

The Return to Normalcy: Concerns About Returning to Work Associated with COVID-19

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BACKGROUND

- TCORS provide a broad range of research-related activities for trainees (graduate students and postdoctoral fellows) and early/junior/new investigators (EJNI) to build and improve research expertise in TRS
- These research-related activities were affected by stay-at-home orders in response to the pandemic¹
- CTSA scholars reported disruptions to their research, making it difficult to use their time productively
- This analysis aims to understand the concerns and perceptions of trainees and EJNI as they return to on-site work in order to better support TCORS trainees and EJNI during this transition

METHODS

- A survey was adapted from the Immediate Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on CTSA TL1 and KL2 Training and Career Development¹
- An email invitation containing a public REDCap² survey link was distributed to all TCORS trainees and EJNI through CASEL between March 24 and May 10, 2021
- Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively to compare gender, race/ethnicity, trainee status, starting environment, and research field of expertise
- Qualitative data were subsequently theme coded, involving open coding for initial domains of interest and then an axial coding strategy^{3,4}

RESULTS

- 35.7% of graduate students and 31.6% of postdocs reported concerns about returning to work
- 61.5% of graduate students had returned, while 61.1% of postdocs had not
- 61.9% of EJNI expressed concerns about returning to work and 70.0% had not returned
- 20.8% of data researchers expressed concerns about returning to work and 42.9% had returned to work
- 50.0% of lab researchers had concerns about returning to work and 81.0% had returned to work
- 95.0% of those who were concerned about returning to work were also offered the vaccine, and had returned to work
- 40.1% of respondents provided concerns about returning to work
- Increased exposure was the most reported concern about returning to work, and most respondents had no concerns about the vaccine

Figure 1: Return to Working In-Person Status Based on Field of Research



Figure 2: Concerns About Returning to Work Based on Field of Research

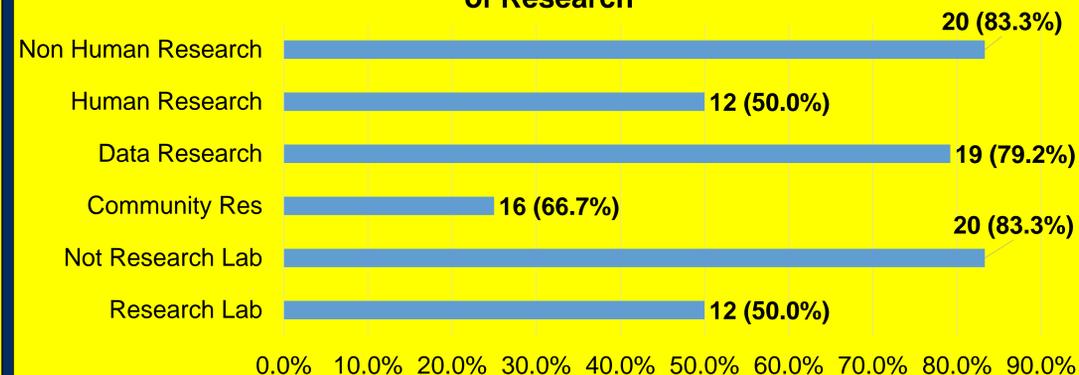


Figure 3: Campus Re-Opening Among Those Concerned About Returning to Work

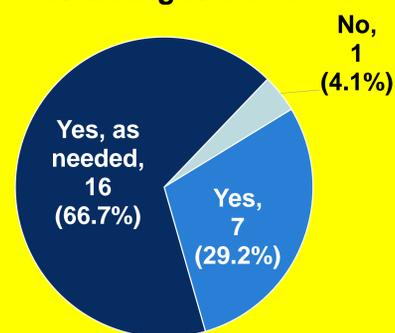


Figure 4: Campus Re-Opening Among Those Who Returned to Work

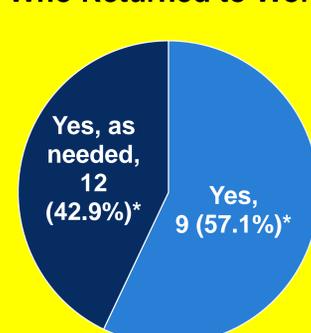


Table 1: Concerns About the COVID-19 Vaccine

Theme	N	Example Comments
Vaccine Development, Testing and Long Term Effects	7	How long is the effectiveness window?
Other	4	The distribution of vaccine has been slow. Pregnancy
None	1	I took it - I had no concerns
	9	n/a - very grateful to have received it!

Table 2: Concerns About Returning to Work

Theme	N*	Example Comments
Increased Risk of Exposure	14	having to rely on public transportation for my commute - increased risk for exposure and 2+ hours per day spent commuting instead of working Proximity of colleagues who do not follow CDC guidelines in their personal lives
Productivity	4	I have gotten used to working at home and find myself to be productive, so I am not looking forward to going back to the office all the time. [...]
Protocol Implementation	3	[...] office capacity and number of individuals at the office; a lot of the determination and collaborations between departments (e.g., how do we coordinate at 75% capacity between floors) gets left to PIs/Staff/Departments so it's a lot of additional effort to also try to establish a return to work while maintaining all research activities
Effects of COVID/ Vaccine	2	[...] Still, little is known about the vaccine in terms of how effective it is or how long the effects will last. [...]
Number of Cases	2	I do not want to return to work until COVID cases are low. [...]
Other	6	Our lab conducts human research where people are actively smoking/vaping in the lab. When I do go back, I will have to dress in full PPE for everyone's protection.

DISCUSSION

- COVID-related restrictions have redefined work environments of trainees/EJNI as they adapted to work-from home/hybrid models.
- Lab researchers, including non-human researchers, have reported the most concern, but have returned to work due to the inability to carry out their research remotely.
- As restrictions continue to be lifted and working in-person resumes, TCORS trainees and EJNI are once again experiencing a drastic change to their work environments and potentially a loss in productivity.
- Studies have shown that down-time caused by the pandemic has allowed scholars additional time to focus on specific aspects of their research such as data analysis, writing, and working on grant or fellowship applications^{5,6}.
- With the added stress of potential increased exposure and mistrust of institutional protocols, these results support the value of each institution and mentoring PIs conducting a needs assessment, proactively reaching out to their trainees/EJNI⁷.

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