

Graduate Student Research – Guidelines to Mitigate COVID-19 Risk

Graduate students play a critical role in advancing Virginia Tech's research mission and the academic expectations of research-based PhD and MS programs involve successful completion of dissertation or thesis research projects. Acknowledging that restrictions on research activity may make it difficult for graduate students to maintain their academic progress, Virginia Tech nevertheless is committed to the higher priority of health safety. Therefore, consistent with Governor Northam's stay at home order (Executive Order No. 55 – 2020), all research activities involving graduate students will be conducted in accordance with the Essential Operations level stipulated in Presidential Policy Memorandum No. 309.

Specific circumstances vary among graduate students, so a plan for assigned research duties should be developed through an interactive conversation between the student and faculty advisor. In all cases, plans must be approved by the graduate program director who shall serve as an advocate for the student when necessary. The following guidelines should be followed in drafting the plan:

1. Graduate students whose research projects are conducted at home and that do not involve close contact with others and that pose no risk to their health safety or that of others are not subject to these guidelines.
2. For research projects that involve working in environments occupied by others such as multi-user laboratories, graduate students should be assigned tasks that can be accomplished remotely if feasible. Examples of tasks that are well suited to remote work include literature reviews, project design, data collation and analysis, and manuscript preparation.
3. For research projects that involve working in environments occupied by others and if remote work is not feasible, a graduate student may conduct research in these environments (on site) only if the research project is determined to be essential and if the graduate student is also identified to be essential to make progress on the project. Under these limited circumstances, the following conditions must be met:
 - a. On-site work must be voluntary and authorized by the student's advisor, and mutual agreement must be documented and confirmed by the graduate program director, who will serve as the graduate student's advocate when necessary.
 - b. The student's advisor, project principal investigator, lab manager, or other appropriately trained employee must be present or sufficiently proximate to oversee health safety training and be readily available to answer questions and address any concerns.
 - c. Each on-site research location will have an updated COVID-19 standard operating procedure (SOP) prominently displayed that instructs all personnel regarding health safety practices appropriate for the space and type of research conducted, and a training log will be maintained in which each student confirms successful completion of training in these health safety practices.
 - d. Required health safety practices described in the COVID-19 SOP will include the following:
 - i. Prohibition against occupancy if the individual:

- 1) has fever or respiratory symptoms or has been in contact with anyone with these symptoms for the past 14 days;
 - 2) has tested positive for COVID-19 and has not yet been cleared to return to work by an authorized public health official; or
 - 3) has within the last 14 days returned from an area with reported community spread of COVID-19.
- ii. Individuals with an underlying health condition that may predispose the individual to COVID-19 are discouraged from working on site.
 - iii. Minimum standards for social distancing, described in terms of distance (at least 6 ft) as well as duration of proximity (no more than 15 minutes).
 - iv. Minimum standards for hygienic practices such as hand washing.
 - v. Identification of surfaces to be disinfected and frequency of disinfection.
 - vi. Any requirements for personal protective equipment (PPE) such as face masks and gloves, and the types of PPE required.

Dissertation and thesis research as well as research assigned to meet assistantship work requirements are subject to these guidelines. All research done for academic credit, except for dissertation or thesis credit, must be conducted remotely. Graduate students who are employed to conduct research that does not involve assistantship duties are subject to policies pertaining to student wage employees.