist – an optional checklist to assist you in preparing to shut down as well as in actually implementing a shut-down plan; 2) Research-Lab Continuity Request Form. All faculty/researchers who will need on campus access to their laboratories (e.g., in order to maintain critical research materials or care for animals), must submit the Research/Lab Continuity Request Form to the Associate Vice President of Research and Innovation (jennifer.waldron@uni.edu) no later than 5:00 on Thursday, March 26, 2020.

In general, these are some of the actions that should be performed by all researchers now in support of the current partial campus restrictions and in preparation for a possible complete shutdown.

• Update the research group or lab member contact list (e.g., name, title; location, office phone, email and cell phone number). Share the list with each lab member and building managers (if applicable). Keep hard copies as well as electronic versions of the list which are accessible from remote locations.
• If required on-campus functions depend on vendor supplies for ensuring research facility or lab safety (e.g. liquid nitrogen), please plan ahead appropriately to meet this need.
• Ensure that standard operating procedures and safety protocols are available in a visible location, that all safety procedures are being followed, and that individuals have been adequately trained. Dispose of hazardous waste in a timely fashion, especially if working with time-sensitive materials.
• Ensure that the research team, including the PI, has remote access to files, data and software systems, while maintaining data controls and security requirements.
• Begin backing up data on university servers if working remotely or planning to work remotely.
• Limit research to only those essential activities that are at a critical phase, meaning that abandoning them would cause a major or irreversible loss in project momentum.
• Any large experiments requiring multiple days and/or multiple people or instruments should be postponed, if at all possible.
• If carrying out a long-term experiment and if it is feasible to freeze or store samples at specific steps, consider doing this more often.
• Biohazards and other agents should be handled as dictated by approved protocols. If these materials need manipulation during any disruptions in operations, handle and/or dispose of them as protocols and SOPs dictate. Ensure that other high-risk materials are secured as well. If you have questions, contact Environmental Health and Safety.
• Every faculty or staff member responsible for animals should create a plan to manage animal experiments and ongoing care in case of decreased lab staffing or shortage of
supplies. Contact the Chair of the Animal Care and Use Committee David McClenahan at 319-273-2218 or email david.mclenahan@uni.edu with questions.

A few guidelines are offered below for those who are supervising undergraduate or graduate student research. Faculty Advisors should:

- Discuss with students the status of thesis and dissertation projects to determine whether they can be completed efficiently by reducing the scope or number of research activities, without sacrificing the scientific or scholarly contribution of the project.
- Assist students in moving their research into virtual settings and/or processes, and in prioritizing their work to essential research activities and experiments, especially to ensure student progress towards degree.
- Current general campus guidelines suggest that small numbers of individuals may meet when the work cannot be done virtually (e.g., meeting with a student to conduct an important experiment), provided they maintain a distance of six feet or more apart.
- Lab work should be prioritized to those undergraduate students who require it for graduation within the next academic year. Note that student employees are currently allowed (but not required) to continue working, if they maintain appropriate social distancing practices.
- Confer with students on possible scenarios for support if a thesis or dissertation project must be suspended on a timeline that extends the student’s graduation date.
- Bring studies that can be paused to the point at which they can be temporarily suspended, and curtail the launch of new research activities or experiments.
- Most meetings should be virtual, but also make time for meetings that advance the missions and maintain good communication networks within research groups.

Finally, there are restrictions that apply to working remotely which are enforced by federal, state and university regulation, policies and guidelines. In evaluating options for remote work, please note the following:

- Researchers are not allowed to set up an off-campus laboratory site without prior approval.
- Researchers are not allowed to take materials, equipment or other laboratory supplies – other than notebooks, laptops, data storage devices, or computers – offsite (e.g., to their homes) from their labs or workspaces.
- Under no circumstances are researchers allowed to transfer or transport Controlled Unclassified Information or other data that require a controlled environment. Ensure that such information is properly stored and secured.
- Under no circumstances is it appropriate to remove animals, plants or other materials from university research spaces.

GUIDANCE SPECIFIC TO HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH

Although RSP is temporarily closed and all staff are now working remotely, the IRB office and committee are operating as usual, and will continue to do so throughout the summer.
Researchers may continue to submit all IRB applications and modification requests by email, and if a protocol requires full board review, the committee will be convened virtually. If there are questions, please email the IRB Administrator at anita.gordon@uni.edu, which will be checked regularly both days and evenings. In addition, call the IRB Chair Todd Evans at 319-230-4458 or email todd.evans@uni.edu. As a back-up, contact Sean Parrish at sean.parrish@uni.edu.

To protect research participants, researchers, and the larger community from the risk of COVID-19, UNI is hereby restricting face-to-face interactions with research subjects. Instead, research interactions with human research subjects must be performed remotely, or postponed, unless the interaction is essential to ensure the health, safety, or well-being of the subject.

- If the health or safety of current study participants requires in-person interaction or you otherwise believe there is an urgent need to meet in person with a study participant(s), contact the IRB Administrator or IRB Chair for guidance.
- Enrollment of new participants in a clinical trial or other human subject-related research project should likewise occur only if: 1) participation in the research is essential to a participant’s health and/or well-being; or 2) the enrollment and participant interactions and interventions can be conducted remotely for the duration of the COVID-19 outbreak.
- If a study interview, focus group, or research site visit needs to be cancelled or postponed, participants should be informed of the reason and that they will be contacted again when the visit can be rescheduled. These messages to subjects do not require prior IRB approval.

Otherwise, please consider these alternatives to in-person interactions: a) Holding study visits or focus groups remotely using teleconferencing software (e.g. Zoom, Skype, etc.); or b) questionnaires, interviews, and similar procedures may be conducted online or via phone. Now may be a good time to request access and become familiarized with Qualtrics, the online survey platform which UNI subscribes to. Qualtrics is recommended because it is more secure and more robust than Google Forms, Survey Monkey, or other online survey software. More information about accessing and using Qualtrics is available on the Institutional Research & Effectiveness website, which is the office that manages the Qualtrics license. Or email megan.vogt-kostner@uni.edu.

Researchers must continue to obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to approved research. As in the past, this can be accomplished by emailing all study materials and procedural changes to the IRB Administrator at anita.gordon@uni.edu. Most modification requests are approved within a couple of days.

If your study is more than minimal risk, discuss possible remote consent approaches with the IRB Administrator or Chair. However, most UNI studies are minimal risk, and the IRB will often approve various methods for obtaining informed consent remotely. Here are some examples:

1. If you are conducting individual interviews by phone or teleconferencing software, you have at least two procedural options for obtaining virtual consent: a) read the consent information at the start of the interview, ask the participant if they would like to continue,
and then retain a recording or transcript of the recording as consent documentation for 3 years (the standard requirement for retaining consent forms); or b) send the consent information to the participant in the body of an email, and request a reply as to whether or not they would like to proceed with scheduling. In the latter case, you must save the email as a file in your study records, and the saved file must include the header information as shown in the reply email (From and To email addresses, date/time, etc.)

2. If you are conducting focus groups online, you will probably want to read the consent information at the start of the meeting, and then you must retain the recording or transcript of the reading and participant responses (either accepting or declining, depending on your instructions).

3. If you are doing online survey/questionnaire data collection, the best option is usually to invite participation by email (or by SONA, MTurk, etc. when applicable) then seek consent after participants click the survey link. In this case, the consent language is shown as the first page of the survey, or at the top of the first survey page, and completing the survey thus indicates consent. Alternatively, the IRB will approve including all of the consent information in the invitational email. All of the consent information, however, must be in one place (in the email or at the start of the survey), not split between the two.

Study personnel may and should work remotely on human subjects research projects, but privacy and confidentiality of research subjects must be protected, as well as the security of the data. Investigators should develop protocols and train study personnel on methods of maintaining security, and protecting privacy and confidentiality during remote work. Advance preparation, such as removing identifiers from data sets and establishing remote access to university computers is also advised.

If an external IRB is providing oversight for the research project, be sure that the external IRB is contacted to determine whether/how to report the restrictions on face-to-face study procedures, and whether/how to modify an approved study to allow remote procedures.

We gratefully acknowledge the work of our colleagues at the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, UC Berkeley, and U Michigan, from whom we have adapted our guidance and forms.