MEMORANDUM

DATE:  03/16/20

FROM:  Maja Matric
       Interim Vice President of Research

Dear faculty, staff, and student researchers,

USC is actively responding to daily updates about the COVID-19 emergency. We are also planning ahead toward next steps in all areas of campus life. We ask that all researchers read this message carefully to inform their actions and plans in this rapidly changing situation that impacts our entire community.

We aim to continue USC research in forms that are safe for all involved. Remote research is requested from all for whom it is possible. Researchers are asked to actively work with their teams to coordinate and support remote work.

We acknowledge that a great deal of research, such as laboratory-based research and in-person human subjects research cannot be done remotely. All laboratories and units should defer whatever non-remote work they can defer. In addition, public health officials may require individual labs or units to shut down for a period of time, so all labs and units should be ready to suspend operations other than necessary maintenance and essential activities.

Because research at USC is highly diverse, we are working with the deans and schools to help the research community respond appropriately. We are asking that the following steps be applied University-wide:

· All researchers will carefully follow the guidance from the USC COVID-19 site (sites.usc.edu/coronavirus), including social distancing (6 foot radius), hand washing, not touching the face, self-care, and cleaning of workspaces, among others, to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission while conducting research in all shared USC environments.

· PIs and other relevant research leads will work with each of their students, post docs, and staff members to develop a personalized plan that allows each of them to conduct research remotely to the fullest extent possible, e.g., performing data analysis, literature review, modeling and computation, writing manuscripts, grant and other applications, reviewing papers, and planning. For those performing work on USC campus facilities, plans will be developed to observe continuous social distancing and minimal personnel.
All research-active faculty members and other PIs are asked to develop a Research Continuity Plan in the light of COVID-19, outlining how their group will follow the guidelines above, and how they will slow research if necessary to only essential personnel. Plans should clearly indicate what activities would be critical to maintaining the long-term capabilities of the research program if research were to cease due to external restrictions. Considerations of criticality include where discontinuation would generate loss of significant data, samples, or animal life; where equipment would not operate safely, where there would be a risk to the health and safety of study participants; and for COVID-19 or other critical clinical/research needs. Each school will provide guidelines and deadlines that are specific to their faculty members and the unique needs of their research programs. We appreciate your prompt attention given the rapidly changing health landscape.

Our 53 research cores have been asked to evaluate the support that they can provide at this time and to announce their plans on their web sites; a summary will also be provided on the Research COVID-19 site (research.usc.edu/coronavirus).

When considering research that requires a physical presence in one of the USC facilities, researchers should conduct -- at most -- limited amounts of their essential, highest priority work as established by PIs in consultation with their chiefs, chairs or deans. We understand that there is some subjectivity in the definition of essential and high priority. The parameters cited above should be considered. For all non-human subjects research, these priority lab activities should be informed by the evolving situation, and by the Research Continuity Plans referenced above.

With respect to human subjects research and clinical research, the only time direct contact with study participants will occur is when the risk of not having such contact carries a significant risk to participant health and safety. Thus, only studies with potential therapeutic benefit to participants will have direct participant contact until further notice. For all other studies, direct participant interaction will not occur until further notice. This applies to non-therapeutic trials, observational studies and all community-based non-interventional research. Only studies that offer significant therapeutic benefit will enroll new participants. All new studies that have not yet started should be postponed. Research that can be conducted virtually / remotely can proceed. The Office of Protection of Human Subjects (OPRS) and the relevant school deans have issued guidance and will continue to issue guidance.

Continuing to work physically in a laboratory should be at the discretion of the student, staff member or postdoctoral researcher. Unless their presence is required for an essential role, trainees who wish to exclusively work remotely should be allowed to do so, and PIs should work to facilitate those wishes.

Research staff should contact their managers and follow information as provided by Human Resources Partners.

Meetings should be held online or by phone, including one-on-one meetings and formal lab or group meetings. Groups should use the available video conferencing and networking tools to continue to interact regularly to promote individual well-being and the progress of research.
· PIs should prepare for the eventuality that an individual in their group will test positive for COVID-19. Given the current projections, this is a likely scenario for many research groups. Laboratory spaces and offices used by an individual found to be COVID-19-positive will be closed, disinfected, and prepared for re-occupancy. Environment Health & Safety has established guidelines to follow and will work with the appropriate department to ensure this is completed.

· Guidance regarding research involving animals has been provided and will continue to be provided by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC).

How long will this last? Nobody currently has a good answer; we will evolve our guidelines based on the best input from the CDC and relevant public health officials.

Your school, the Office of Research, and the Environment Health & Safety Office are ready to answer questions from faculty and other research you develop your Research Continuity Plans. We are providing contact information for all on the Research COVID-19 web site (research.usc.edu/coronavirus) and all will be available for Zoom sessions.

We are not ceasing all in-person on-campus research at this time. If it becomes necessary to do so, we will continue to provide support such as heating and cooling, essential equipment, animal facilities, and basic maintenance. Schools, the Office of Research, and Environmental Health and Safety will work together to determine how best to continue critical activities.

We realize that there are significant implications of these restrictions on the research process. The most important consideration is that we take care of our health and the health of those around us. The research continuity plans that each laboratory has put in place are intended to help protect the integrity of our research capabilities, ensure your academic progress, and enable full operations.

We will continue to monitor the situation, refine our plans in response to your questions and feedback, and update the Research COVID-19 site research.usc.edu/coronavirus.

We are grateful for your help in addressing this unprecedented challenge.

Cc: Charles Zukoski
   Elizabeth Graddy

We are grateful for excellent examples from Stanford University.