



Tip Sheet: Classifying Positions as Academic Specialist

Intended Audience: HR unit administrators, Chairs/School Directors/Deans or anyone making hiring decisions.

Introduction

Academic specialists play a pivotal role in advancing MSU's academic mission through their contributions in teaching, research, curriculum development, advising and outreach. The classification process for these roles involves a detailed evaluation of their specific duties to ensure alignment with academic responsibilities that directly support the institution's mission. By adhering to the classification guidelines outlined in the [Academic Specialist Position Description](#)¹ departments can reliably determine whether a position qualifies as an academic specialist and accurately identify its primary functional area—be it teaching, research or outreach. Accurate classification of positions is vital in distinguishing between staff and specialist roles, fostering clarity, accountability and alignment with the institution's strategic mission.

The Academic Specialist Appointment System categorizes individuals into two ranked levels: Senior Academic Specialist and Academic Specialist. Given that many positions encompass responsibilities across multiple functional areas (i.e., Academic Advising, Teaching, Curriculum Development, Research and Outreach), classification is based on the area in which the specialist devotes the most significant effort.

A record of the assigned duties is maintained in the [Specialist Position Description](#) (SPD), which serves as a classification record and sometimes the job description for each academic specialist. It is imperative that the SPD remains current and accurately reflects the scope of responsibilities. Should any changes occur in the duties or scope of work, the SPD must be promptly updated. An up-to-date and precise SPD is essential not only for the annual review process but also for evaluations related to promotion to Senior Academic Specialist or for continuing status.

¹ See sections 2.4 and 4.1.

Key Takeaways

Academic specialist positions must comply with the placement guidelines in Section 2.4.1 of the Specialist Handbook by allocating a designated percentage of time to a core functional area (e.g., teaching, outreach, advising or curriculum development).

The SPD is the official job description for an academic specialist and should be kept up to date with an accurate description of duties at all times.

Specialist positions generally require a master's degree or higher, while academic specialist roles in research require either a Ph.D. or serving as the principal investigator on a research project.

Appointment Parameters for Academic Specialists

Academic specialists are appointed in units that report directly or indirectly to the Provost or the Vice President for Research and Innovation and may hold fixed-term or continuing appointments, either full-time or part-time, with a duty assignment of either an academic year (AY – nine-month) or an annual (AN – 12-month) basis.

The appointment types include:

- **Fixed-Term Specialist:** Appointed with a specific end date. Continuous reappointment for up to five terms may lead to a multi-year reappointment.
- **Continuing Specialist:** Initially on probation, appointed for a minimum of 50% time.

Classifying an Academic Specialist

Guidelines for Classifying Academic Specialists

To determine if a position qualifies as an academic specialist and to assign the appropriate functional area, hiring units should first consider the following:

- **Core Responsibilities:** Define the position's responsibilities within the unit.
- **Functional Area & Full-Time Equivalent Allocation:** Identify the percentage breakdown of duties in one or more of the following areas:
 - Academic Advising
 - Curriculum Development
 - Teaching
 - Research
 - Outreach
- **Academic Relevance:** Review each responsibility and ensure the duties align with academic responsibilities rather than staff functions. If most of the responsibilities are administrative, consult with your FASA liaison to determine the appropriate classification.
- **Collaboration:** For outreach responsibilities, specify whether the position engages with internal or external stakeholders. Outreach roles must focus on external groups; internal MSU outreach does not meet the criteria for an academic specialist–outreach designation.

Document the responsibilities on the [SPD](#), and attach additional pages as necessary. Ensure the SPD provides clear, detailed explanations of the academic-related nature of the work to avoid confusion with university staff roles.

SPD Documentation and Review

- Attach the completed **Specialist Position Description (SPD)** to all position requests, hires, rehires or change of status actions in the appropriate system (e.g., EBS).
- Maintain a copy of the SPD in the employee's file, review it annually during evaluations and update it as needed to reflect any changes in work allocation and responsibilities. Provide a copy to the employee to ensure clarity and alignment on role expectations.

Academic Specialist Functional Areas and Placement Guidelines

Provided is a summary of academic specialist functional areas, an overview of the responsibilities, placement guidelines and degree requirements, for each functional area. More detailed information on functional area responsibilities can be found in *Section 2.4.1 of the Academic Specialist Handbook*.

Functional Area	High Level Overview of Responsibilities	Placement Guidelines	Educational Requirement ²
Teaching	Provide instruction for credit courses.	30% of position	Master's degree
Advising	Advise students on course selection, degree requirements, majors, etc., and/or other instructional activities, e.g., tutoring, interpreting for students with disabilities or bilingual students, advising on academic developmental needs, and developing instructional strategies to assist academic progress.	50% of position	Master's degree
Curriculum Development	Provide content-related support to course, curriculum and/or instructional development activities.	30% of position	Master's degree
Research	Take a lead role on research projects, including developing grant proposals, and directing the research project with designation as principal investigator or performing position responsibilities that require a doctorate.	One must either: 1) be designated as the PI on a research project, or 2) take a lead role on research projects (not as PI but performing duties that require a doctorate)	Doctorate (or PI on a research project)
Outreach	Responsible for disseminating the knowledge resources of the University, to meet the knowledge needs of people outside the University.	30% of position	Master's degree

² In rare cases, typically based on the field of study, exceptions to the educational requirement may be considered. Units should consult their FASA liaison to address any unique circumstances related to the master's degree minimum requirement.

Tips

Mixed Assignments

If the position includes a combination of duties (e.g., part advising and part curriculum development), ensure that one of the specialist duties meets the minimum percentage to classify as an academic specialist and classify the role as such.

Distinguishing Academic Specialist Roles from University Support Staff Positions

When classifying positions, consider the following:

- Does the body of work for the role directly execute MSU's academic mission? If so, it likely qualifies as an academic specialist position.
- Does the role primarily support individuals carrying out the academic mission? If so, it may be more appropriately classified as a university support staff position.

The following duties do not, in and of themselves, meet the criteria for an Academic Specialist position.
AP University Staff Teaching Positions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teaching technical skills, technological information or non-credit courses to other staff or students. Additional duties that are often AP university staff positions include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Administrative duties such as:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Writing grants or providing research support (but not being designated as the principal investigator or where a doctorate degree is required)

Resources

1. [Academic Specialist Handbook](#)
2. [Specialist Position Description](#)
3. [Academic Hiring Manual](#)