

# Contingency Planning for Research Supervisors

*Updated November 21, 2024*

This document is intended to help Cornell faculty and other members of our community consider contingency plans for research continuity in the event of work disruptions that could include labor actions. The university is engaged in negotiations with CGSU-UE and is committed to reaching a fair and reasonable contract with the union that will form the basis for a relationship of trust and mutual respect in the coming years. This document is informational and preparatory in nature in the event of any work disruption, including a strike or other labor action.

We encourage Cornell research supervisors to:

1. **Review the guidance below** and consider steps to take in managing your research in the event of a work disruption or labor action.
2. **Support a productive negotiation process with CGSU-UE** by becoming familiar with the university's [guidance for faculty interactions with graduate workers](#). Faculty who supervise graduate students should not threaten, interrogate, promise, or surveil members of the graduate worker bargaining unit.

Please note that guidance may change as circumstances evolve. Additional information and answers to [frequently asked questions](#) will be provided as developments warrant. Please consult the [Graduate Student Unionization Update website](#) for ongoing updates. If you have time-sensitive questions not currently addressed on the website, please email [graduateunionupdate@cornell.edu](mailto:graduateunionupdate@cornell.edu) for assistance.

## General Guidance

Graduate workers are first and foremost students of Cornell. Even when on strike, a graduate worker must maintain satisfactory academic progress toward their degree(s). This includes attending class, completing academic assignments, taking exams, continuing research toward their dissertation, and meeting the relevant academic milestones determined by their academic program. A full-time student is enrolled for a minimum of 12 academic credit hours each semester.

The following guidance is intended to help research supervisors plan for continuity should graduate workers choose to strike from their work (i.e., assistantship) responsibilities. In general, an assistantship corresponds to 15-20 hours of work or service/week.

## Communication

- Faculty who supervise graduate workers should not [threaten, interrogate, promise, or surveil members of the bargaining unit](#).
- Consistent with NLRB guidance, faculty who supervise graduate workers should not ask questions related to the strike, such as what the level of support for the strike is, how long it will last, etc.
- Once a strike is imminent, a supervisor may ask their graduate workers if they intend to continue working during the strike. However, such questioning must be done in strict accordance with the guidelines provided by the NLRB. Please see the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) for details on appropriate questions and topics.
- You cannot ask graduate workers to work for additional hours beyond that which would have been expected in an average week in accordance with their assistantship appointment, but you can ask them to ensure that important tasks are complete and ongoing activities are up to date.
- You can discuss any topic pertaining to academic progress, including academic research activities, programs of study, and classes and coursework, during a strike. See the [Distinguishing Between Academic Progress and Assistantship Duties guidance document <ADD LINK>](#) for details.

## Stipend

- Graduate workers who elect to strike will not receive their stipends because they will not be working.
- Graduate workers will be asked by the university to confirm whether they continue to work during a strike.

## Reassigning Responsibilities

- In the event of a strike, you can reassign or redistribute duties that fall into the job description and expertise of others.
- Other assistants can be hired on a temporary basis if they are qualified, including graduate students, whether or not they currently hold an assistantship. These appointments should be hourly, in lieu of a typical assistantship. See further information below.
- Before hiring contingent staff, discuss your options with your relevant department chair, dean's office or administrative/finance unit.

## Research Continuity

Research teams and approaches differ widely across campus and disciplines. Contingency planning to ensure the research enterprise is not significantly harmed by any labor action cannot be “one size fits all.” Each research supervisor and/or research team leader must carefully assess and plan according to the research operations and practices. The following 4-step framework is designed to facilitate this assessment and planning process.

### Step 1: Review Roles in Your Group

Review the responsibilities/projects of all members of your research (and for research groups, that of your group) to identify and be mindful of practices affected if student advisees (also described as mentees or trainees) were absent due to an unexpected life circumstance. If you have uncertainty about these responsibilities, consider these sources of information:

- Grant applications and agreements (e.g., scope of work, budget justifications)
- Position descriptions, roles, and responsibilities
- Standard operating procedures of research activities
- In lab-based research that may include data, equipment, or other artifacts, the lab-assigned regular tasks, both operational and safety-related.

### Step 2: Prioritize Functions

Of the responsibilities assigned to researchers on your team, which tasks are most critical and time sensitive? Which functions, if stopped or disrupted, would have the most consequential effects on the safety or viability of your research?

- Focus on responsibilities that relate to:
  - Human research participants with whom your team has ongoing responsibilities and trusted relationships
  - Animal or plant or other biological system care, including both experimental oversight and daily maintenance
  - Critical equipment requiring regular attention or maintenance

- Sensitive specimens or chemicals requiring attention
  - Key data collection or data management activities
  - Field work of various types, especially instances that are seasonal or time-bound using external resources and must be completed at a given time
  - Any additional tasks that cannot be paused or require regular input or attention
- Consider additional less-frequent tasks that may be affected if the labor action occurs over a prolonged period. For example:
    - Mentoring of new or less experienced team members
    - Ordering, receipt, or storage of materials and supplies
    - Equipment maintenance
    - Lab-level safety and emergency response
    - Lab Safety Coordinator duties that will need to be re-delegated within the lab, or taken on by the PI directly
    - Waste removal

### Step 3: Reassign Responsibilities

Based on the list of research tasks you have identified as critical and non-deferrable, consider whether alternative personnel could substitute if needed due to a work stoppage. This applies to lab-based research, office-based research, and field-based research. These questions may help you assess the feasibility of using alternative personnel to fill gaps in your research plan and team:

- Are there individuals within the research team, at Cornell, or beyond Cornell (e.g., those participating in the project collaboration) who can temporarily fill in?
- Do these individuals have the knowledge, skills, and experience to carry out the task?
- Do they require training and/or supervision to execute the task safely and properly?
- Have these individuals been approved on appropriate protocols (e.g., IRB, IACUC, APLAC, APB) to assume these tasks?

- For human subjects research, what obligations do you have toward participants in the study? Here, the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance is a resource.
- For animal or plant care, what alternative plans could address basic care and have you consulted with Cornell's expert staff teams who support aspects of these activities? Here, the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance ([ORIA](#)) and Cornell Animal Research and Education ([CARE](#)) are example resources.
- Develop shared plans and communicate to the rest of your research group.

#### *Consider Broader Implications for Remaining Staff*

- If you do not already have one, set up an emergency contact list for unexpected issues.
- If limited numbers of individuals remain to fulfill duties, how can they continue to work safely in the lab or equivalent research environment?
  - Review [working alone guidance](#) to determine how to best apply these principles to your lab or equivalent research environment.
- If additional tasks must be taken on for a prolonged period, how will the workload impact remaining research colleagues?
  - Consider issues of stress and mental health and be prepared to discuss with staff and HR.

If necessary, consider procedures for suspending research operations and restarting at a future date. Review the [Lab Energy Shutdown Tips](#) for further information.

If you would like feedback on your scenario planning, consider discussing your plans with your department and field colleagues with experience in such research adaptations. Staff in the [Office of Research Integrity and Assurance \(ORIA\)](#) also can address specific questions for your planning.

Remember that you are obliged to shift duties back to any assistants who have participated in the strike once the work stoppage is resolved.

#### **Step 4: Data Management and Security**

Be sure to safeguard research data and ensure data integrity:

- Ensure all data are backed up.

- Restrict access to data to authorized personnel only, and carefully consider what access is provided to alternative personnel.
- Review data management plans.
- Review and update permissions as necessary.