TO: All Project Investigators and UTEP Researchers

FROM: Roberto Osegueda, VP for Research

DATE: March 18, 2020

RE: General Guidance from Office of Research and Sponsored Projects Regarding ongoing Research and Sponsored Project Activities.

The University of Texas System Chancellor announced yesterday that starting immediately all instruction will be provided online for the rest of the Spring 2020 Semester. At the same time, there was recognition that the research enterprise of the university will require a customized response, and each institution was granted discretion to determine if research work will continue and to what extent.

Consistent with funding agencies and CDC’s guidelines, UTEP’s Office of Research and Sponsored Projects recognizes that each research and sponsored project is unique and involves a different level of complexity and challenges brought on by the COVID-19 virus situation. In this document we provide guidelines for goals and standards, but we know that only the Principal Investigators (PIs) have the knowledge and understanding of how best to apply these guidelines to their individual projects. As a result, the continuation of research work at UTEP should be determined on a case-by-case basis, with an initial determination made by each PI considering the unique operational settings.

***The primary objective in all cases is to ensure the health, welfare, and safety of students, faculty, and staff as well as the community, and to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Continuation of research is an important, but secondary objective. These guidelines are subject to change as the situation evolves.***

**May/Should you continue UTEP associated research activities?**

* PIs may elect to continue their research activities, including work in their on campus research laboratories, if they adhere to this guidance and to any stricter guidance from their college, school, center, or facility. PIs have the discretion to pause all or part of operations in their labs or on their projects, if they feel that this is in the best interests of their laboratory/research team to avoid any health risks that may be posed by the COVID19 virus.
* The guidelines presented here apply if you choose to modify and continue your operations.

**General Guidelines:**

* All activities MUST at least meet the current standards for social distancing and other guidelines by CDC and other government agencies.
* All laboratories must have a sign-in, sign-out sheet in the laboratory. Everyone entering or leaving must put a legible name, contact phone number, and a time and date of entry and exit onto this sheet. These records will be kept in the lab and made available to EH&S personnel as needed.
* All lab personnel using facilities should **clean** all contact surfaces when they first enter a laboratory and before they exit the laboratory using the environmental cleaning and disinfection recommendations posted by [CDC (link).](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/cleaning-disinfection.html)  Colleges, Schools, Centers, and Facilities may provide additional guidance. University personnel from EH&S will be available to assist in securing cleaning solutions.

* All laboratory personnel should review their health status daily. They should remain at home if they are sick and, in particular, have any respiratory or flu-like symptoms, such as fever, cough or difficulty breathing.
* All PIs should be prepared for a complete shutdown of activity on relatively short notice. Have a plan in place for your lab. How would you handle closures lasting hours, days, weeks? Think this through and take necessary steps to prepare.
* People should use good judgement on the occupation of confined areas, including elevators, in order to meet social distancing guidelines.

**Who determines the access and use protocols for specific UTEP Research Spaces:**

* For individual laboratories, Core Facilities or other research space supervised by a Laboratory Director (LD), the supervising PI or LD has full authority to establish safety and access protocols for that facility, up to and including closing the lab or facility. The name and current contact information for the supervising PI or LD ***must be posted*** outside the door to such facilities, as well as a list of current access protocols.
* All protocols should meet or exceed current CDC and funding agency guidelines as well as college or department requirements.
* For laboratories shared by multiple PIs, as soon as possible, the PIs ***must select*** a supervising PI for the shared space.

**Who may/may not have access to UTEP research spaces?**

* All people are required to follow current CDC and UTEP safety guidelines as well as specific laboratory protocols, at all times.
* UTEP Emergency and Safety personnel have access to all spaces at all times.
* PI or LD have access to individual laboratories or other research space under their authorization.
* For other individuals, only those explicitly approved by the supervising PI or LD, and following all laboratory and distancing protocols, are permitted in any research space.
* All undergraduate and graduate students, including those working in laboratories as paid employees, have the option to decline to work in laboratories during this time, without penalty or retribution. For paid students, alternative work assignments, such as writing or teleworking, may substitute for normal work requirements.
* Laboratory staff, including postdocs, may request telework from their department chairs and/or project directors, following any policy put in place by the University and respective college.
* Group or lab meetings, and even one-on-ones with your personnel, should be held remotely. The helpdesk is available to assist in providing video conferencing accommodations (helpdesk@utep.edu).

**Human Subject Research**

• Face-to-face human subject research that does not provide a direct benefit to the subject must be paused, effective immediately. If the study design allows transitioning to an online or telecommunicating medium, the IRB Office will be accepting modifications to such projects for continuation of data collection.

* Federal regulations state that the IRB must review and approve any changes to an approved study prior to initiation, unless it is necessary to avoid imminent hazards to subjects. The IRB Committee will work diligently to review and process protocols as expeditiously as possible.

If you have questions about whether your study provides direct benefit or require assistance with a modification request, contact IRB.ORSP@utep.edu

Best Practices for Modified Laboratory Use Protocols

Reduce the likelihood of infection by decreasing the number of people in any laboratory or work place at any given time and controlling for aerosol and surface spread. We suggest the following considerations:

* **Prioritize.** Consider suspending/postponing lower priority projects to allow for distancing and depopulation of the research space. Give priority to students needing to finish a degree, hard-to-interrupt experiments and to your most important research projects.
* **Limit room occupancy.** Establish modified or extended operational hours and “split shifts” among those hours, so that fewer people are in the lab at any given time.
* **Remember to maintain a safe environment while practicing social distancing.** Working alone in a potentially hazardous lab space is never encouraged.
* **Require cleaning of surfaces by lab personnel**, as needed.
* **If work can be done remotely or outside the lab, do it that way** until further notice. This includes data analysis, literature search, writing thesis chapters, etc.
* **Require PPEs as appropriate**, but anticipate shortages of key PPE in the future, namely N95 masks and gowns, gloves and face shields. Begin limiting the number of personnel entering lab spaces that require donning of this PPE.

Anticipate possible futures

* Prepare a shutdown plan for your lab. How would you handle closures lasting hours, days, weeks? Think this through.
* Prepare plans for what to do if someone in your lab develops symptoms of COVID19 or tests positive for the virus. For example:
	+ Contact EH&S (747-7179).
	+ Notify potential contacts that they should self-isolate for 14 days.
	+ Put a quarantine notice on the door of the lab and notify your team not to enter until laboratory has been properly cleaned.
	+ Work with EH&S to discuss the proper cleaning and reopening of the laboratory. They will provide direct assistance and any necessary equipment/supplies to help clean the lab properly.
* If you have questions specific to your laboratory, please consult with your supervisor and/or the associate dean for research in your college.