



# Research

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## Research Ramp-Up Frequently Asked Questions – April 29, 2020

President Ángel Cabrera has appointed a task force to guide and oversee planning for the eventual resumption of Institute operations. No timetable yet exists for reopening facilities and laboratories and returning to in-person instruction. The recovery task force will begin by modeling different possible scenarios and will coordinate the actions of different units within federal, state, and University System of Georgia guidelines. A task force has also been established to develop a research ramp-up plan. Below are some frequently asked questions concerning the ramp-up of Georgia Tech's research enterprise.

### When will the Georgia Tech research community go back to campus?

The research ramp-up will be significantly more complicated than the ramp-down was in March. Childcare facilities and K-12 schools remain closed, limiting what parents can do. Plans for reducing the number of people working in the same space must be developed and reviewed. Replacement personal protective equipment (PPE) will have to be obtained, and PPE will likely be required for jobs that didn't need it before. Graduate and undergraduate students will have to return to campus.

A research ramp-up task force led by Christopher Jones, professor and William R. McLain Chair in the School of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, is working with a campus-wide task force, and with Georgia Tech and University System leadership, on a research ramp-up plan. It is likely that researchers will begin returning to campus gradually starting in May, though no date has been set.

A small number of researchers have been working on campus since the ramp-down to perform essential work and projects in support of specific COVID-19 projects. What these researchers have learned during this period of modified operations will help with the larger ramp-up process.

### What will this ramp-up plan likely include?

The most important goal will be protecting faculty, staff, and students. It is likely that research operations will not resume all at once. It is expected that activities will resume in waves, prioritized to the activities that need to resume most urgently. To reduce the number of people in laboratories at any given time, staggered work hours may be implemented so that people work in shifts. To accommodate parents who don't have child care available, telework hours may be more flexible and combined with laboratory hours in a hybrid system. Cleaning and disinfection of facilities will be increased. To quickly identify and control any infection, temperature checks, smartphone-based contact tracing, and expanded testing operations are being considered. These are among the provisions that are being examined, but final decisions will be made by leadership at Georgia Tech and in the University System. Research sponsors may also need to sign off on the ramp-up plans.

In addition to local leadership, Georgia Tech is also working with peer universities, national organizations and agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to understand the ramp-up issues and how others are addressing them. The challenge of reopening universities will require the best expertise and thinking from around the world.

### What will be done to protect instructors and researchers who are more vulnerable to infection?

This is one of the considerations being studied by both the research task force and the institute task force. Unit heads will be asked to consider this issue in determining who should be returning the labs, when they should return, and who should continue working remotely. The needs of people who have significant vulnerabilities are expected to be worked out on a case-by-case basis within each work unit.

### What about people who have a significant concern about returning to campus?

Many researchers are anxious to get back to campus to continue their work. Others have concerns about working in close proximity to others. Those differing points of view are being carefully considered as part of the research ramp up. Support activities that are not required to be on campus may be allowed to continue to be performed remotely even as some researchers return to campus. These are among the decisions that will be made in the weeks ahead.

### What about undergraduate and graduate students coming back to do research?

Undergraduate and graduate students are essential to the research program and they are part of ramp-up considerations. The task force is aware of the time pressures many students face as they attempt to complete requirements for graduation. Graduation requirements will likely be handled locally in the schools and colleges in coordination with guidance from the Institute and University System. The needs of students will be paramount in making these decisions.



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## For labs that require personal protective equipment (PPE), will this be provided?

PPE is essential to the safe conduct of research and will be provided to laboratories where needed. Much of our existing stock was provided to healthcare organizations facing critical needs, and that will have to be replaced. In addition, ramp-up operations may mandate PPE and different types of PPE for jobs that may not have required it before the COVID-19 pandemic. PPE is difficult to obtain nationally and until the supply chain is replenished, that will remain a challenge. Georgia Tech units are producing some PPE, including face shields and some face masks, but not all needs can be met with these internal resources. Georgia Tech units are also producing disinfectant products.

## How are we handling research that relies on human subjects?

Human subjects research may require not only that researchers return to their labs, but also that persons from outside campus be brought into Georgia Tech facilities. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is engaged on this topic and the ramp-up task force is looking at guidelines for how some research may be done remotely. Accommodations for human subjects research during this challenging time will likely depend on individual protocols.

## Is there guidance for faculty with industry research contracts that have hard deadlines?

The [Office of Industry Engagement](#) is working with faculty and individual industry sponsors. Every sponsor has different requirements and the issues created by the inability to access campus facilities are being discussed on a case-by-case basis. A number of no-cost extensions have already been issued. Faculty members should work with their contracting officer to address these issues as soon as possible.

## What are the implications of COVID-19 for Georgia Tech's financial situation?

Georgia Tech receives financial support from three main sources: research and other sponsored activities, the state of Georgia, and student-related fees. Each of these areas has been affected differently by the pandemic and the specific implications are unclear right now.

Federal agencies continue to pay invoices submitted and have not advised of any expected changes. Researchers have generally been able to obtain no-cost extensions of project deadlines because the agencies are aware of the challenges universities face. Researchers have continued to submit proposals during this time, and grants/contracts have continued to be awarded. So far, there has not been significant reduction in revenues from federal agencies. On the industry side, some companies have indicated they may defer projects until their financial conditions become clearer.

Everyone is aware of what has happened to the economy of the state of Georgia. Reductions in economic activity will have an effect on state revenue collections. The extent of that effect and how that will be reflected in our state funding for fiscal year 2021 aren't known. At the same time, the state will have much higher costs for unemployment and medical services. The Georgia General Assembly will have to finalize a budget by the end of June.

Student fees are also an area of great uncertainty, particularly for international graduate students. Refunds made during the ramp-down period created a significant budget challenge. International students make up a large part of our student body, particularly in graduate education, and the ability of students to return to campus may contribute to the financial challenge. The extent of that is only now being fully realized.

## What financial guidance can be provided until this issue becomes clearer?

Principal investigators and others with financial authority should exercise fiscal responsibility during these times. It is likely that some large equipment purchases and capital projects may be deferred. Georgia Tech will prioritize people over equipment and other expenses to the extent that is possible.

## What is the status of hiring for research positions?

In general, hiring for positions that are supported totally by sponsored funds is continuing. These positions do not depend on state funding or student fees, so they bring much-needed funding into Georgia Tech and the state of Georgia. Many of these "soft-money" positions are in the [Georgia Tech Research Institute](#), but others are in the academic colleges. Facilities and administration (F&A) costs associated with this hiring are important to maintaining the revenue position of Georgia Tech. Other hiring is paused until Georgia Tech and state of Georgia learn more about the financial issues ahead.



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## If researchers cannot utilize campus facilities, can we reduce the F&A rate?

Georgia Tech's facilities and administration (F&A) rates are set by the Office of Naval Research to recover the cost of providing services necessary to carry out the work mandated by grants and contracts from all federal agencies. Georgia Tech does not set those rates and cannot change them. F&A funds support Georgia Tech's research program and a reduction would also negatively impact the budgets of schools and colleges, which receive a substantial portion of these revenues.

## If furloughs and layoffs are necessary, how will they be allocated?

No decisions have been made on these issues. Georgia Tech will prioritize people during financial challenges, and it is likely that any decisions about furlough and layoffs will be made at the state and University System levels. It should be noted that a furlough is an employer-mandated, temporary unpaid leave from work, often for a certain number of days during a specific period of time. Persons furloughed retain their jobs and usually their health insurance.

## Will Georgia Tech receive assistance from federal government recovery initiatives?

U.S. universities will be receiving assistance focused on support to students who have been hurt financially by the pandemic. Georgia Tech is expected to receive approximately \$11 million. About half of that will go directly to students, while the remainder will go to programs designed to support students. Guidance on how the funding will be administered and distributed is expected to come from the U.S. Department of Education and the University System. This program is separate from support being provided to small businesses.

## Can federal grant and contacts be refocused to COVID-19 efforts?

With sufficient justification, NSF, NIH and other federal awards can repurposed with permission from the project's program manager within the funding agency. Faculty members should work with their program managers if they believe such refocusing would be advantageous. [Guidance](#) for this can be found on the website of the Office of Sponsored Programs. Federal agencies have also issued requests for proposals to address specific COVID-19-related objectives, and Georgia Tech has created a website to list those at <https://research.gatech.edu/coronavirus-fundingopportunities>

## What is the status of the Small Bets Grants Program?

The budget for the Small Bets program is being funded from non-state sources, including GTRI's independent research and development program. There were more than 200 submissions and at least 21 have already been selected for funding. The collaboration between schools, colleges and GTRI has been tremendous, and that will be reflected in the awards announcement, which will be made during the week of April 27th.

## What is the status of the EVPR COVID-19 Rapid Response Seed Grant Program?

Response to the call for proposals exceeded expectations and more reviewers had to be recruited. Those reviews are now complete and five of the most time-sensitive awards were made during the week of April 20<sup>th</sup>. Another 15 awards are expected to be made during the week of April 27<sup>th</sup>.



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