

Leading and Mentoring in Research Supporting At-Risk Users

A CCC Research Supporting At-Risk Users (SARU) Brief

Research supporting at-risk users (SARU) requires scientific leaders to not only produce rigorous science, but also navigate the unique challenges of training, mentoring, and leading teams to do this work. For scientists leading SARU research teams across academia, industry, and civil society, the following high-level guidance can shape a strategic mentoring approach.

Build strong scientific foundations before specialized expertise in high-risk research

SARU research requires two main skills: **(a) how to do high-quality research** and **(b) the topical knowledge of and demonstrable respect for at-risk populations** needed to navigate research risks. Early-stage researchers often come to a SARU project motivated by the latter, and in some cases have deep experience with their population. A lab leader's responsibility is to **ensure their work builds on a foundation of rigorous research skill**, so they can become thoughtful consumers and, eventually, themselves leaders of high-quality SARU research.

We recommend **giving early-stage researchers low-stakes learning environments** to practice foundational skills like project scoping, literature review, methodology, and analysis before leading new work on a high-risk topic. Lab leaders might consider having an early-stage researcher serve as second- or third-author on a project led by a more senior researcher. Faculty can facilitate these environments by hosting senior graduate students in their labs, or collaborating with senior researchers on group projects.

Proactive and collaborative support plans are the foundation for a successful project

Support plans are a key part of how we keep ourselves, our collaborators, and our participants safe. **Support plans are not one-size-fits-all**, and should be adapted as project, researcher, and external circumstances evolve. Key best practices include being proactive and collaborative. Leaders can set norms that **support plans are developed at the start of a project, not in response to incidents**. Leaders can also ensure every team member has a range of support beyond their supervisors (e.g., peers in other labs, or mentors at other institutions). To develop a support plan, consider the [SARU Report](#).

Often, what's needed is support with the emotional experience of doing this work. The particular pressures of SARU research can be compounded by the innate stress of graduate studies and the publish-or-perish culture common in academia. Lab leaders can **encourage students to set work-life boundaries, be proactive about seeking professional mental health support, and lead by example**.

Another often-needed area of support is how to handle the productivity pressures of SARU research. This work can feel urgent, as at-risk users experience real-world harms every day. It can also take longer than anticipated, for reasons internal (e.g., a researcher's specific triggers), and external to the project (e.g., data breaches, current events). Lab leaders can **set expectations** that timelines can be highly variable, and often longer than expected, from approval to recruitment and study execution.

Finally, SARU research can create safety risks for researchers themselves. Leaders should be equipped to **help team members handle risks like harassment, doxxing, and reputational harm**. In this, leaders should be aware of when institutional resources like researcher safety trainings can be helpful and what other institutional resources exist, and give individual team members the ultimate say in the risks they accept.

Build community beyond the lab

Problems facing at-risk populations are varied, but not all of them sit at the intersection between people, information, and technology. What can a sociotechnical perspective (e.g., specific methods or theories) bring to bear on the problem in question? Does your research team have the right expertise, resources, and institutional support to address a meaningful aspect of the problem? Is this problem one where a sociotechnical approach can make change that would be meaningful to the impacted population? It can be incredibly powerful to **collaborate with experts on complementary disciplines** to make progress, or sharpen your research questions to those you are best suited to address.

Beyond leading teams that conduct good work, scientists can also help build the community of practice in SARU research. Consider supporting convenings like workshops and asynchronous groups where we **build community across labs and institutions**. These convenings are core to the informal connections that help us each get resources and support beyond what individual institutions can provide. Consider also how to **build professional pathways** for long-term careers in at-risk research. How can we help reviewers, promotion committees, managers, and funders understand the unique challenges of this work, and meaningfully support it? By intentionally prioritizing community-building, we can ensure sustainable futures for the entire SARU research community.



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CCC Report

Supporting At-Risk Users Through
Responsible Computing



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