



Dear Incoming BGS Student,

I am writing to update you as best I can on what the Fall may look like at Penn. As you can imagine, we are still considering as many options to provide an optimal experience for your graduate education and hope to send more finalized plans soon. While there is a lot of uncertainty around the state of the COVID19 pandemic in the fall, there are a few things we can be sure of based on our experience in the spring: 1) our programs are adaptable, flexible and were able to switch to on-line education without a gap in teaching, 2) we have learned a lot from our experiences in the spring and have developed strategies for virtual experiences for both courses and rotations, and 3) we are committed to providing you with an outstanding and minimally disrupted educational experience. Our goal is to provide you with as much flexibility and opportunity to engage on campus as it becomes possible to do so while keeping your health and safety our top priority. I am sharing what we know at this point.

**Courses.** Classes will begin on September 1 for the fall term. We are planning to run all large BGS classes remotely to ensure the safety of our students. Smaller classes may consider a combination of remote and in-person sessions, as long as everyone can be safely and fully accommodated. Any classes or discussions that MAY take place in person will also be available to stream on-line so that any student not on campus can participate remotely in all of the class sessions. We successfully transitioned many courses to a remote mode in mid-Spring 2020, and we have great confidence that remote instruction in the fall will be at the usual high level.

**Research.** As you may know, most wet-bench lab research at Penn was paused in mid-March due to the pandemic. Plans have been established to ensure the safety of our trainees and community during re-entry, in three phases. **Phase I**, beginning now, allows research only at low density within the laboratories. **Phase II**, which will occur only when conditions continue to improve, will permit the staffing of laboratories to medium density, with stringent safeguards still in place to protect everyone's well-being. **Phase III**, which will occur only with further lessening of risk, will permit more normal levels of research, but with safeguards still in place. More details are available here: <https://research.upenn.edu/resources/resumption/>

Our current students can return to laboratory work on a voluntary basis. Thus, students who are willing and able to participate in lab research voluntarily and who agree to adhere to the safety measures put in place to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV2, will be eligible to start an in-lab rotation at some point during the fall semester on a voluntary basis. Any student who has concerns about re-entering the laboratory in Phase I or Phase II for any reason such as their personal health or health of loved ones with whom they live should not work in the laboratory until Phase III.

All students will have the opportunity to begin their fall laboratory rotation in a virtual (on-line) format with the possibility of coming into lab depending on the safety of the laboratory research plan, the readiness of the PI to take rotation students, and, most importantly, that the student chooses to enter the laboratory voluntarily. Some students will be able to have essentially full experiences on-line doing "dry" research, for example in labs in Genomics and Computational Biology or Biostatistics and Epidemiology. For student who work in disciplines requiring "wet" lab experience we have prepared a virtual experience to acquire background knowledge and skills, design projects, and experience lab culture via on-line interactions, then transition to in-lab experiences

when appropriate. If virtual rotations are necessary through the full semester, students will have the opportunity to set-up in-lab experiences with those labs at a later time.

**Orientation and Advising.** We are developing a completely remote Orientation Program that will begin on August 17. Some events will engage the whole entering class, and some (including advising sessions) will involve your specific graduate groups and programs. We also will spread out these activities so you are not overwhelmed by too many consecutive hours of screen time. More details will be provided in July.

**Financial Commitment.** Your fellowship (tuition, fees, stipend and health insurance) are guaranteed under all circumstances. So while there is some uncertainty about the reopening of the campus this fall, you need not be concerned about the status of your financial support. August stipend will be received on August 31, and [Penn Student Health Insurance](#) coverage begins August 1. More information about payroll will be sent separately.

**Relocation information.** Once the University moves to Phase III of re-entry, students will be expected to be on campus. However, since the fall semester will begin under Phase I (or potentially Phase II) conditions, relocation will depend on your personal circumstance. Some of you may still choose to move to the Philadelphia area later this summer. In this case, your proximity will prepare you for any transition to in-lab rotations or in-person course sessions. Others may choose not to relocate to the area for the start of the semester, weighing personal concerns about health, safety and family needs. Such a decision to delay relocation will not require an explanation or justification, nor will it be viewed negatively in any way by BGS or your graduate group. Although the timing of Phase III is unknown at this point, you will receive frequent updates on any movement towards Phase III so you may plan accordingly. Even though you will not be local for the semester's beginnings, we assure you that you will be able to participate remotely throughout and be fully integrated into your program in as engaged a manner as possible.

**International Students.** The University's [Office of International Students and Scholars Services](#) is addressing enrollment of new international students, and we expect to have more information for you soon.

We understand that the complexities of the situation may leave you with unanswered questions. For this reason, we are planning to host a town hall for incoming BGS students. Details will be provided soon.

We must remain flexible as the COVID situation could evolve and plans are subject to change. In conclusion, we hope this provides the information necessary to plan your upcoming academic year. Please note that later this month there will be the university announcement on how we intend to operate as a campus community in the fall semester. This includes the Penn Campus Student Compact each of us are asked to follow that provides the best practices for limiting the spread of COVID-19. We are deeply proud of the ways in which the Penn community has risen to the challenge of this pandemic and are confident in our ability to navigate the year ahead in cooperation with the Penn community of students, faculty, and staff. In the meantime, we wish you safety and good health, and look forward to seeing you in person, as soon as that is possible.

BGS and the graduate group leaders are working closely with the University and the School of Medicine on the fall semester planning process, and we will continue to provide you with information as it becomes available. We appreciate your patience and look forward to connecting with you, virtually at first but eventually in person!

Sincerely,



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