Graduate Student Safety and COVID19 Policy Adherence - Survey Results

11/19/2020

Introduction
The goal of this document is to use the data from the anonymous Sept/Oct 2020 survey conducted by the Chicago Graduate Student Association (CGSA) to better determine areas which students need additional support as a result of the COVID19 pandemic. This document was put together using numerical and written responses within the survey results and framed by the members of the COVID19 Committee. In this document we will focus on reports of transgressions by labs in regards to university policy.

Methods and Data Collection.
A survey link was emailed to graduate students using the CGSA and GLAC listservs. A total of 168 responses were received from graduate students that work on the Chicago (n=111), Evanston (n=43) or both (n=5) campuses or remotely (n=7). Our survey included questions regarding: Overall Comfort Level, Pressure To Return, Mask Wearing, Capacity Level Adherence, Social Distancing, Working Remotely, Research Plan Adherence, and PPE Access. Students were polled on a scale of 1-5 and short answers to elaborate responses were collected.

Capacity limits and social distancing policies have the highest level of noncompliance.
We found that a sizable number of students have dealt with transgressions of university policy in areas of capacity limits, mask wearing, research plan adherence, and remote working. In fact 41% of all the students surveyed marked a score of 3 or below (where 1 notes no adherence to policy, and 5 denotes complete adherence) for at least one of those categories.
Chicago campus graduate students report higher levels of noncompliance compared to Evanston campus graduate students.

Based on the survey data as well as COVID Committee Members’ perspectives, we found that transgressions were more common on the Chicago campus. Below we highlight some of the areas which policy adherence on the Chicago campus is particularly poorly rated.

On the Chicago campus 35% of respondents noted capacity level adherence of 3 or below, which is of particular concern. The following departments were reported with a score of 1 on capacity level adherence: Pharmacology, Cancer Center, Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Neurology (2), OB/GYN, Pathology, Pharmacology, Molecular Biosciences, Microbiology and Immunology, Biochemistry & Molecular Genetics. After capacity adherence, social distancing and research plan were the next lowest rated categories. Finally, remote working and PPE access had few to none low ratings.

Below you will find the major categories of concern split up by student program.
PIs take many approaches to falsely explain or circumvent Northwestern University COVID policies. Students responded with various methods that their advisors and PIs are instructing the lab to act against COVID policies with respect to the following categories:

- Capacity limit
  - PIs added collaborators to their list of workers to artificially increase the number of individuals, thus increasing the capacity limit
  - PIs argued that the lab space was large enough to allow for proper social distancing
  - PIs argued that masks are 100% effective, and therefore even if lab was at full capacity, everyone was protected
  - When student requested capacity limit to be enforced, PIs explained that it was too difficult to work around everyone’s experiments
  - PI explained they could not let the safety of one lab member be more important than the productivity of other lab members
  - PI said they were not aware of any capacity limit

- Pressure to return to work
  - Students were pressured indirectly to return to work to explain why they have not performed expected experiments
  - PI pointed out during lab meeting who was or was not at home and insinuated that they should be in lab
  - PI sent emails to members of the lab telling them to return to lab, because it was safe

Many students are not empowered to report observed noncompliance. We asked the following question in the survey:

“If your lab/group is not following university guidelines, do you feel comfortable bringing up your concerns to administration? Why or why not?”

65 out of 168 responses left a comment, with 38 answering “No” and 21 answering “Yes.”

Responses mentioned that PIs have no accountability for their actions:

Fear of retaliation and lack of true anonymity was another reason to not feel comfortable with reporting noncompliance:
Common “yes” responses attributed the reason to a positive relationship between them and their advisor/PI:

- Yes I would because we have an anonymous reporting form for concerns and I have a good relationship with my advisor...
- Yes, I want to prioritize my safety and I feel that my PI does as well.

While there are some students who feel comfortable with reporting violations of COVID guidelines, the majority of the students who responded do not feel comfortable. Based on the student's short responses on comfort with reporting noncompliance with university guidelines, we suggest that there is explicit communication from the higher University administration (deans) regarding COVID protocols (such as policy stating graduate students can not be forced to be essential workers, etc.). In addition, decisive administrative action against non compliant PIs is necessary, as many students have experienced that reporting can be a futile effort if PIs have a “final say” on their laboratory guidelines.

**Survey conclusions and recommendations moving forward to increase graduate student research safety.**

Overall, many students are feeling unsafe working on campus, especially on the Chicago campus due to an unsafe physical environment and the pressure to continue research. The students who feel safe continuing research on campus consistently cite a supportive and careful research advisor/PI. Northwestern University has useful and appropriate methods of reporting research safety concerns. However, pressure from PIs on students prevents use of these methods, leading to increased noncompliance. We highlight some of the reasons students are not able to report noncompliance as well as specific suggestions to reduce noncompliance below:

**Students’ concerns about reporting noncompliance:**
- PI will withdraw support for the student in subtle ways
- PI will actively damage a student's reputation
- Student will have to change labs
- Student may face visa or immigration concerns
- Administration will do nothing
- Administration will side with PI

**Suggestions to increase compliance:**
- Establish/enforce room capacity compliance through increased signage and increased random monitoring of compliance
- Redefine “essential worker” category to minimize unessential graduate student work
- Establish responsibility of administration to ensure compliance beyond or against PI oversight

These data reflect graduate student concerns and we believe these proposed changes to policy will increase safety during the COVID-19 pandemic for graduate students and NU researchers.