

Graduate Student Disability Alliance: Statement on Phase 1 reopening of labs

Date: May 30, 2020

The Graduate Student Disability Alliance will not support a reopening of labs for nonessential research until the administration makes substantial improvements in its plan to support disabled and chronically ill students and staff. While returning to work is currently voluntary for graduate students involved in nonessential research, essential staff such as custodians and shuttle drivers do not have this option. We therefore feel that it is in the best interest of the health and safety of the Yale and New Haven community to delay phase one lab reopening until more stringent safety measures are implemented and accessibility is prioritized in the reopening plans. Currently, many safety plans recommend that researchers avoid using elevators, avoid eating during 8 hour long shifts, and walk or bike to work. These recommendations all pose major barriers to many disabled researchers. Moreover, recent research indicates that 6-feet of separation may not be sufficient to protect individuals from COVID-19 infection when in an indoor setting such as labs, and questions about the ventilation of the lab spaces have gone unanswered. Although students currently have the choice to stay home, the University has also failed to answer how these students will be supported if they are unable to make research progress due to prolonged inaccessibility of labs.

Students with concerns about lab accessibility are directed to contact either their faculty supervisors, meaning that they may have to disclose their health status, or Student Accessibility Services, an office with four employees to handle the needs of thousands of students. Rather than placing the burden on individual students to advocate for the safety and accessibility of their labs, centralized measures from the University administration will ensure that all labs and departments are supporting their disabled students. In the midst of the pandemic responses that have consistently and often willfully sacrificed the safety and well-being of individuals with disabilities, Yale must ensure that its policies are unmarred by an ableist agenda that unjustly disadvantages members of its community.