

On February 8th, the Emergency Working Group for Research met with the Divisional Deans and the Dean of Graduate and Professional Education to discuss questions that arose during the faculty survey on COVID impacts on Research performed in June 2020. Here are reported the questions and answers updated as of February 28th.

In attendance: Jan Amend, Stephen Bradforth, Steven Finkel, Titus Galama, Assal Habibi, Peter Mancall, Beatrice Mousli, Sri Narayan (Co-Chair), Gioia Polidori, Catherine Quinlan, Lorraine Turcotte (Co-Chair), Sherry Velasco, John Vidale.

1) Access to Libraries

Q: Are there plans to partially open the libraries for researchers in the Humanities so that they can get back to their research work?

A. The Divisional Deans have not heard any complaints regarding access to libraries. The Deans suggested that if faculty have an issue, they should go to their Chairs and the Chairs should then communicate the problem(s) to the Divisional Deans.

Q. Are the divisional Deans collaborating with their counterparts at area R1 universities to devise solutions or agreements with the major research libraries in the L.A. area to begin to support the exchange of resources, for instance?

A. Not at the moment but it is a possibility that can be considered in the future. Catherine Quinlan, Dean of the USC Libraries, agreed that staffing resources for the libraries may not be enough to support all the needs of the faculty.

2) Travel restrictions

Q. Research programs are also suffering because of travel restrictions. Could lifting the travel ban for regulated research travel be achieved?

Dean Bradforth explained that travel is tightly regulated primarily for budget reasons. Therefore, if a researcher has a Research Restart plan in place and has grant funding that requires travel, then an exception can be granted (upon request) so that the faculty can travel to fulfill the specific aims of the grant. Dean Bradforth mentioned that he does not know whether being vaccinated will be a requirement for travel. The most important variable seems to be the funding issue i.e. if a scientist has grant funding, an exception for reimbursement of travel may be granted. However, just having a grant does not allow one to travel. And the travel must be essential – conferences do not count as essential. There are two issues. Whether budget restrictions will be relaxed on spending USC funds on travel, and separately, whether the university removes the liability/public health restriction on its employees travelling as part of their work activities.

Currently:

- Research travel for fulfilling the terms of an external grant or contract – that the travel is specifically needed to meet the written terms of the grant. A required in-person contractor meeting (DoE, DoD and DARPA) is currently allowed with approval of an exception from Dornsife. So would a field trip to collect data that was specifically the funded goal of an external grant. I.e., the terms of the contract will not be fulfilled if the trip does not take place.

- Research travel to a conference – currently not allowed regardless of source of funds. Very narrow restriction applies to an employee who is already overseas and the conference is taking place in an area of low transmission. Again exception required and this would only be granted in extraordinary circumstances.
- Personal travel – not recommended, but entirely up to the employee. No part of the trip can be reimbursed from USC or external funds, including department funds. If someone goes travel at their own risk, they must still comply with quarantine rules at both ends of travel that are in effect at the time.

The topic of when travel restrictions will be removed more generally came up at the last research restart working group meeting ---- where the working group were envisaging what restart phase 3 would look like. Travel would probably be the one area with meaningful change. As to when phase 3 will actually start, it is not known.

In phase 3, the research working group is **requesting** lifting the budget restrictions on travel (Provost and Operations office decision). Public health recommendations will likely follow county/state/state department recommendations, the approval of the USC public health working group and the USC Senior Vice President for Operations.

3) Computers

Q. The use of sophisticated software and online tools is de rigeur for our classes. The university has helped to learn these new tools but many faculty members do not have computers that can handle these new tools, especially due to the recent policy allowing faculty to receive a new computer every 5 years instead of 3. What can be done to assist faculty who need a new computer?

A. DTS should be contacted if a faculty does not have a computer that can use all of the applications. DTS has a loaner program.

4) Vaccine roll out

Q. Is there a timeline for staff and researchers that participate in research efforts with human subjects to receive the vaccine? Similar staff and researchers at Keck have received the vaccine. Why have people on the UPC not received theirs?

A. Dean Bradforth mentioned that information regarding the vaccination schedule is constantly changing and that it is impossible to predict who will be vaccinated next. USC strictly follows the rules and regulations implemented by the County of LA. Dean Bradforth also confirmed that only those researchers (at Keck) that interact with patients or human subjects have received the vaccine, not all researchers. It is likely, because of the way the state is distributing vaccine, that for many Dornsife employees they will be able to book an appointment more quickly somewhere else before vaccine supply levels received by USC Student Health trigger an invitation to

them. Rule of thumb – if you have any opportunity to get vaccinated via any mechanism, take it. You should receive both shots through the same location, and keep a copy of the proof of vaccination.

5) Caregiving responsibilities

Q. While the University and the College have done some work to address the issue of caregiving responsibilities, unfortunately faculty need more support. Are there initiatives being planned to support faculty with caregiving responsibilities?

A. The College instituted a pre-tenure program that included the possibility of receiving help for child care issues. Dean Bradforth agreed that this is a serious issue and that they have urged the Provost to develop better options. However, the budget constraints being what they are due to Covid, this work will most probably be postponed until Covid related issues have been reduced.

6) Graduate Students

Q. Graduate students are struggling due to COVID restrictions. Are there programs in place to support graduate students keeping up with their research timeline, knowing their funding might run out before they can actually be back on the research track?

A. The College has instituted a 2-year extension program for graduate students who will need more time to complete their dissertation. There is also a program in place whereby a fellowship year that has not been used for an incoming graduate student could be used for a student who needs an extra to complete their dissertation.

Additionally, the College is collating data on the effects of Covid on the postponement of oral qualifying exams.