INTRODUCTION

Entry into graduate school can be a stressful experience as students are presented with a large and complicated amount of information. Therefore, each academic unit offering a graduate degree must develop a Graduate Handbook containing the essential features of this Graduate Handbook Template, as well as information particular to the respective academic unit and/or college. The Graduate Handbook will inform students on course and program requirements, on the timetable for the selection of a faculty advisor and the formation of a guidance committee, on examinations and graduation requirements and policy for dismissal as required by the Graduate Students Rights and Responsibilities (http://www.vps.msu.edu/SpLife/default.pdf) document.

The Handbook will be given to all entering graduate students. As an option to a hard copy, the Handbook may be provided on a web site; students should be notified as to where they can access the online copy.

All entering graduate students will participate in an orientation session(s) organized by the academic unit and/or college. Students entering “off-cycle” will be given the Handbook at the time of entry and will be required to participate in the next scheduled orientation. Units will ensure that a faculty member designated to act for the unit will advise entering students who have not chosen a faculty advisor on course selection and degree requirements.

Units should annually review their Handbook to ensure the accuracy of information provided to entering students. An out of date Handbook can add to the stress of entering students while an accurate Handbook can help minimize stress and disputes, and help ensure successful degree completion.

Graduate Handbooks must be consistent with University and college policies. Units should consult current versions of the following documents and may incorporate them by reference in the different sections of the handbook; or reference them in an appendix with links to the appropriate document.

- Academic Programs
  http://www.reg.msu.edu/AcademicPrograms/Default.asp
- Graduate Students Rights and Responsibilities (GSRR)
  http://www.vps.msu.edu/SpLife/default.pdf
- MSU/GEU Contract
• Guidelines for Graduate Student Advising and Mentoring Relationships  
  http://grad.msu.edu/publications/docs/studentadvising.pdf

• Guidelines for Integrity in Research and Creative Activities  
  http://grad.msu.edu/publications/docs/integrityresearch.pdf

This Template is designed to include all of the important sections for a Ph.D. program, but all graduate programs must have a handbook. The Template should be modified for course-based Masters programs and for other Master’s degree programs. A handbook for such a program may be limited to a listing of course requirements, the nature of the certifying examination if required, the office where a student could petition for a course waiver or substitution and reference to the appropriate documents listed above.

Section X, entitled “WORK RELATED POLICIES” is intended for graduate students employed in their major department/school. When a graduate student is employed in another unit, the policies of that unit apply. In all cases, units must follow contractual rules and University policies.

Units developing or revising their Handbook may wish to consult Handbooks from units with a similar mission. The Graduate School is also prepared to provide advice and review drafts. The Graduate Schools web site for the Handbook Template will be updated with “new developments” when significant changes occur.

**Organization of the Handbook Template:**

This Template contains ten sections that address fundamental topics and concerns about graduate education. Each section starts with a brief description of the “Intent” of the section and includes a list of “What to include” as well as “Policy Recommendations” that are endorsed by The Graduate School and by the University Graduate Council (UGC). The majority of the Policy Recommendations are from the Guidelines for Graduate Student Advising and Mentoring Relationships or from the Guidelines for Integrity in Research and Creative Activities. The lists of what to include reflect input from the Ombudsman, the staff of the Graduate School, the Office of International Students and Scholars, the Diversity Advisory Group to the Vice-Presidents, the Graduate Associate/Assistant Deans and graduate students from four different colleges.
I. PROGRAM OVERVIEW

**Intent:** It is essential for entering students to understand the goals and objectives of the graduate program. This section should serve as a “road map” for graduate students to see the big picture in their degree programs and to begin to understand the expectations of the faculty. This section may also include a statement about the overarching mission of the department/school and a description of the organization of the department/school. Opportunities for student participation in different departmental/school activities (including ad hoc and standing committees) could be explained in this section (GSRR 6.1.1 – 6.1.3). This section provides an opportunity for the department/school to underscore the importance of attracting and retaining a diverse group of graduate students and of the importance of diversity among peers and faculty for the professional development of all graduate students.

**What to include:**

- Explain how the graduate training/education provided by the program is connected to the appropriate disciplinary practices and goals.
- Make explicit the expectations of the program, including attendance to “brown bags,” dissertation proposal and defense presentations, and professional meetings.
- Make explicit any expectations about demonstrable mastery of the subject matter at the different stages of the training program.
- Judiciously selected quotes from current students and/or faculty may be added to enrich the information about the department/school included in this section.
II. PROGRAM COMPONENTS/PLAN OPTIONS

*Intent:* This section should explain the elements that constitute the degree program including any plan options (such as Plan A or Plan B Masters options) and possible participation in interdisciplinary programs.

*What to include:*

- Provide an explanation of comprehensive exams and Plan B qualifying exams (e.g., type and general content of the exam, how pass or fail is determined, number of times a student can repeat the test, definition of what constitutes a partial or conditional pass, deadlines for successful completion of the exam, number of times the exam can be retaken).
- Be explicit when stating the goals and purpose of the comprehensive/qualifying exam, the required course work and the thesis/dissertation.
- Describe any options for specializations, cognates or certificates.
- Describe what constitutes an official plan of study and how it relates to the program components.
III. DEGREE REQUIREMENTS

**Intent:** Once the various aspects/components of the degree program have been explained, the requirements necessary for successful completion of those components should be specified. It is very important to distinguish between these two categories. It is important to keep all of the requirements in one location, so that there are no hidden requirements (GSRR 2.3.3).

**What to include:**

- Provide a comprehensive list of requirements for each program in the unit, including any laboratory rotations, internships or apprenticeships. Include here: admission and candidacy requirements, course requirements, language requirements, research/research credits requirements and teaching requirements.
- Explain what is meant by provisional acceptance to the program, and identify any deadlines to completion of any remedial work referred to in the provisional acceptance.
- Describe the English-language proficiency requirements for international students.
- Prepare a table that outlines the requirements and their due dates and time limits (GSRR 2.4.4). A system of cross-referencing the various requirements to an appendix with copies of the corresponding forms is generally very useful.
- Provide a year-by-year synopsis of the degree program(s).
- Explain any residency requirements and residency fees (GSRR 2.4.3).
- Provide a checklist of university/college/department/school forms and deadlines and explain how they relate to the procedures for graduation/degree certification.
IV. SELECTION OF THESIS/DISSERTATION ADVISOR

Intent: Initiation and successful completion of independent research or creative activity requires early and continued advice and oversight by a faculty advisor on behalf of the academic unit. Therefore, academic units will develop policies and procedures to ensure that the faculty advisor of each graduate student will be selected in a timely fashion and that the relationship between the graduate student and the faculty advisor will be conducive to a successful academic experience and training in research or creative activities. Particular attention must be devoted to mentoring across cultural barriers and to the special needs of non-traditional students. The unit must also develop the policies and procedures to insure appropriate advising and mentoring for entering students that have not identified a permanent thesis/dissertation advisor; this is of particular importance for programs that require several short-term rotations during the first year in the program.

Policy Recommendations:

- The time line for the selection of a permanent faculty advisor will be specified.
- Appropriate advising, supervision and mentoring will be provided to entering students before a permanent faculty advisor is identified.
- Units should be particularly sensitive to the cultural fit of advisor-student relationship; communication and background experiences play a significant role in the student’s understanding of the expectations of the graduate program.
- The academic unit will establish procedures to help incoming graduate students select a faculty advisor.
- The selection of the permanent faculty advisor will be submitted for approval to the chair/director of the academic unit, or the director of graduate studies, or a committee of the academic unit.
- The academic unit will establish guidelines and expectations for successful faculty advising consistent with the Guidelines for Graduate Student Advising and Mentoring Relationships.

What to include:

- Describe the qualifications necessary to serve as a thesis/dissertation advisor.
- Describe the role and responsibilities of the thesis/dissertation advisor.
- Describe the responsibilities of the student, the department/school and of the major professor when the major professor leaves MSU before the student completes his/her degree program.
• Describe the responsibilities of the unit administrator when a student and/or faculty advisor can no longer work together.
• Provide information about how to select a permanent advisor and how to change advisors if that becomes necessary.
V. FORMATION OF THE GUIDANCE COMMITTEE

**Intent:** The guidance committee is expected to share responsibility for reviewing the graduate student’s progress and guiding the student toward completion of course and program requirements. Therefore, academic units will develop policies to ensure that the guidance committee of each graduate student will be formed in a timely fashion and that its composition will ensure proper guidance of the graduate student and maintenance of high professional standards in the graduate student’s studies and research or creative activity.

**Policy Recommendations:**

- The academic unit will establish a time line for forming a guidance committee.
- The academic unit will establish procedures to advise graduate students on how to choose the members of their guidance committee.
- The composition of the guidance committee will be submitted to the chair/director of the academic unit for approval. To ensure uniform standards across the academic unit, the chair/director may add one appropriate member to the guidance committee.

**What to include:**

- Provide instruction on how to form a thesis/dissertation committee (including: deadline, minimum number of faculty from inside the program/major and number allowed or required from outside the program/major).
- Provide information on how to change the composition of a constituted committee (GSRR 2.4.2; 2.4.2.4).
- Provide information about who can serve as members of guidance committees, including faculty outside the student’s program or department/school and the responsibilities of the committee members.
VI. THESIS/DISSertation Defense AND Final ORAL Examination

Intent: The final master’s or doctoral examination is the culmination of a student’s graduate education and training and reflects not only on the accomplishments of the graduate student but also on the quality of the graduate program. Therefore, academic units will develop policies and procedures that will ensure the maintenance of expected professional standards in the preparation of the written documents and in the oral defense of the thesis/dissertation. An approved thesis/dissertation that is accepted by the graduate school is a single-author publication and contributes to the body of knowledge of the discipline.

Policy Recommendations:

• The graduate student will present the results of the thesis/dissertation in a seminar open to the community.
• To ensure fairness in the examination procedure and maintenance of academic standards, the dean of the college or the chair/director of the academic unit may appoint an outside member to the examining committee. The outside member of the committee will read and critique the thesis/dissertation, will participate in the oral part of the exam, and will submit a report to the dean of the college and/or the chair/director of the academic unit.

What to include:

• Define the nature and scope of the thesis/dissertation (GSRR 2.4.6).
• Make explicit any requirements and/or expectations concerning the publication or submission of research that constitutes or is part of a thesis or dissertation.
• Provide a list of recent theses/dissertations accepted by the department and/or provide the location where they can be found.
VII. DEPARTMENTAL POLICIES: ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

*Intent:* Graduate students have a right to periodic evaluation of their academic progress, performance, and professional potential (GSRR 2.4.8). Therefore, academic units will develop procedures to review the performance of each graduate student at least once a year. To ensure a comprehensive assessment of the student’s performance as well as the student’s satisfaction in the graduate program, academic units are advised to consider a two-tier review system; namely, a review by the guidance committee and faculty advisor and a review by an independent third party, such as chair/director of the academic unit, the director of graduate studies, or a committee. This section of the handbook should explain the evaluation procedures and should make explicit the policies for dismissal due to academic deficiencies.

**Policy Recommendations:**

- The guidance committee will review at least once a year the graduate student’s progress in his or her research or creative activity as well as plans for work in the coming year (GSRR 2.4.8). A report on the results of this review will be signed by the members of the guidance committee and by the graduate student. This report will be filed with the chair/director of the academic unit and will be placed in the graduate student’s file, together with any response that the graduate student may attach to the report of the guidance committee.

- Once a year, the faculty advisor and the graduate student will complete the appropriate portions of an annual progress report form, such as the one prepared by the UGC in 2000 and adopted by the Graduate School ([http://grad.msu.edu/forms/](http://grad.msu.edu/forms/) under the Faculty Staff section there are progress reports for doctoral students, Masters Plan A and Masters Plan B). The faculty advisor and graduate student will meet to discuss this evaluation and, if applicable, sources of funding. The faculty advisor and the graduate student will sign the completed annual progress report, which will be submitted to the chair/director of the academic unit or the director of graduate studies and will be placed into the graduate student’s file. The annual evaluation by the advisor should be coordinated with the review of the student’s progress by the guidance committee; the two reports may be combined to avoid duplication. Graduate students who wish to appeal any part of the faculty advisor’s evaluation may do so in writing to the chair/director of the academic unit or the director of graduate studies, and this appeal will be filed together with the annual progress report.

- Academic units are advised to institute as policy a meeting of the unit chair/director, or the director of graduate studies, or a faculty committee with each graduate student to review all aspects of the annual progress report. At this occasion, the graduate student has the opportunity to
discuss with the chair/director of the academic unit, the director of graduate studies, or the committee any aspects of his or her studies that seem relevant for successful completion of the graduate program, including problems that may hinder progress, and any appeal of the faculty advisor’s evaluation (see above). Recommendations based on this review will be communicated in writing to the faculty advisor and the graduate student within two weeks of the meeting, and that report will be placed in the graduate student’s file.

What to include:

- Define what is considered “acceptable academic standing” (GSRR 2.3.3) and what is considered as “making satisfactory progress toward a degree”.
- Inform the students of their right to receive a warning when academic performance or progress is judged to be unsatisfactory (GSRR 2.4.8.1 and 2.4.8.2).
- Provide an inventory of the typical content of a student’s departmental file. Note that for teaching assistants a separate “personnel file” is prescribed by the GEU/MSU contract.
- Inform the students of their right to access their educational records (GSRR 3.2.3) and explain the procedures to follow to view those records.
- Explain the policy for grading comprehensive/qualifying examinations and the policy for any remediation in case the student fails the exam or part of the exam.
- Provide explicit criteria used for dismissals due to academic deficiencies, including number of grades below 3.0 and number of failed attempts to pass qualifying exams and comprehensive exams that result in dismissal from the program.
VIII. DEPARTMENTAL POLICIES: INTEGRITY AND SAFETY IN RESEARCH AND CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

**Intent:** Integrity in research and creative activities is based on sound disciplinary practices as well as on a commitment to basic values such as fairness, equity, honesty and respect. Students learn to value professional integrity and high standards of ethical behavior through interaction with members of their academic unit and their faculty advisor and by emulating exemplary behavior. This section of the handbook should state the program’s expectations for the responsible conduct of research and creative activities of graduate students (GSRR 2.4.7) and should present explicit criteria for dismissal for reasons other than academic deficiencies, including research misconduct, dishonesty with respect to grades or academic records and scholarship, and violations of professional standards.

**Policy Recommendations:**

- Each faculty advisor and graduate student will be provided with the document *Guidelines for Integrity in Research and Creative Activities* ([http://grad.msu.edu/publications/docs/integrityresearch.pdf](http://grad.msu.edu/publications/docs/integrityresearch.pdf)).
- The academic unit will develop as part of its academic program mechanism for communicating and discussing standards of professional integrity appropriate for the discipline.
- The academic unit will inform students of MSU policy related to the use of humans and vertebrate animals for research.
- The academic unit will inform the student about the Office of Radiation Chemical and Biological Safety (ORCBS) regulations and policies related to laboratory safety and security including issues related to the handling of transgenic plants and pathogenic organisms.

**What to include:**

- Provide explicit criteria for dismissal due to unethical or dishonest behavior while engaged in research, scholarly and creative activities (GSRR 2.4.9).
- Provide explicit criteria for what constitutes a violation of professional standards. Expectations about professional conduct should be set by the unit based upon the prevailing disciplinary standards and when appropriate by the standards demanded by external accrediting agencies.
- Provide instructions on how to obtain approval from the Human Research Protection Program and/or from the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) for the respective use of humans and vertebrate animals for research.
- Provide instruction on how to comply with regulations monitored by ORCBS.
IX. STUDENT CONDUCT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

**Intent:** The University has established a judicial structure and process for hearing and adjudicating alleged violations of recognized graduate student rights and responsibilities (GSRR, Article 5). The first venue to resolve such conflicts informally or formally rests within the academic unit. Because the faculty advisor-graduate student relationship is deemed so important, special attention should be given to the resolution of conflicts between a graduate student and his or her faculty advisor.

**Policy Recommendations:**

- The academic unit will establish hearing procedures for the resolution of conflicts between a graduate student and his or her faculty advisor or guidance committee and will communicate these procedures to each graduate student. The initial task of conflict resolution may rest with the chair/director of the academic unit, the director of graduate studies, or a committee (GSRR 5.1.2).
- The academic unit will establish procedures for the timely change of the faculty advisor when such a change would best serve the progress of the graduate student in his or her program.

**What to include:**

- Provide explicit expectations for graduate students’ professional behavior and explicit criteria for dismissal for failure to display professionally accepted behavior.
- Provide and explain the departmental/school policy for handling grievances and appeals.
- Provide explicit guidelines for dealing with conflicts of interest between students and faculty and between students.

Note: check with the Ombudsman’s office to ensure that the policies conform to MSU policy.
X. WORK RELATED POLICIES

*Intent*: This section should make explicit the units expectations concerning graduate student’s work related to graduate assistantships. All policies related to graduate assistantships must be consistent with GSRR 4.2.1 – 4.2.8. For graduate assistants appointed as teaching assistants, the policy also must conform to the specifications of the current MSU/GEU Contract.

*Policy Recommendations:*

- Provide a mechanism to inform teaching assistants about their rights and responsibilities under the current version of the contract between MSU and the GEU.
- Provide a mechanism to inform all graduate students about their health insurance options.

*What to include:*

- Explain the criteria for awarding, renewing and terminating graduate assistantships, including length of eligibility, and the process used to evaluate the students’ performance. (Cite MSU/GEU Contract, where appropriate.)
- Explain the policy for graduate assistant leave and expectations about vacations and leave to attend professional meetings.
- Explain any policies related to outside work for pay.
- Explain any policies concerning the use of departmental resources such as computers, offices, copy-machines, office supplies, mailboxes and telephones.
- Explain the English-language proficiency level (e.g., minimum score in the SPEAK test) expected of international teaching assistants (see *Academic Programs* for the minimum all-University standard of English proficiency).
XI. UNIVERSITY RESOURCES

Intent: This section should include a list of university resources available to all graduate students with particular attention to those that apply to the discipline/mission of the unit.