SAN DIEGO STATE
UNIVERSITY

Frequently Asked Questions for SDSU Researchers

Last Updated 3/19/2020

Q: What kind of research may currently take place on campus, given COVID-19 restrictions?

As an important first step, many of our faculty, staff, post-docs, and students have already transitioned to telework. However, not all work can be done remotely. Each researcher will need to categorize their work and that of their students and staff as:

- Critical research that requires an on-campus presence
- Research that is high priority but can be done remotely
- Research that can be deferred

We realize the terms critical, essential and high priority are somewhat subjective, but guidance from departmental norms and conversations with the chairs and deans should help guide faculty decisions as conditions continue to evolve. Please also read our FAQs on critical and non-critical research, listed below. Research that is non-critical and normally conducted on campus should be delayed or conducted remotely, if possible.

Q: What constitutes critical research?

Critical experiments are those for which suspension of the research would cause irreparable harm to the project. For example:

Time critical - there may be a limited window for data collection over an extended period of time -- e.g. data must be collected on specific dates within a year and substantial time has already been invested acquiring data for the project; research subjects may have only specific times when they can be tested for a study; characterization of a specific plant growth stage is needed for incorporation into a long-term study which has been in progress for multiple years

Q: Who is considered essential personnel?

Individuals who are essential to carry out critical research or critical duties including those who are:

- Responsible for maintaining the viability of research subjects, including the well-being of animals in vivarium and non-vivarium facilities.
- Research personnel who are needed to preserve highly perishable, and difficult to replace research materials (e.g. primary cell lines that cannot be stored), such that considerable time and costs would be associated with their loss.

- Individuals who are responsible for regular maintenance of equipment that, if not done, could result in damage to the equipment and/or extraordinary cost.
- Researchers working on experiments that have a small window for completion — for example, data collection might be required in the immediate time-frame as a long-term experiment comes to fruition or for research that relies on the ability to make specific measurements only at certain times a year.
- Research critical to helping address the COVID-19 health crisis.
- Research where a pause in the research will negatively impact the care of participants on a clinical trial.

Q: Can students and postdocs be designated essential personnel?

No. Undergraduate researchers, graduate students, and post-doctoral researchers cannot be identified exclusively as essential personnel by the PI. The decision to work on critical research projects on-campus during this period is the decision of the student worker or post-doc, without fear of repercussions.

Q: Why are we asking for researchers to evaluate their studies as critical or non-critical?

We understand the challenges with pausing active research programs. However, we are facing an unprecedented challenge with COVID-19 and must all do our part to flatten the growth curve to protect our community and lessen pressures on our public health infrastructure. If you have questions, please contact your dean for guidance.

Q: What if my research is non-critical?

Non-essential research should either be done remotely or deferred until health conditions change.

Examples of non-critical research that should be paused could include experiments where intermediate products could be stored until a later date, new experiments that have not started yet, or continuing efforts to build new devices. Consider using the SDSU Research Pause Checklist to prepare your lab for this period.

Principal investigators and research lab directors should work with their personnel to develop a personalized plan for each individual to work remotely whenever possible. Examples might include writing grant proposals, conducting literature searches, analysis of data, virtual training in targeted research topics, project reports, or simulation modeling. [See this document for details](#).

Q: I am feeling sick, but have some important things that I need to take care of for my research project. What should I do?

Before you are sick, identify a [research continuity plan.](#)

If you're not feeling well, you should stay home and follow the university guidelines about contacting your healthcare provider. It is a good idea to develop contingency plans if you cannot come in to take care of an ongoing research project. For example, if your study is considered critical, discuss shared work responsibilities so that others could complete a critical step, put your samples in a refrigerator, or an alternative way of ensuring that you won't lose important data. If you expect to be quarantined or gone for an extended period, you might plan alternative work that you could do at home if possible and appropriate. Faculty should develop a comprehensive understanding of ongoing activities by all researchers in their group, including undergraduates, graduate students, postdocs, and technicians, to ensure that urgent tasks can be completed in case of unexpected illnesses.

Q: How can I ensure my research lab is supervised if I am quarantined?

If the research is deemed critical and the Principal Investigator (PI) will be absent from their unit, a member of the unit (lead technician, postdoctoral researcher, or graduate student) should be assigned the responsibility of communicating with the PI as needed, responding to requests from the university and research foundation, and overseeing compliance responsibilities for the lab. The name and contact information for this individual should be indicated on biosafety, animal care, or other compliance documents, updated as needed, and provided to the Division of Research Affairs (rgulizia@sdsu.edu) and the SDSU Research Foundation (mcody@sdsu.edu). Similarly, unexpected illness may result in challenges with timely grant submission, meeting requirements for grant reporting, purchasing of supplies, etc. Please consider developing a plan in writing for an alternative person to have signature authority (dollar limits may be specified) to manage grant activities for your unit. PIs should contact their research foundation grant specialist to complete a signature authority form.

Q: Is the university planning to shut down research labs?

Although the university is encouraging social distancing by canceling large events and shifting to virtual teaching for lecture classes, at this time the university is still open. Researchers whose studies are deemed critical can still work in their research labs, although they must limit close contact to reduce risk of transmission. Conduct group meetings online, and encourage people to work remotely as much as possible.

Q: How can we keep our critical research program running when there may be limited personnel available?

- Identify procedures and processes that require regular personnel attention (e.g. animal studies).

- Assess and prioritize critical laboratory activities. Identify any research experiments that can be ramped down, curtailed, or delayed. Identify personnel able to safely perform essential activities.
- Ensure that you have access to contact information for your critical staff.
- Cross-train research staff to fill in for others who may be out sick or unable to come to work.
- Ensure they have appropriate training.
- Consider documenting critical step-by-step instructions.
- Coordinate with colleagues who have similar research activities to identify ways to ensure coverage of critical activities.
- Review contingency plans and emergency procedures with researchers and staff.
- Maintain a sufficient inventory of critical supplies that may be impacted by global shipping delays.

Q: How can our lab make our work environment as safe as possible?

- Researchers should disinfect lab areas and touch points with 70% ethanol (e.g. door knobs, sink handles, freezer doors, fume hood sashes, telephones).
- Ensure work on computers, equipment or benchtops is dispersed to areas that are at least 6 feet apart.
- Consider alternating or staggered work schedules to meet the demands of the laboratory while limiting close contact with others.
- Identify work that can be done from home or remotely, such as data analysis.
- Avoid in-person meetings. Use remote work technologies such as Zoom conferencing.

Q: How can we ensure the safety of researchers if we have a period of reduced staffing?

Ensure individuals performing critical tasks have been adequately trained and understand whom to contact with technical or safety questions. Avoid performing high-risk procedures alone. Notify colleagues of your schedule when working alone. Have a check-in system. Ensure high-risk materials (radioactive, biohazards, chemicals) are secured.

Q: If members of my lab team have been quarantined and students are not on campus such that my scholarship will be delayed or limited, how should I communicate this to my funding agencies?

If you think it is possible that the operations of your laboratory may be disrupted by staffing or quarantine issues, you should notify any program officers who are presently funding your research and engage them in a discussion about appropriately modifying your proposed timelines for progress. Program officers are typically understanding, and in the case of this national disruption, might reasonably be expected to be even more understanding than usual. However, don't delay keeping them updated on any progress, or challenges you are

experiencing related to delivery on research programs. Contact them early, and keep them regularly updated.

Q: Sometimes we may want to bring people together in person to discuss research or work on a collaborative project. Can we have meetings of smaller groups to discuss research?

Time on campus should be limited exclusively to work that cannot be done off campus. Meetings should be shifted to an online format. Zoom and other applications allow video interactions where you can share content and see each other's faces during group discussions.

Q: We have planned for a visitor from outside the university to present a research seminar or collaborate on research projects, and their visit is scheduled for the near future. What should I do?

Postpone all seminars and visits from colleagues and collaborators from other institutions.

Q: I know that the university is eliminating non-essential travel, but can I travel for research that is funded by an external grant?

Following updated guidance from the CSU, all international travel and non-essential domestic travel is suspended through the end of spring semester (May 31, 2020). This includes grant-funded projects. Future travel, including summer and fall 2020, will be determined as the COVID-19 situation evolves. Researchers should contact their appropriate dean if an exception is requested or if you have questions. Exceptions for domestic travel must be approved by the dean and provost. All international travel must be approved by the dean, provost and president. Whenever possible, we recommend communicating with colleagues by phone or the internet (e.g., by Zoom, Facetime, or SKYPE).

If domestic travel is essential, Faculty and Staff are required to submit T2 forms for processing of travel and insurance documents at least 30 days prior to travel. Please note: all domestic travel requests need to be vetted through the appropriate dean and provost in advance. This includes travel supported by extramural grant funding managed by the SDSU Research Foundation (SDSURF).

Q: I traveled before the Campus restriction. Will I be reimbursed?

Reimbursements for travel before March 11, 2020 will be reimbursed with the normal review processes. Please submit the signed T2 with your receipts for processing.

Q: Is there a delay in processing Travel claims?

As of today, Accounts Payable has not specified that there is a delay in processing due to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, AP has noted that as we begin the second part of the Spring 2020 semester, and begin to close out the 2019/20 FY, please expect a slight delay due to the quantity of claims received during this time period.

Q: If members of my lab team have been quarantined and students are not on campus, how can I operate my laboratory?

If operations of your laboratory have been disrupted by staffing or quarantine, you should notify any program officers and your SDSURF Grant Specialist and engage them in a discussion about appropriately modifying your proposed timelines for progress. Many agencies have published guidance to address potential delays in progress. The NIH, for example, has confirmed that they will accept late reports, provided notice is given to the Program Officer (NOT-OD-20-086). Keep your Program officers updated on any progress, or challenges you are experiencing related to delivery on research programs. Contact them early, and keep them regularly updated.

Q: Where can I find more about how federal funding agencies are responding to COVID-19?

The SDSU Research Foundation maintains a list of COVID-19-related notices from sponsoring organizations. View the list in the "[Information from Sponsoring Agencies](#)" section. You may also contact your development specialist.

Q: I have a grant deadline coming up, what should I do?

Plan early, complete early, submit early. Please contact your research foundation development specialist immediately if you are planning to submit a proposal before June 1st. Keep an eye on the source of the Request for Proposals, whether Grants.gov, FEDBIZOPS, or the program website. If you are unsure of where to find this information, contact your development specialist. Sometimes agencies will issue additional guidance or extensions. However, you should plan to complete your application and submit early. SDSU Research Foundation is continuing operations and staff are working remotely; however, staff may be impacted by personal circumstances and it is difficult to predict what technical issues may occur.

Q: I need a letter of support for my project. What should I do?

Please send your request to the appropriate party early. SDSU is not closed at this time, but responses may be delayed.

Q: How do I submit important forms?

SDSU Research Foundation has launched processes to accept scanned documents via MyRF. Starting March 19, you will be able to submit Purchase Requisitions, Disbursement Requests, and Journal Vouchers and supporting documentation electronically in MyRF. MyRF users can submit and approve documents with their MyRF credentials instead of a wet ink signature. After logging into MyRF, you will see two new links: a Document Processing Link that will allow you to upload and electronically approve documents, and a Document Processing Listing link that will allow you to track the status of your documents.

Q: Can you extend the deadline on UGP submissions?

We are honoring requests on a case-by-case basis. Contact Research Affairs to request a one-year extension by emailing Christine Cook at clcook@sdsu.edu.

Q: What about continuity of care for animal-related research?

SDSU has a defined response for the care of animals as part of our overall emergency/disaster plan. Our husbandry, veterinarian and vet tech staff are considered essential employees and will be expected to come in during an emergency and care for rodents that are housed in vivarium spaces.

There is also the need to continue husbandry of other species that are not in vivarium spaces and would need care by designated lab personnel. When completing essential personnel lists please include these individuals so that they can have access to buildings and animal housing spaces.