Subject: Updated Guidelines: COVID-19 & In-Person Research Activities, On and Off Campus
To: Academic Chairs and Directors. Please share widely with unit members, including faculty, staff, graduate students, undergraduate researchers, postdoctoral fellows, and other research trainees.
From: Prof. Steven M. Short and Prof. Alexandra Gillespie
Date: Wednesday, October 20, 2021

To the UTM Research Community:

We write to summarize seven changes to our research restart guidelines and processes, all effective at UTM today. The changes represent important steps in our gradual transition toward more in-person activity, which will continue into the winter 2022 semester with the return of predominantly on-campus instruction.

1. Distancing in Academic Research Labs
Academic research labs that meet the definition of instructional spaces may now resume operations at full capacity without 2m physical distancing, provided that everyone in the lab continues to wear a mask and any other applicable PPE. The option to remove distancing in labs remains exactly that—an option, exercised at the discretion of primary investigators and research teams, based on their distinct operational needs and local circumstances. The change has full support from the experts at Peel Public Health, who emphasize the safety of increased capacities among masked, highly vaccinated populations in well ventilated spaces.

UTM continues to put these safety measures in practice: we maintain our mask policy, our vaccine requirement, and our industry-leading strategy for ventilation. All UTM labs are served by centralized air handling units with enhanced MERV 14 filters; all are equipped with disabled demand control ventilation to avoid reductions in air flows. Our teams in Environmental Health & Safety and the Office of the Vice-Principal Research remain ready to provide support, sharing information on ventilation measurements in specific labs on request.

1. Definition: Research Labs as Instructional Spaces
The definition of in-person instructional spaces, as described on page 17 of U of T’s COVID-19 General Workplace Guideline, now includes research labs where learners—undergraduate and graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and other research staff—conduct research under the guidance of a faculty supervisor and receive training in research methods, technical practice, and experimentation. The definition applies to student office spaces assigned to individual students but does not apply to unsupervised study or common areas, where 2 m physical distancing and capacity limits continue. 2 m distancing will also continue in all UTM’s in-person courses for the rest of the fall 2021 semester, as we ramp up safe campus activity gradually, starting with research labs.

2. Research Restart Process
Researchers who move their labs to full capacity do not now need to submit a new request to access on-campus research facilities. All currently approved PI requests for access remain valid. Labs should stay ready to pivot operations to 2m distancing if the need arises, in which event approved PI research restart forms will provide a fall-back position, with new requests and amendments following the familiar process.

3. New Lab Trainees
Any new trainees who now join a UTM research lab may access a revised student and non-employee postdoctoral attestation form, which they should submit to their unit’s Chair or Director. Again, any trainee forms already completed as part of an approved PI research restart plan remain valid.

4. Face-to-Face Human Subjects Research
Researchers working with human subjects have access to a revised and simplified Face-to-Face Human Participant COVID-19 Assessment Form, focused on participant health and safety, which will continue to support VPRI’s two-step review process.
5. **Off-Campus Research, Including International**

Anyone conducting research anywhere off-campus without human participants no longer needs to have their requests reviewed by the Face-to-Face COVID-19 Review Committee. These researchers should continue to read U of T’s [Guidance on Research and Travel During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) and use the [Off-Campus Safety Planning Record](#). The same process applies for anyone participating in on-site field research at, e.g., the Koffler Scientific Reserve, the Hart House Farm, and Gull Lake.

6. **International Travel for Non-Research Purpose: e.g., Conferences**

Anyone travelling internationally on university business no longer needs to complete the Face-to-Face and Off-Campus Form. The suspension on [student travel internationally](#) remains in effect until 31 December, 2021, with select exemptions granted to PhD students whose research or dissertation completion would be significantly impacted otherwise. PhD students should contact the [Safety Abroad Office](#) to discuss if this exception applies.

These seven changes, we recognize, comprise a major download of information—and more information is available still in related memos from Professor Lori Ferris, Associate Vice-President, Research Oversight and Compliance, and Professor Joshua Barker, Dean, School of Graduate Studies and Vice-Provost, Graduate Research and Education, which we’ve attached. To digest this information together, we will host a discussion forum from 9:00am to 10:00am ET on 27 October, open to all researchers and research staff at UTM.

Thank you: we look forward the conversation next week—and to continuing to make UTM a home for world-leading research, impactful discovery, and safe collaboration.

Best wishes,

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