TO: ECU Researchers

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SUBJECT: Guidance for Research During the Post-Holiday COVID Surge

The number and percentage of COVID-19 positive cases are at all-time highs in the city, county, and state. Hospitalizations in North Carolina are also at a historic high with many hospitals nearing 100% capacity. This has led to the postponement of elective procedures to ensure beds are available for critically ill patients. In an effort to reduce community spread of COVID-19 and manage the strain on our healthcare system, Governor Cooper extended the stay-at-home order through January. Additionally, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services issued a directive for state residents to adhere to public health guidelines and refrain from non-essential activities.

To comply with this directive and reduce the spread of COVID, REDE is issuing the following guidance. This guidance pertains to all research projects at ECU, including but not limited to laboratory, field, community, small group, and clinical projects.

ECU faculty and student researchers should evaluate ongoing and planned research projects, precautions, and safety plans and should consider postponing or pausing all non-essential studies involving direct face-to-face interactions. In particular, human subject studies that are not COVID-19-related and have no direct, immediate clinical benefit to patients should be paused and re-evaluated for risk/benefit to the participant and to the research staff in the current surge. Enrollment of new participants should be delayed, if possible, and current participants should be made aware of the Jan. 6, 2021, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services directive. Investigators also should consider:

1) Decreasing the number of individuals in spaces with human subject participants;
2) Pausing or re-designing human subject studies that have group participants (focus groups, exercise groups, multiple participants tested at the same time); and
3) Limiting participant interactions to faculty or senior personnel.

These precautions should continue until the incidence of active COVID-19 cases in the region decreases to pre-holiday levels.

Research studies conducted with strict adherence to public health guidelines may continue, but personnel should follow approved safety, social distancing, and personal protective equipment guidelines. Personnel should be diligent in submitting the ECU daily COVID-19 survey and seek testing if they experience a potential exposure to the virus. Anyone with symptoms, who has been near someone with symptoms, or who has tested positive should self-isolate, should NOT come to work, and should contact the Office of Prospective Health or Student Health for guidance on treatment and the pathway to returning to work.