

Report of the Research and Scholarship Continuity Task Force University at Albany

Executive Summary

This report, prepared by the *Research and Scholarship Continuity Task Force* convened by the Vice President for Research, provides guidance for safe reopening of laboratories, studios, and the facilities that were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential to follow the plan outlined here for the health and safety of UAlbany’s faculty, staff, and students engaged in the performance of research, scholarship, and creative activity.

Research and scholarly activities at UAlbany, an R1 institution, are top priorities and are considered *essential*. Continuity of research is important for timely graduation of students, tenure and promotion of junior faculty, extramural grants, professional recognition of UAlbany researchers/scholars, and raising and retaining national and international rankings.

Principal investigators, project leaders, and faculty supervisors have the authority and responsibility to safely restart scholarly activities in a manner and at a pace they deem proper when “New York on Pause” is relaxed in the Capital District Region. They are responsible for informing their team members about applicable Federal, State, SUNY, and UAlbany directives and implementation of the recommendations herein. Additional guidance will be provided by the UAlbany COVID-19 Task Force and the Division for Research.

All necessary measures to protect the health, safety, and well-being of faculty, staff and students are intrinsic to these recommendations which are aligned with the standards set by the Federal government, NY State, SUNY, and UAlbany. The guidelines for resumption of research operations require proper health screening, social distancing, use of appropriate protective gear, adherence to guidance from the Office of Environmental Health and Safety, and use of the General Laboratory Checklist for Restarting Research Activities to inspect and test various equipment and tools for proper functioning prior to resuming research. Researchers are encouraged to conduct as much of their research activities remotely as can be done while staying off campus.

Report Outline

1. Research and Scholarship Continuity Task Force	2
2. Guiding Assumptions	3
3. Personnel Protection	4
4. Laboratory/Studio Planning and Preparation	5
5. Building, Facilities, and Services	6
6. Noncompliance	7

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Guiding Assumptions

1. UAlbany's plan to restart research and scholarship activities will be aligned and comply with directives and guidance from the Federal government, NY State, SUNY, and UAlbany administration. Personnel participating in research and scholarship activities requiring on-campus presence will be able to return to their laboratories, workshops, studios, library, offices, and other facilities when it is safe.
2. Conduct of research is *essential* for:
 - a. timely graduation of graduate students, training and professional career of postdoctoral scholars, and tenure and promotion of faculty,
 - b. meeting project goals, conducting pilot studies, dissemination of results, grant renewals, new grants, and professional recognition of our researchers/scholars,
 - c. raising and retaining national and international rankings, for example: Carnegie classification, NSF Higher Education Research and Development survey, US News and World Report, and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, and
 - d. excellence in research and scholarship that plays a very important role in recruitment and retention of high-caliber students, staff, and faculty.

Therefore, research and scholarship activities will be permitted during disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic with full compliance with all guidelines in this document.

3. Research project leaders (or principal investigators) are well trained and responsible professionals. They can be trusted to self-comply and ensure full compliance of project personnel with all applicable rules, regulations, and procedures in this document and recommended for the safety and well-being of all project personnel.
4. Participation in research activities during the disruption is voluntary. No individual should feel coerced to participate in research. There will be no fear of retaliation or reprisals against those who choose not to participate in research under partial shutdowns. An individual sensing coercion to work during partial shutdown should bring this to the attention of his or her department chair or designated point of contact (POC). Individuals working with a department chair should bring this to the attention of the designated POC (if not the chair) or the college/school dean.
5. Many undergraduate students may not be present on campus during COVID-19 related disruptions. As a result, they are not expected to participate in research/scholarly activities. They may continue research activities remotely or when the UAlbany campus returns to normal and is fully operational.

If a student's graduation will be unduly delayed because of the disruption, an exception may be granted upon written recommendation of the student's advisor, when the student is willing and able to participate in research.
6. Laboratory leaders will follow the guidance from the Office of Environmental Health and Safety and use the [General Laboratory Checklist for Restarting Research Activities](#) to inspect and test various equipment and tools for proper functioning before resuming research.

Personnel Protection

The following *general* guidelines must be followed in the conduct of on-campus research/scholarship. Principal investigators (PIs) have the responsibility of informing all individuals working in their group about these guidelines. PIs also have the discretion to give additional guidance specific to the nature of research/scholarship and operations of their laboratories.

1. *Symptoms Monitoring*

UAlbany employees will follow the self-monitor protocol based on the standard [CDC Protocol](#), including monitoring of body temperature before beginning work. Body temperature may be taken before leaving home or upon arrival at the worksite. Non-contact IR thermometers should be used to take body temperature. Thermometers may be provided by the Environmental Health and Safety office.

Any individual with a temperature exceeding 100 °F and with one or more of the other COVID-19 symptoms (loss of taste and smell, cough, skin rash, difficulty breathing, confusion, unexplained bleeding, diarrhea, headache, stiff neck, etc.) should not report for work and should seek medical care. CDC recommended apps may be used to self-identify other symptoms and follow CDC recommendations.

If anyone develops COVID-19 symptoms, that person should seek medical attention and notify the UAlbany Human Resources Reporting Hotline at (518) 442-1501.

2. *Social Distancing and Use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)*

UAlbany employees should observe social distancing of at least 6 feet when possible. When social distancing is not possible, appropriate mask and eye protection or face shields should be used. Protective gear may be removed behind closed doors in private spaces. If two or more people are in the same air space and likely to come closer than 6 feet, protective gear shall be worn.

Cloth face masks can become saturated with respiratory secretions and must be changed and laundered frequently. The use of vented masks, e.g., N95 respirators with an exhalation port, is not recommended as they release unfiltered exhalation and might emit viral droplets into the air. Any researcher required to wear such a respirator should have medical clearance to wear the respirator, and undergo fit testing and training compliant with OSHA Standard for Respiratory Protection Standards.

Principal investigators/scholars have the discretion to give further guidance specific to the operations of his/her laboratory/studio.

Individuals, while observing proper social distancing, should spend as little time as possible in common use areas such as offices, eating areas (kitchens), conference rooms, restrooms, elevators, etc.

3. *Handwashing and use of gloves*

When work conditions within the lab require frequent touching of surfaces or objects, protective gloves must be worn at all times. Gloves should not be worn outside the lab, as they may spread contamination. Frequent hand washing or use of sanitizers is strongly recommended, especially when entering and exiting the lab.

4. *Observe the Buddy System*

An individual should not work alone in the laboratory. Make sure that someone else in your lab/group is able to observe you at all times. If you are in a small space where only one person can be present,

make arrangements with another group member who is able to periodically check up on you and ensure your safety.

5. Off-Campus Research

All UAlbany personnel engaged in off-campus research at another institution (e.g., national and corporate laboratories, universities, etc.) must fully comply with the institution's guidelines for safe conduct of research. It is strongly advised that the lead PI become familiar with the COVID-19 related requirements at the destination.

6. Field Research

When conducting field research in public spaces, federal land, national and state parks, or private property, all reasonable precautions must be taken to ensure the health and physical safety of individuals engaged in research and those in proximity. All individuals should follow the basic guidelines as outlined here and those recommended by the on-site project leader and facility administrator.

7. Lab visitors

Lab visitation should be discouraged or at least minimized. Visitors must observe all safety precautions and wear safety gear as regular researchers would.

8. Research Travel

Before deciding to embark upon research travel, one should review the latest guidance from [CDC](#), the [NY Department of Health](#), and the [US Department of State](#) if traveling internationally. Research travel is also subject to [Fiscal Controls](#) and will need to be approved by UAlbany's Controller's office.

Laboratory/Studio Planning and Preparation

1. Each laboratory's schedule, all users' names and contact information, and the laboratory leader's name and emergency contact information should be posted near the lab entrance. An electronic or physical logbook, to record when any researcher enters and exits the laboratory, must be maintained to assist in contact-tracing if needed.
2. Entrances to the building and doors to common-use areas, such as restrooms, should be capable of hands-free operation.
3. To maintain recommended social distancing, laboratory leaders should review the space available and the number of individuals who will be present at different times of the day. As a rule of thumb, each person should have at least 200 *square feet* of floor space. There should be not more than two researchers per bench or one person per hood.
4. When apparent that proper social distancing is difficult to maintain, alternative strategies should be considered:
 - a. Allowing some research related activities (e.g. data analysis) to be performed in one's office or at a remote location whenever possible.
 - b. Using time-staggered scheduling of individuals' presence in laboratory.
 - c. Use of masks, face shields, and PPE should be encouraged. However, their use might be limited by the specific experiment being performed. So, each laboratory will develop practical guidelines for the use of protective gear.

- d. Special attention should be paid to graduate student offices where it may be difficult to socially distance from each other. Student advisors should initiate an effort to find additional office space (in unused conference and classrooms) or develop a time-staggered occupancy schedule for them.

The laboratory schedule and any cautionary signs should be posted at the lab entrance and communicated to all members of the laboratory.

5. All surfaces in the laboratory should be wiped using [EPA approved](#) disinfectant for the COVID-19 virus. These include tables, desktops, computer keyboards, mice, knobs, and handles, etc. Fresh solutions of unexpired bleach prepared in accordance with the [CDC recommendations](#) or 70% isopropyl alcohol solutions should be used at least twice each day and when deemed necessary. The responsibility of sanitizing falls on the laboratory users and leaders, as custodial service personnel do not normally enter labs.
6. At the time of reopening the lab after the disruption, the PI or his or her designee should inspect for safety and proper functioning of equipment using UAlbany's [Environmental Health and Safety checklist](#). It is highly recommended that project members (or a designated member) do a periodic walkthrough of the lab to make sure that all equipment is functioning properly. Equipment needing attention includes, but is not limited to, electrical cords, water baths, cryogenic systems, equipment cooling/heating water circulators and hoses, refrigerators and freezers, vacuum pumps, fume hoods, etc.
7. Handwashing stations with soap, water, and paper towels should be maintained in each lab. Staff should be instructed upon entering or exiting the lab to wash their hands.

Buildings, Facilities, and Services

1. *Functional and Fully Serviced Buildings*

It is imperative that all campus buildings which house laboratories/studios operate *normally*. Services such as heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems circulating healthy air (with HEPA filters), hot and cold water, vacuum and pressurized air lines (where equipped), delivery of supplies, equipment repairs, etc. should all be operational. These are essential for the conduct of research and maintenance of healthy environments for researchers.

2. *Core Facilities*

Core facilities should be operational and develop scheduling and social distancing procedures. Guidelines for using core facilities should be clearly posted, and all single occupancy spaces should be clearly marked.

3. *Infrastructure and Research Operations*

Infrastructure and services essential for research, such as fume hoods, instrumentation maintenance and repairs, computers and network services, cell lines, animal health, etc. will remain operational at an optimum level.

4. *Division for Research*

a. Sponsored Programs Services

Sponsored Programs Administrative services will remain open and accessible to assist research teams in the submission of grant applications, progress reports, and acquisition of supplies and equipment.

b. RF-Human Resources

RF-HR will remain open and accessible to assist research teams in the hiring, benefit services, employee relations, payroll, retirement and other human resources related services.

c. Research Compliance and Lab Animal Facilities

Human subjects protections (IRB), use of animal in research or teaching (IACUC), lab animal facilities: The Office of Regulatory and Research Compliance will remain open and staff will be available for consultation and guidance regarding making submissions and virtual data collection methods (in lieu of traditional face-to-face interviews) and protection of research data. The Laboratory Animal Resources staff are considered essential employees, and they provide animal care daily. Animal labs have ample room and traditionally use PPE. The Laboratory Animal Research facility already has a disaster plan into which COVID-19 relevant information has been incorporated.

5. *Mail and Package Delivery*

Arrangements should be made for safe delivery of mail and packages that may contain needed supplies, parts, or equipment for laboratories/studios. This could include delayed delivery/pickup and disinfecting the item(s) being delivered. Contact the University's Biosafety Officer for the protocol.

6. *Sanitation and Disinfection*

Sanitizer stations will be installed in all buildings near restrooms and entrances. These will be regularly refilled. Masks, thermometers, gloves, protective goggles, and disinfectants may not be chargeable to extramural grants. UAlbany should procure such supplies and make them available to researchers who normally do not use them in the conduct of research.

7. *Shared Use Areas*

Caution must be exercised in shared areas such as conference rooms, eating areas, restrooms, elevators, and mail and package delivery rooms. It is highly recommended that all surfaces be wiped with disinfectants before and after use. One must maintain appropriate social distancing and use personal protection gear in such common-use areas.

8. *Personnel Protective Devices*

In order to facilitate easier access to PPE during this time of COVID-19, the [CAS Tech Scientific Store](#) will stock a limited range of PPE. PI's and departments may use account transfers from their research and state accounts to obtain PPE at the store. For projects that normally require their use, such costs may be charged to extramural grants.

Noncompliance

All individuals engaged in on-campus research must comply with all federal, NY state, SUNY, and UAlbany guidelines and directives. In the case of conflicting directives from different agencies, one should comply with the most restrictive policy.

It is in everyone's interest to observe people in your surroundings for compliance. All should adopt the "see something, say something" practice. The first violation of any safety rule(s) should be pointed out to the individual in violation. S/he should be apprised of the correct applicable policy. Subsequent violations should be brought to the attention of the individual's supervisor who may choose to report it to Human Resources if and when appropriate.