

Report on Research Compliance Volume 17, Number 6. May 21, 2020 Institutions Adopt Phased Approaches, Engage PIs in Fraught Task of Safely Resuming Research

By Theresa Defino

Just as principal investigators are anxiously waiting to re-enter their labs, eager—but cautious—compliance officials and leaders of institutions are laying the groundwork to ensure studies resume under circumstances that present as low a risk as possible that PIs, staff, students and research subjects will be exposed to COVID-19.

But officials acknowledge that the risk won't be “zero,” a fact they say is important to communicate and which underlies a recommended phased approach to resumption of research.

With the exception of COVID-19-related studies and clinical trials deemed therapeutic, most bench as well as bedside research on campuses have been dramatically altered over the last several months, with some shut down entirely or operating in a version that is proceeding through remote and electronic means when possible.^[1] Courses are being taught online, and personnel, including research administrators, are teleworking.

Now that some states are lifting stay-at-home orders, colleges, universities, medical schools, hospitals and others are grappling with how to restart the research enterprise. It's a tall order—and they are taking care to include stakeholders in their plans. At Providence College in Rhode Island, for example, some 100 individuals and 12 subcommittees are devising a plan that best accommodates its students and undergraduate research programs.

“The key word is ‘responsibility,’ in terms of what we are going to allow and when,” said Kris Monahan, Providence College's director of sponsored projects and research compliance.

Harvard University is coordinating its reopening efforts “not only with the schools for research [but] with our affiliated hospitals as well,” and there is also “significant coordination” on a daily basis with those planning the return of administrative staff as well as undergraduates, said Chief Research Compliance Officer Ara Tahmassian, noting “research is not done in a vacuum.”

At the University of New Hampshire and elsewhere, there won't be a one-size-fits-all strategy, as plans are being drawn up for individual labs with specific attention to health and safety of undergraduates, as appropriate for UNH. As Louise Griffin, senior director of research and sponsored programs, put it, “they are students first and researchers second.”

Monahan, Tahmassian and Griffin shared their reopening plans during a recent webinar sponsored by the New England region of the National Council of University Research Administrators. They were joined by Andrew Chase, vice president of research management and research finance for Partners HealthCare.

Before delving into individual institutions' plans, Tahmassian gave an overview of “the most common planning principles that we are seeing,” which he said are also in place at Harvard:

- Timing implementation to lifting of stay-at-home orders on the state level.
 - Ensuring availability of personal protective equipment (PPE).
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- Preparing buildings for return and controlling access to buildings.
- Developing low-density work plans.
- Allowing those who can work remotely to continue to do so.
- Testing employees and providing notification of symptoms.
- Instituting “contingency plans for rapid lab closure if team member(s) test positive.”

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