

# HEALTH AND EDUCATION COVID-19 RESPONSE: RESEARCH ENTERPRISE IMPACTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

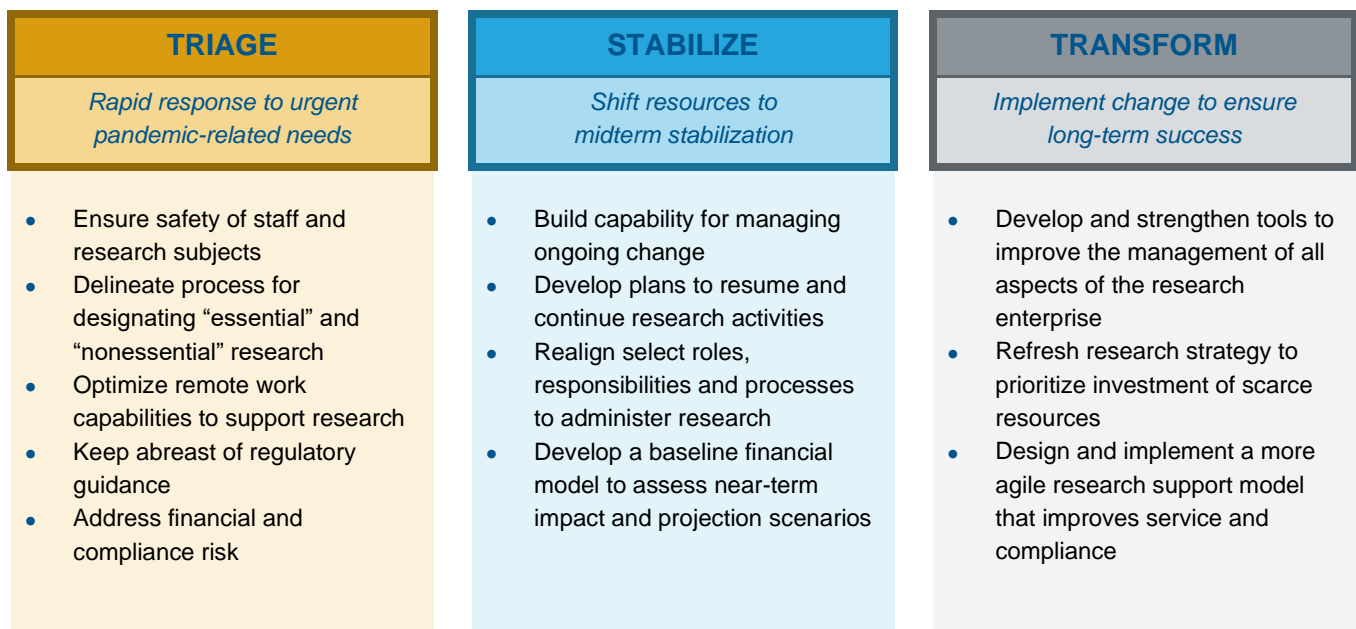
The immediate demands of the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in prompt and thoughtful actions by institutional leaders to ensure the safety of students, faculty, staff, and the human and animal subjects involved in the research programs. Given the closure of most labs and the inevitable shift in funding priorities, research institutions across the country face their own unique challenges and opportunities.

Although the environment is still rapidly changing, it's clear there will be a "new normal" during which research institutions will have to stabilize their operations and continue vital work. It's uncertain how long this period will last or exactly what the long term will look like, but there will undoubtedly be increased emphasis on understanding the key funding and financial realities resulting from the pandemic. This knowledge will form the basis for prioritization of research portfolios and even greater focus on strategic alignment, financial stability and risk management.

Research in medical, biological, sociobehavioral and many other fields will be critical to developing solutions to the pandemic, and as such, supporting a robust research enterprise has never been more important. Strategic research leaders will need to develop stronger alignment between the research portfolio and institutional strategic priorities. As institutions innovate in bolder ways, the collegial sharing of ideas will continue to strengthen institutions.

In a [recent white paper](#), Huron outlined a three-phase framework for higher education's evolution through this pandemic and impending recession. In this framework, the sector enters first into a triage phase, then transitions to a period of stabilization while it begins to explore opportunities for fundamental transformation.

Leaders across the research enterprise can benefit from this model, and there are implications that should be considered as they navigate each phase.



## Triage: Assess the Impact of Known Changes

By now, many institutions have made critical decisions regarding which research activities and staff fall under the category of “essential.” Investigators, institutional review boards (IRB), and institutional animal care and use committees (IACUC) have been called to determine whether study-specific COVID-19 risk mitigation plans are needed for research involving human and animal subjects. For research that can be placed temporarily on hold, maintenance of those programs (equipment, cell lines, animals, reagents, trained personnel, etc.) is a top priority. Technology such as electronic signatures and remote access are suddenly more valuable. Numerous federal publications have initially addressed salary support, financial reporting, grant submission and other [compliance and regulatory matters](#).

## Stabilize: Evaluate the “Known Unknowns”

Stabilization is about creating a new, sustainable paradigm for the various administrative, regulatory, financial and scientific support activities necessary to maintain the research mission. Common elements of these new paradigms include guidelines for working from home, clinical trial participant screenings, updated schedules and protocols that incorporate social distancing for those employees who need to work on-site, provisions for managing or adapting paper-based processes, and enhanced communication pathways.

Continuity plans may be tested as infection rates vary locally and personnel may be unable to work due to personal or family illness. As the contours of the pandemic continue to evolve, the environment in which institutions operate is also likely to continue to change over the next several months. In this regard, institutions should develop a process for quickly and effectively adapting to these ongoing shifts. This might include the creation of targeted committees and an overarching “command center” to help prioritize issues, coordinate across teams and organize resources.

Federal sponsors of research are providing additional [flexibility](#) around funding and reporting, but institutions will need to remain focused on financial compliance, especially with respect to documentation and any funding specifically for pandemic-related efforts. Institutions should also begin evaluating and updating their financial models for the research enterprise to account for short- and longer-term effects of the crisis.

## Transformation: Design an Improved and Sustainable Paradigm

As COVID-19 continues to cause operational and financial challenges for research institutions, having a process to allocate scarce resources across a variety of possible investments will become essential. Institutions will want to maintain research capacity and activity across key areas, but constraints in resources will increase the criticality of the focused deployment of those assets. At the same time, leaders should carefully consider areas in which investments and resources can have the greatest impact, both for the institution and society.

Institutions now need to form task forces to evaluate the benefits of stronger alignment of the research program portfolio to the institution’s overarching strategic priorities. Critical to long-term success will be the exploration of more innovative operating models to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the research enterprise. A comprehensive understanding of the costs of various research programs and their alignment to institutional priorities and funding trends will help ensure that resources make the greatest impact.

Experiments with adopting more innovative service delivery models to create stronger partnerships and alignment across the enterprise are also advised. Outsourced services will likely prove to be an increasingly necessary reality as institutions accommodate a remote workforce. With these shifts in mind, the adoption of standard business processes and software-as-a-service (SaaS) technology will help enhance and sustain high-quality service and risk management. Transformation efforts — even as triage and stabilization efforts continue to require attention — have the best probabilities of achieving research program sustainability and success.

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