IMPACTS OF COVID RESTRICTIONS ON RESEARCH AT DORNSIFE

A Report to the Dornsife Faculty Council

Prepared by The Emergency Response Working Group (Research)

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IMPACTS OF COVID-RELATED RESTRICTIONS ON RESEARCH AT DORNSIFE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND FEATURED RECOMMENDATIONS

The Emergency Response Working Group for Research (ERWGR) surveyed faculty, graduate students and research staff on the question: “What is the most important concern that you have about your ability to conduct your research while Covid-19 restrictions remain in place?” The 290 responses highlighted at least seven main areas of concern. The ERWGR has described the findings and listed recommendations in the report, a summary of which is provided below.

1) Safety. Safety was the subject of at least 10% of the responses. The primary concern was contracting COVID-19. Many respondents also had misgivings or felt they lacked important information about USC’s plans to return to more normal operations, and expressed concerns about the ability of the school to manage the situation (screen people, respond timely to changes in the local pandemic situation, etc.)

Recommendation: Prioritize the delivery of clear, accurate, and timely information to improve confidence in USC’s plans to ensure the safety of personnel upon return to work.

2) Limited library and archive access, and travel restrictions. About 25% of the respondents (majority in the humanities and social sciences) are frustrated with their inability to pursue research because of the difficulties in accessing archives and library resources and conducting field work. Research is on hold until local, domestic, and international archives reopen, and travel restrictions are removed.

Recommendation: Create a standing Dornsife faculty advisory committee to the Libraries to establish lasting and effective channels of communication between departments and campus libraries.

Recommendation: Allow essential travel.

3) Internal grants and undergraduate opportunities. Faculty are concerned about the lack of clarity on the status and plans for USC internal grants and sabbatical programs for faculty, and opportunities for undergraduates wanting to perform research.

Recommendation: Communicate in a timely manner the future of internal USC grants and point to specific resources and deadlines for proposal submission.

4) Emotional and financial hardships and impact of prolonged loss of interpersonal contact. Faculty are concerned about the emotional and mental health effects of COVID on the faculty, staff and students. Students are concerned about falling ill and having to deal with the financial consequences of ill health, the difficulty of being far from home, the inability to concentrate, the pressure to come into the lab, and the stressful working conditions. Faculty and students are concerned about the difficulty to supervise students and the reduced opportunities to learn from peers, mentors and professional colleagues.
**Recommendation:** Enhance the resources for virtual communication, and communicate widely the resources available for emotional / mental support.

5) **Restrictions on research with human subjects.** Faculty expressed confusion and concern about the start of human subject data collection and the process. It appears that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has not begun to review amendments or modification requests to human subject research protocols. Faculty are concerned that their research protocols are not as they were intended or proposed in their grants. Faculty are also concerned about the lack of guidance issued from funding sources (e.g., grant agencies) on how to address these pauses in research progress.

**Recommendation:** Communicate accurately the details of resumption of research involving human subject participants and how the IRB proposes to review all research protocols for risk mitigation. These communications must clarify whether these approvals are through amendments or by a uniform policy applicable to all Departments.

6) **Challenges associated with working/teaching without childcare options:** Many faculty and students described the challenges of research and teaching while having children at home. The general feeling is that USC is not providing enough of the necessary childcare support. Faculty and graduate students with children are deeply concerned about how to adjust to these circumstances if LAUSD and the neighboring school districts remain closed.

**Recommendation:** Provide emergency funding to faculty and students to find appropriate childcare options.

7) **Inability to pursue research on a full-time basis.** The Research Restart program is currently at 30% of pre-COVID occupancy levels and restricts what can be done in the lab. Many respondents expressed concern that this level of restart has significant ramifications for graduate students, post-docs and early-career faculty because they are working against a clock (e.g., completing PhD or a tenure clock). Many researchers and faculty are paying graduate students and post-docs full salaries/stipends but the research output is not commensurate. For early-career faculty, this is especially damaging as they may be using start-up funds and are on a tight schedule to meet grant application deadlines.

**Recommendation:** Provide support either financially and/or as release time from teaching to ensure that the productivity of faculty, post-doctoral fellows, staff and graduate students engaged in research. These augmentation measures may be specific to each scientist’s professional field and benchmark timeline.
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**Purpose**

The Emergency Response Working Group for Research (ERWGR), formed by the Dornsife Faculty Council (DFC), was tasked with identifying the Impacts of COVID-related restrictions on research activities within Dornsife. The goal was to highlight key areas of concern for faculty, students and staff and provide recommendations for action to the Dornsife Administration in a timely manner. While this report is drafted by a Dornsife Faculty Council group, we want to emphasize that the recommendations listed in this report are meant to support not only the faculty and research staff of all Dornsife Divisions but also the post-doctoral fellows, graduate students and undergraduate students who are members of the Dornsife research groups. As the situation with COVID has been rapidly evolving, the work of ERWGR and the preparation of the report was accelerated to be of immediate relevance.

**Methodology**

The members of ERWGR represent various types of research activities within the many disciplines in Dornsife. We also engaged the Dean of Libraries, Catherine Quinlan. The ERWGR met via Zoom on June 11, June 18, and June 29, 2020. Considering the time-sensitive nature of the task, the ERGWGR chose to quickly survey the Faculty, graduate students and research staff on the question: “What is the most important concern that you have about your ability to conduct your research while Covid-19 restrictions remain in place?” The respondents were also encouraged to provide their affiliation and status as faculty, student or staff.

We received about 258 responses to the survey within a day. These survey results were sorted into main areas of concerns and distributed among the members of ERWGR. The group members analyzed the survey results, prepared summaries and recommendations, and shared these findings with the rest of ERWGR in the Zoom meeting on June 18th and over email. In total, 290 participants responded to our survey, and their answers followed the same patterns of the initial data set analyzed by the committee. A draft report was circulated for comment on June 25 and the recommendations were discussed in a Zoom meeting on June 29.

**Organization of the Findings and Recommendations**

The Report is organized by the major Areas of Concern (AOC) listed below:

1.0 Safety
2.0 Limited Library and Archive Access and Travel Restrictions
3.0 Internal Grants and Undergraduate Opportunities
4.0 Emotional and Financial Hardships and Consequences of Prolonged Loss of Interpersonal Contact
5.0 Restrictions on Research with Human Subjects
6.0 Challenges of Working/Teaching without Child Care Options
7.0 Inability to Pursue Research on a Full-Time Basis
The order in which these AOCs are presented does not indicate priority. The summaries under each of these AOCs list the major findings and highlight key issues. A list of recommended actions is provided under each AOC.

1.0 Safety

Safety was the subject of at least 10% of the responses. The primary concern was contracting COVID-19. There were also misgivings about transmitting COVID-19 to vulnerable partners and family members. For some, the concern was great enough to consider staying home until a vaccine is ready.

Many respondents had misgivings or felt they lacked important information about USC’s plans to return to more normal operations. The misgivings stemmed from skepticism about the organization’s ways to monitor and enforce the plan, including the likely possibility of having inadequate testing. Some doubt the ability of the school to screen people entering campus and handling a likely explosion of local cases with the re-opening of schools, including the LAUSD. A number felt that USC has not been providing sufficient timely information about changes in the local pandemic situation to have confidence that the problems are being handled properly and are under control.

Another prime concern was safety within research groups, especially in lab work. The re-opening rules make lab schedules complicated to problematic. Issues include training of newer personnel, setting up experiments, conducting experiments on reduced timelines, limits in the size of teams working on procedures, and the potential dangers of personnel working in an environment where fewer individuals are nearby.

Safety was also a concern for local and work-related travel, including trips to acquire licenses (e.g. trips to the DMV), inoculations, and obtaining supplies that might expose researchers to COVID. Research travel itself, especially field work, has a range of safety hazards, as well as other new complications, more thoroughly covered in other sections of this report.

Recommendations:

1. Disseminate clearer directives regarding safety regulations to ensure the safety of personnel upon their return to work. It is also recommended that the organization provide timely information about changes in the local pandemic situation and how the changing circumstances are being addressed by the plans.

2. Acknowledge that collaborative work is being impeded and solicit specific suggestions to deal with existing and emerging issues to address the limitations under which we operate.

3. Acknowledge that field work and institutionally-supported travel will be impeded for an extended time simply by the logistics of safe travel and explore alternate approaches and resources to support these activities.

4. The USC communications team should include an epidemiologist (akin to Dr. Anthony Fauci) to increase understanding of and confidence in the safety measures taken at USC.
2.0 Limited library and archive access and travel restrictions

An overwhelming number of responses (about 25%) related to the inability to pursue research because of the difficulties in accessing archives and library resources. The majority of respondents in this category represent disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences, while constituents in the Physical and Life Sciences are concerned about the long-term impact on the inability of faculty PIs and their students to travel to collect data in the field.

Faculty and students consistently reiterate that the Library is the University’s core research resource and should be respected and energetically supported. Research in all four divisions in Dornsife requires a robust and efficient Library system, with strong collections and access to an extensive Interlibrary Loan network. Research in the Humanities in particular relies heavily on access to books, scholarly journals and other printed materials, and archives of unique or rare primary sources (documents, collections of artefacts, visual media). The vast majority of these primary source materials remains undigitized and requires in-person access.

Respondents are concerned that their research is on hold until local, domestic, and international archives reopen and travel restrictions are removed. For example, internet and field surveys conducted by the Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR) are hampered by restrictions on in-person visits of study participants, and travel to foreign (developing) countries.

Faculty and students report difficulties in obtaining books from USC Libraries and note that collections and subscriptions are limited for their research. These responses may be indicative of problems and gaps that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, whose effects have been exacerbated as access to other local libraries remain closed. Access through Interlibrary Loan has been dramatically curtailed due to network closures, and the results of LEAP to offset this restriction in access remain unclear. These responses partly reflect deficiencies in how Library-related communications regarding available services and resources are being received and disseminated to Dornsife researchers. As the largest and most academically diverse unit in the University, Dornsife faculty and administration have a leadership role to play here.

Recommendations:

1. Link key Dornsife websites to the library’s website to provide easy access to research services offered while COVID-19 restrictions apply.

2. Create a standing Dornsife faculty advisory committee to the Libraries to establish lasting channels of communication between departments and campus libraries.

3. Approach major local research institutes of broad importance to Dornsife departments to make special arrangements to loan/digitize materials.

4. Allow essential travel to conduct field work to prevent halting of research activities.

5. Institute small-scale development awards to offset increased research expenditures. Reallocate grant funding restricted for travel to digital resources, connectivity, and computing needs.
6. Streamline the process for faculty to hire independent contractors on-site from their research accounts as long as travel restrictions remain in place.

7. Identify and address systemic issues with Joint Provost Academic Senate Committee on Libraries that affect research and respond to the long-term consequences of budget cuts. If a Dornsife library advisory committee is established (as per item 1 above), the chair could be an *ex officio* member of the Academic Senate Committee.

3.0 Internal grants and undergraduate opportunities.

The status and plans for USC internal grants, which are vital in humanities particularly, is unclear. Given the limited outside opportunities, this lack of information is a cause of concern. There is no clarity on the status of the AHSS Sabbatical program especially as faculty are planning to avail of these in Academic year 2021.

Undergraduates throughout Dornsife rely on college funding opportunities for performing research. The status of these opportunities and when they will become available is not clear.

**Recommendations:**

1. Quickly disseminate information about the future of internal USC grants and funding opportunities with a calendar of the newest deadlines.

2. Explore and identify the possibilities of virtual research opportunities (which would include having undergraduate assistants).

3. Issue a calendar of restart for undergraduate research in libraries and labs and disseminate information in a timely manner to faculty and students.

4. Clarify the future of SURF and SOAR programs.

4.0 Emotional and financial hardships and impact of prolonged loss of interpersonal contact.

Faculty are concerned about the emotional and mental health effects caused by COVID and the effect that uncertainty about the future has on colleagues and students. While few faculty expressed concerns about their own mental health, there are good reasons to believe that they too have similar personal concerns. Faculty, graduate students and post-docs are intertwined in a symbiotic relationship. What affects one group also impacts the others. The faculty are particularly concerned about the ability of some of their students to conduct research and the financial hardship resulting from students having to extend their studies and paying for their own research expenditures (having to extend their studies, no access to materials from the lab therefore paying out of own pockets, etc.) The students echoed these concerns. They are
concerned about falling ill and having to deal with the financial consequences of ill health, fearing that there will not be much support from USC. They expressed difficulty with being far from home, inability to concentrate, pressure to come into the lab with concerns of safety looming, and that working conditions are more stressful. Student responses suggest inadequate support from USC / Departments to make working from home possible (such as ensuring students having good internet access). Students also expressed concerns about continued funding for their research / studies.

The lack of interpersonal contact has affected the faculty and students in various ways. The faculty are concerned about their inability to train and directly supervise their students, post-docs and new hires, leading to projects being put on hold or being stalled. Likewise, the students feel the reduction in opportunities to learn from their peers, mentors and professional colleagues. The lack of exchange of ideas through in-person interactions and the absence of learning opportunities normally available through conferences, workshops and seminars is being felt by both faculty and students.

**Recommendations:**

1. Identify sources of funding for student and postdoctoral research, offer more time to finish studies / extend postdoctoral scholarships, and inform students / postdocs about such resources to alleviate their concerns.

2. Make available and communicate widely the resources available for those needing emotional / mental support.

3. Communicate USC support that is available to students when they fall ill.

4. Survey the issues associated with student fears about falling ill with COVID and inadequate health insurance coverage under these circumstances.

5. Explore further how researchers and students may be able to interact more productively, attend virtual conferences, reach out to experienced researchers, network, etc., while physically distancing. Point researchers and students to their subject specialist librarians.

6. Enable faculty and students by providing resources and communicating best practices in virtual communication.

7. Clearly communicate the plans to allow researchers to safely return to labs to allay concerns regarding safety.

8. Set up a support line for students / researchers that are not willing to take the risk but feel pressured to return to campus.
5.0 Restrictions on research with human subjects

Faculty expressed confusion and concern about the start of human subject data collection and about how to go about it given the circumstances. It appears that the IRB has not begun to review amendments or modification requests to human subject research protocols. At the moment, clinical research with human subjects is approved to take place. The number of emails sent by the administration stating that research is resuming is confusing to the faculty and research staff. The email from IRB of June 17 directs the researchers to their website for further guidance and requirements prior to resuming research.

Faculty expressed concern that their research protocols are not taking place in the way they intended and proposed in their grants. For example, a faculty member who is studying child learning and development had to completely shut down their research because schools are not available to recruit children from. It is still not clear whether it is safe for children to even return to school. This concern is also shared by faculty who conduct community research or conduct research studies with older adults or other vulnerable populations. Faculty also expressed concern about lack of guidance issued from funding sources (e.g., grant agencies) on how to address these pauses in research progress.

Recommendations:

1. Communicate accurately the details of resumption of research and clarify the situation with research involving human subject participants and how the IRB proposes to review all research protocols for risk mitigation. The communications must clarify as to whether these approvals will be done through amendments or by a uniform policy applicable to all Departments.

2. Identify how other research institutions are addressing the interruptions in their human subject programs as this is a common issue.

3. Request guidelines from grant agencies on dealing with such interruptions now and later, as the pace and productivity of research is expected to be much slower.

4. Identify sources of bridge funding or supplemental funding to extend the funds for an ongoing research project.

6.0 Challenges associated with working/teaching without childcare options

Faculty and students describe research and teaching challenges associated with having children at home. Many are unable to concentrate on writing or focusing on their teaching while young children are at home. Research productivity across Dornsife is contingent upon adequate childcare support for working families. The general feeling is that USC is not providing enough childcare support. There are no viable options on campus and the few day-care facilities that are sponsored by USC will be reducing the number of children that they will accept because of COVID restrictions. Given the changing COVID restrictions at the county and city level, it is unclear how faculty and students may respond to limitations placed on who can take care of their
children at home. LAUSD may not resume in-person instruction in the fall, and its teachers have been told to prepare to teach online. If LAUSD and neighboring school districts remain closed, USC faculty and graduate students with children are deeply concerned how to adjust to these circumstances. Thus, COVID has amplified the well-known deficiencies in daycare options for faculty, graduate students, post-docs and staff at USC.

**Recommendations:**

1. Provide emergency funding to help faculty and students find appropriate childcare options.

2. Emphasize the need for forceful and dynamic USC leadership on this issue as it affects our competitiveness as an employer and as an institution of higher learning.

7.0 Inability to pursue Research on a full-time basis

All non-COVID-related research stopped when we were asked to shelter in place in mid-March. The Research Restart program is currently at 30% of pre-COVID occupancy levels after a 3-month hiatus. Faculty, post-doctoral fellows and graduate students have concerns about this policy because it restricts what can be done in the lab. Assays and experiments require more than a few hours in the lab on alternate days. Furthermore, coordination of access to shared equipment is virtually impossible. This issue has significant ramifications for graduate students, post-docs and early-career faculty because these respondents are working against a clock, whether the clock is a 5-year graduate student offer letter, a two-year post-doc contract or a 7-year tenure clock contract.

Many researchers and faculty are paying graduate students and post-docs full salaries/stipends but the research output is not commensurate. For early-career faculty, this is especially damaging as they may be using start-up funds and are on a tight schedule to meet grant application deadlines. While, this issue is especially pressing for early-career faculty, it is likely also a significant concern for others. Further, the concerns from childcare issues discussed in Section 6.0 above are also at play.

**Recommendations:**

1. Examine how other colleges and universities in the region have been able to ramp up their research activities faster.

2. Closely monitor the COVID cases and ensure that all research-active faculty, staff and students follow the safety guidelines to avoid setbacks with spread of the virus.

3. Engage with early-career faculty on a case-by-case basis to address concerns that are discipline-specific and field-specific.

4. Develop practical measures aimed at providing support either financially and/or as release time from teaching to ensure that the productivity of faculty, fellows, staff and
graduate students as needed by each researcher’s professional field and benchmark timeline.

5. Develop and distribute guidelines to mitigate the ramifications of extended research restrictions and closures on productivity, promotion, and time-to-degree.

6. Lead university-wide efforts to increase financial support for post-doctoral fellows and graduate students in all disciplines whose time-to-degree or time-to-contract completion will be affected by COVID restrictions.