MKI Research Restart Guidance

MIT is planning for a limited restart to on-campus research that could begin as soon as Summer 2020. By this point Massachusetts should be past its initial wave of individuals who have contracted COVID-19, but it is unlikely that a full testing suite will be in place. Therapeutics and vaccines will likely be many months away. The goals will be (1) to minimize the chances of a mini-outbreak on campus in any department or lab, and (2) to ensure that instances of potential exposure are identified promptly, and affected persons are vectored to proper medical care and do not spread the virus to others. A guiding principle is that MIT work should not expose our personnel to any more risk than they would experience from participating in general society of greater Boston.

For this reason, during the restart we should anticipate that any employee who can work effectively from home will still be instructed to do so. The ramp-up will initially involve personnel who require regular physical access to campus to perform their job duties. At MKI we expect that this will start with groups working on lab experiments and instrumentation.

Space density on campus will be carefully managed for students and employees, and access will be configured to promote social distancing and proper hygiene while maintaining personnel safety. MIT is adding new functionality to its Space Management database, which already has information on the footprint and responsible individual for each room or lab on campus. MKI will be seeking help from PIs to document which specific researchers require access to each room and lab in our three properties.

This information will be added to the database and used to check that density in each room is consistent with guidelines on square footage per person. The density will conform with CDC recommendations on spacing, with some margin for equipment, furniture, and movement. We do not yet have official guidance on square footage requirements. Early discussions have suggested roughly 160 square feet per person in a lab environment, but analysis of other classrooms and public spaces has not been shared. Where access needs exceed available space, groups can plan to schedule tasks in shifts. The Space Management database will be able to verify that proposed shift schedules comply with density limits.

Many public health experts stress the importance of testing, contact tracing, isolation, etc in managing COVID prior to development of herd immunity or a vaccine. MIT has significant testing capabilities through the Broad and Ragon Institutes, and our researchers have been piloting both RNA and antibody testing. However as of today, any discussions about systematic testing/tracing as part of the ramp-up program are at the brainstorming stage only.