

# **RESUMING RESEARCH OPERATIONS THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN**

# PHASED APPROACH TO RESUMING RESEARCH OPERATIONS

## PREFACE AND SCOPE

This document was created by the Research Restart Working Group in coordination with the associate deans for research for each college, school, or unit (CSU) and UT Core Facilities Directors, with further consultation with representatives from Environmental Health and Safety (EHS), the Office of Research Support and Compliance (ORSC), and UT Libraries. In crafting these principles for resuming research activity at The University of Texas at Austin, we drew from similar documents created by peer institutions, the AAMC, and the AAU. By supporting the phased resumption of on-campus research, we hope to achieve the university's core mission of transforming lives for the benefit of society.

- **In Scope:** This plan provides a phased approach to manage access to research laboratories, shared facilities for animal research, and shared-use (core) research facilities (including computational facilities). The plan is also intended to manage research activity in the arts, humanities, and social sciences as well as libraries, archives, and collections. Additional research spaces covered by this plan include the J.J. Pickle Research Campus in north Austin; the UT Marine Science Institute in Port Aransas; the McDonald Observatory; and other UT research stations and field sites.
- **Out of Scope:** The following spaces/activities are out of scope for this plan:
  - Studio and performance spaces, including film and editing labs and architecture studios (these are covered by the Academics Working Group)
  - Undergraduate experiential learning laboratories, including the Freshman Research Initiative (these are covered by the Academics Working Group)
  - Administrative office spaces for research support/administration operations (these are covered by the Operations Working Group)

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- **Principle 1.** Follow public health policies from governing authorities.
- **Principle 2.** Resume research operations in alignment with the executive UT campus response to COVID-19.
- **Principle 3.** Protect the emotional and physical health and safety of our clinical and human research subjects, as well as the UT research workforce.
- **Principle 4.** A CSU may request approval from the Executive Vice President and Provost, in consultation with the Vice President for Research, to enforce stricter policies; the policies here represent the minimum level of compliance.
- **Principle 5.** CSUs with ethical and legal requirements, as well as policies imposed by the sponsors of funded research.
- **Principle 6.** Comply with ethical and legal requirements, as well as policies imposed by the sponsors of funded research.
- **Principle 7.** Protect the careers of early stage researchers.
- **Principle 8.** Ensure as rapid a research restart as public health and logistical conditions permit, while remaining agile in anticipation of a resurgence of COVID-19.

**Overarching Goal:** To keep everyone safe, while increasing research activity in a phased approach as safety becomes easier to maintain.

### **Principle 1. Follow public health policies from governing authorities.**

- Our top priority is safety, for UT researchers, staff, students, and the surrounding community. Our goal is that the repopulation of our research spaces does not contribute to a resurgence of COVID-19 infection that threatens local residents or impairs the progress of important research. Therefore, the duration of research phases outlined in this research restart plan, as well as transition between research phases, will be guided by State of Texas and influenced by the City of Austin/Travis County and national/U.S. public health authority directives.
- Increases in research activity/personnel density in the research phases of this plan will be tied to the prevalence of COVID-19 infections in Austin and the surrounding areas, ongoing measures to re-open Texas, as well as the availability of (1) testing, (2) therapeutics or a vaccine, and (3) personal protective equipment (PPE) for both COVID-19 protection and for research.
- Decisions made in this restart plan are approached from a viewpoint of risk management. Researchers must understand that until the population has acquired significant immunity naturally or a vaccine is developed and deployed widely, any reengagement that brings them into proximity with other researchers increases the possibility of coronavirus transmission. Researchers should evaluate this risk against the potential benefit of their planned research activities.

**Principle 2. Resume research operations in alignment with the executive UT campus response to COVID-19.**

- The UT campus response to COVID-19 is multifaceted, requiring close coordination among academic, research, student life, health, athletics, and business units. Research restart plans will align with these broader campus plans.
- Research-related activity such as travel, hosting conferences, or visiting researcher exchanges will be subject to the general COVID-19 policies put in place by UT for similar activities in non-research domains.
- A widespread return of undergraduate researchers to campus laboratories will not occur until the university executive leadership has permitted undergraduates to return to campus for their primary academic activities.

**Principle 3. Protect the emotional and physical health and safety of our clinical and human research subjects, as well as the UT research workforce.**

- Health considerations in this context include not only possible infection with COVID-19 but also mental health and laboratory safety.
- Any individual who feels that they are being asked to carry out unsafe activities or to work under conditions that are unsafe for themselves and others should discuss their concerns with their immediate supervisor or, if necessary and appropriate, with their unit head or the [UT Ombuds Office](#).
- Safety within laboratories must be rigorously maintained, with adequate access to lab-required PPE and other safety related supplies.
- Until immunity is established, research activity that can be conducted remotely should be.
- Research participants who are not part of the UT research workforce, including Lab Access Visitors, industrial affiliate users, and human subjects study participants, may return to campus to engage in research only after the university executive leadership deems it appropriate.

**Principle 4. A CSU may request approval from the Executive Vice President and Provost, in consultation with the Vice President for Research, to enforce stricter policies; the policies here represent the minimum level of compliance.**

**Principle 5. CSUs will implement a fair and transparent process for granting access to research spaces.**

- The conditions and priorities for granting access will be collaborative and public, with approval processes documented. CSU leadership will communicate their approval processes and criteria to their PIs.
- Access to research spaces and priority for access will be governed by the Deans/Associate Deans for Research of the CSUs that control the space in question.
- Transitions between research phases of this plan will be communicated to the campus by the Office of the Vice President for Research, after obtaining approval from the the university executive leadership.

**Principle 6. Comply with ethical and legal requirements, as well as policies imposed by the sponsors of funded research.**

- The research enterprise is highly regulated and constrained by the requirements for safe, legal, and ethical conduct. Research conduct must follow these requirements even under the current circumstances. Similarly, research sponsored by external funders must follow the terms and conditions that accompany those funds, including special policies issued in response to COVID-19.

**Principle 7. Protect the careers of early stage researchers.**

- To the extent that it is possible under the State public health authority directives, as access restrictions are relaxed, priority to return to research spaces should be given to those researchers who cannot work remotely and are under time constraints to complete degrees, to conduct work linked to time-sensitive funding (e.g., a postdoctoral fellowship), or for tenure and other career reviews.

**Principle 8. Ensure as rapid a research restart as public health and logistical conditions permit, while remaining agile in anticipation of a resurgence of COVID-19.**

- Because State public health directives are subject to revision at any time due to the many outstanding questions surrounding COVID-19 transmission and infection, researchers should anticipate the possibility of returning to more restricted research phases, should COVID-19 infections rise again.
- Along with public health conditions, key logistical issues (e.g., supply chain/delivery, animal breeding) will constrain the pace at which we can move through the research phases of this plan.
- Under no circumstances should safety be sacrificed due to lack of adequate supplies, such as the type and quality of PPE.
- Flexible work schedules are encouraged but must not be used to circumvent overall lab occupancy/workforce number policies established for each research phase and must not be implemented at the expense of laboratory safety.
- The policies for workforce number established for each research phase have been set with the goal of minimizing building density as a whole. Workforce numbers may seem low for individual labs/spaces, but they significantly impact building-scale population. Even an incremental increase in activity, when implemented across many labs, will result in several hundred new people working in research buildings, resulting in a dramatic increase in density – not only in labs but also in hallways, elevators, equipment rooms, and other shared spaces.

## PHASED APPROACH TO RESEARCH RESTART

### Key Terms:

- **Workforce Number** refers to the number of unique individual researchers (faculty, graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and staff) performing research on-site at UT. This number is expressed in terms of percent relative to normal, full-scale workforce operations.
- **Field Research** is defined here as research performed off-site, on non-UT property, without engagement of human subjects. Social sciences and humanities research that involves interacting with human subjects off-site (e.g., ethnographies, focus groups, classroom or home observations) is included under Human Subjects bullets in the table.
- **Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences** research criteria defined here apply to art research and to humanities and social sciences research that do not involve face-to-face interaction with human subjects. Performance arts guidelines are not covered under Research Restart. Humanities and social sciences research that involves face-to-face interaction with human subjects is included under Human Subjects bullets in the table.
- **Human Subjects** research criteria defined here apply to face-to-face interaction with study subjects. Any human subjects research that can be done 100% virtually may be continued through all research phases, with IRB approval.

**Required Policies for Symptom Monitoring and Social Distancing:** During Research Phases 1-5 (defined below), occupancy of research spaces should be limited to those necessary to safely conduct the research. Social distancing may require significant revision of normal procedures. These policies must be followed to safely resume research on campus:

- Take your temperature before coming to campus. If your temperature is at or above 99.6 degrees Fahrenheit, stay home.
- If you have [symptoms consistent with a COVID-19 infection](#) or receive a positive COVID-19 test result, stay home. Call a doctor or UT CARES at 1-833-UT-CARES. Inform your supervisor as soon as possible.
- If you or someone in your lab or office tests positive for COVID-19, contact [UT Occupational Health](#) and provide the sign-in records for your research space for contact tracing purposes.
- All students, staff, and faculty must wear a face covering at all times when inside university research spaces, except when working or eating/drinking alone in a single-occupancy office. Note, however, that personal face coverings do not replace appropriate PPE that may be called for in laboratory standard operating procedures, particularly for work involving bio-hazards, chemical hazards, or animals.
- Stay at least 6 feet (about 2 arms' length) from other people.
- No more than one individual per 200 sq. ft. of laboratory or office space.
- Offices smaller than 300 sq. ft. should be considered single occupancy.
- Contact tracing logs should be maintained for all research spaces, with names and times of entry and exit.

- PIs may use shift work as a way to increase social distancing among their researchers, but they must adhere to the following overarching policies:
  - Labs cannot operate 24/7. Labs must be closed from 10 p.m. – 6 a.m. daily to allow custodial services to work uninterrupted. All researchers must vacate both labs and offices during these hours.
  - The sum of researchers working across all shifts cannot exceed the target Workforce Number for a given Research Phase. For instance, the target Workforce Number during Research Phase 3 is 30%–40% of the total research workforce. College/school leadership may adjust these percentages further for individual PIs in order to balance Workforce Number across the entire college/school portfolio.
- Time must be built into work schedules to allow researchers to disinfect high-touch surfaces in the research space before, during, and after their work shifts

### **Suggested Best Practices for Resuming On-Campus Research Safely:**

- Continue remote work to the extent possible for activities such as literature review, data analysis, and writing.
- Continue to meet remotely even for meetings with only two (2) people.
- Create and post a scheduling calendar, including names and contact information, so that everyone will know who is present in the lab or core facility at any given time
- The UT Health and Wellness Working Group recommends splitting workers into two cohorts that work on rotating, two-week schedules. Cohort A works on site for 14 days, then works from home for 14 days while Cohort B works on site. This 14-day remote work period slows the spread of the virus by enabling each cohort to self-isolate while monitoring themselves for COVID-19 symptoms.
  - Again, the total number of unique individuals on site in both cohorts (A+B) cannot exceed the Workforce Number defined for each Research Phase.
- For more information about policies and best practices for resuming research safely on campus, please refer to the [PL Research Restart Toolkit](#).

The Phased Approach Table below represents the policies and practices for resuming on-campus research activities based on our current knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic as of the date of issue. University executive leadership will continually reassess conditions on campus and in our community, which may result in changes to the policies and research activities permitted in each Research Phase. For future Research Phases, in particular, individuals can use the information about permitted research activities provided in the Table to anticipate how on-campus research activity might change over time. As more becomes known about COVID-19, and as we gain experience with increased on-campus activity during the pandemic, the details of permitted activities may evolve over time. We will communicate changes in policy in a timely fashion to allow researchers to plan accordingly.

<b>Research Phase</b> (Workforce Number)	<b>Practice Good Hygiene</b>	<b>Maintain Social Distancing</b>	<b>Wear Face Coverings</b>	<b>Permitted Research Activities</b>
<b>Research Phase 5</b> (5-15%)	<b>Stay Home If Sick</b>			<p><b>Only maintenance of critical equipment, samples, and/or animal colonies is permitted</b></p> <p>Authorization for critical research activities is handled through the Office of Vice President for Research</p> <p><b>Research facilities and field stations are closed</b>, except where personnel are required to protect life, safety, and critical research infrastructure/capability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimum staffing</li> <li>• COVID-19 research permitted, but only for those activities with a deployment timeline that can impact the current pandemic</li> <li>• Authorization for one-time access to offices to pick up books and materials, shut down instrumentation, or perform other essential shut-down activities may be permitted by Deans</li> <li>• <b>Research Offices:</b> Researchers not permitted in research offices unless exempted as essential personnel; All shared research offices should be maintained as single occupancy using a schedule</li> </ul>
<b>Research Phase 4</b> (15-30%)				<p><b>On-campus access to maintain essential research capability or prevent catastrophic disruption is permitted</b></p> <p>Essential research activity exempted via an approval process in Office of Vice President for Research</p> <p><b>Research access limited to social-distanced, essential personnel required for permitted research activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essential research activity for which a delay will catastrophically disrupt the project or protocol</li> <li>• COVID-19-related rapid response activities (e.g., development of testing, manufacturing of ventilators, epidemiological modeling)</li> <li>• <b>Research Offices:</b> Only essential personnel permitted in research offices; Research offices should be maintained as single occupancy using a schedule to ensure social distancing</li> <li>• <b>Core Facilities:</b> Prioritize cores that support COVID-19 research, e.g., Animal Resources Center (ARC), Center for Biomedical Research Support (CBRS), Texas Materials Institute (TMI)</li> </ul>

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Field Research:</b> Prioritize seasonal data collection or experiments close to completion for which cessation will lead to catastrophic loss of research results; No overnight trips permitted for data collection</li> <li>• <b>Libraries:</b> Libraries, archives, and collections providing remote services only; no researchers permitted on site</li> <li>• <b>Arts, Humanities &amp; Social Sciences:</b> Only remote interviews, remote data collection, and analysis permitted</li> <li>• <b>Human Subjects:</b> All face-to-face human subjects research is paused, with the exception of subjects needing medication for clinical treatment with such exceptions approved case-by-case; No new enrollment in clinical trials*</li> </ul> <p><b>Preparations to enter Phase 3:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Necessary core facilities are staffed and operational</li> <li>• Labs are able to purchase necessary supplies</li> <li>• Social distancing, face covering, symptom and attendance logging are in place, cleaning measures understood and in place</li> </ul>
<p><b>Research Phase 3</b> (30-40%)</p>	•	•	•	<p><b>Permitted research activity relaxed to include time-sensitive research</b></p> <p>All research that can be done remotely should continue to be done remotely</p> <p>Research restart approval process administered by CSU in coordination with Core Facilities Directors</p> <p><b>Time-sensitive research priorities may include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seasonal data collection such as field research or experiments close to completion</li> <li>• Access for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows close to completing their degree/term of appointment, including visiting graduate students/postdoctoral fellows with formal visiting agreements on file</li> <li>• Sponsored projects with grant end dates within 3 months, for which the funding agency has not granted leniency</li> <li>• <b>Research Offices:</b> Access to single-occupancy offices allowed for those with research approvals on file; Shared offices must follow social distancing guidelines or maintain a single-occupancy schedule if social distancing cannot be maintained</li> <li>• <b>Animal Research:</b> Prioritize animal experiments for which cessation will result in euthanasia or loss of a colony as well as studies for which additional data can be obtained by studying animals already present in animal facilities; Limited amount of breeding and new animal orders processed; Breeding and orders allowed only for animal experiments that require short-term housing (3-4 weeks); Procedures performed must minimize the need for prolonged face-to-face personnel interactions</li> <li>• <b>Core Facilities:</b> Restart facilities where work cannot be done remotely, with additional sanitization and distancing measures in place for common/shared equipment; Core facilities restricted to UT employees and previously approved, long-term visiting researchers; No human subjects research allowed in core facilities</li> <li>• <b>Field Research:</b> Expand approvals based on current travel restrictions; Overnight trips may be considered under prevailing UT travel policy</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Libraries:</b> Plan for expanded on-campus libraries research services (e.g., paging services for trainees nearing degree completion or term of employment); Books and other materials may be picked up on limited basis by pre-arranged appointment only; Plan for limited access to archives and special collections in coordination with library staff, with priority for researchers with deadlines for tenure, degree completion, etc.</li> <li>• <b>Arts, Humanities &amp; Social Sciences:</b> Prioritize researchers with imminent deadlines (e.g., tenure, degree completion) for access to rare books/materials on a limited basis; Restart social sciences labs and data enclaves where work cannot be done remotely, with additional sanitization and distancing measures in place for common/shared equipment</li> <li>• <b>Human Subjects:</b> UT researchers permitted on campus, but not research study participants; No new enrollment in clinical trials*</li> </ul> <p><b>Preparations to enter Research Phase 2:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Core campus functions are staffed and operational to handle increased load (e.g., ARC, EHS, Facilities)</li> <li>• More core facilities are staffed and operational</li> <li>• Labs are able to operate with necessary lab safety supplies</li> <li>• Social distancing, face covering, symptom and attendance logging are in place, cleaning measures understood and in place</li> <li>• <b>Plans for sudden return to Research Phase 4 in place</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Research Phase 2</b> (40-60%)</p>	●	●	<p><b>Gradually expand the number of researchers on campus while maintaining social distancing</b></p> <p>All research that can be done remotely should continue to be done remotely</p> <p>Research restart approval process administered by CSU in coordination with Core Facilities Directors</p> <p><b>Broader group of research activities permitted (i.e., beyond time-sensitive projects) within the established workforce limits for this phase:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Research Offices:</b> Access to single-occupancy offices allowed for those with research approvals on file; Shared offices must follow social distancing guidelines or maintain a single-occupancy schedule if social distancing cannot be maintained</li> <li>• <b>Animal Research:</b> Expand approvals to include more complex short-term studies and longer term studies that do not involve invasive procedures; Allow additional breeding/acquisitions as researchers prepare to transition to the next research phase</li> <li>• <b>Core Facilities:</b> Access permitted for external users with attendance logs maintained by cores; Expand user access on case-by-case basis depending on local user demand and ability to sanitize equipment between users</li> <li>• <b>Field Research:</b> Expand on a case-by-case basis depending on local conditions/ restrictions at field sites, travel restrictions, ability to travel safely and ability to social distance at field sites</li> </ul>

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Libraries:</b> Allow limited access to physical library materials paged via UT Libraries Pick It Up service for pickup at PCL; Access to archives and special collections by appointment and only when following social distancing protocols; Limited public services and computer lab use in PCL entry level only</li> <li>• <b>Arts, Humanities &amp; Social Sciences:</b> Expand user access to social sciences labs and data enclaves on a case-by-case basis depending on local user demand and ability to disinfect equipment between users</li> <li>• <b>Human Subjects:</b> Allow research involving human subjects already on campus (e.g., UT students or staff) and deemed low-risk for developing serious COVID-19 infection per CDC guidelines; research must proceed with only minimal direct contact and while maintaining social distancing; New clinical trial enrollment will be limited to studies that do not require visits or procedures that place the enrollee at increased risk of COVID-19 exposure beyond typical activity in the community; This risk assessment will require administrative approval by the Office of Research Support and Compliance, with consultation by the IRB as needed, and the ADR of the CSU</li> </ul>
<p><b>Research Phase 1</b> (60-85%)</p>	•	•	•	<p><b>Continued expansion of the number of researchers on campus while maintaining social distancing</b></p> <p>Research restart approval process administered by CSU in coordination with Core Facilities Directors</p> <p><b>Broader group of research activities permitted within the established workforce limits and social distancing limits for this phase:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Research Offices:</b> Access to offices allowed generally, with attention to social distancing and cleaning</li> <li>• <b>Animal Research:</b> Expand access further on a case-by-case basis depending upon availability of PPE and ARC support while following requirements to limit personnel approved for building access</li> <li>• <b>Core Facilities:</b> Further expand access on a case-by-case basis</li> <li>• <b>Field Research:</b> Further expand on a case-by-case basis depending on local conditions/restrictions at field sites, travel restrictions, ability to travel safely and ability to social distance at field sites</li> <li>• <b>Libraries:</b> Expand access to libraries, archives and collections, provided that social distancing and sanitizing of materials touched by users can be sustained</li> <li>• <b>Arts, Humanities &amp; Social Sciences:</b> Further expand access to social sciences labs and data enclaves on a case-by-case basis.</li> <li>• <b>Human Subjects:</b> Expand on-campus research involving human subjects with minimal-to-moderate direct contact; Allow off-campus human subjects research, including school or home observations, ethnography, focus groups, involving populations deemed to be low-risk for developing serious COVID-19 infection per CDC guidelines (such research will require support letters from off-campus research sites and must follow UT policies for travel); New enrollment in clinical trials allowed</li> </ul>

<b>Research Phase 0</b> (100%)	●			<b>Resume normal, full-capacity research operations, including open core facilities, libraries/archives/collections, field research and human subjects research with direct contact</b>
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\*No new enrollment in clinical trials allowed except for IRB-approved COVID-19 clinical trials