



Faculty & Academic Staff Affairs
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Postdoctoral Scholar Handbook

Michigan State University

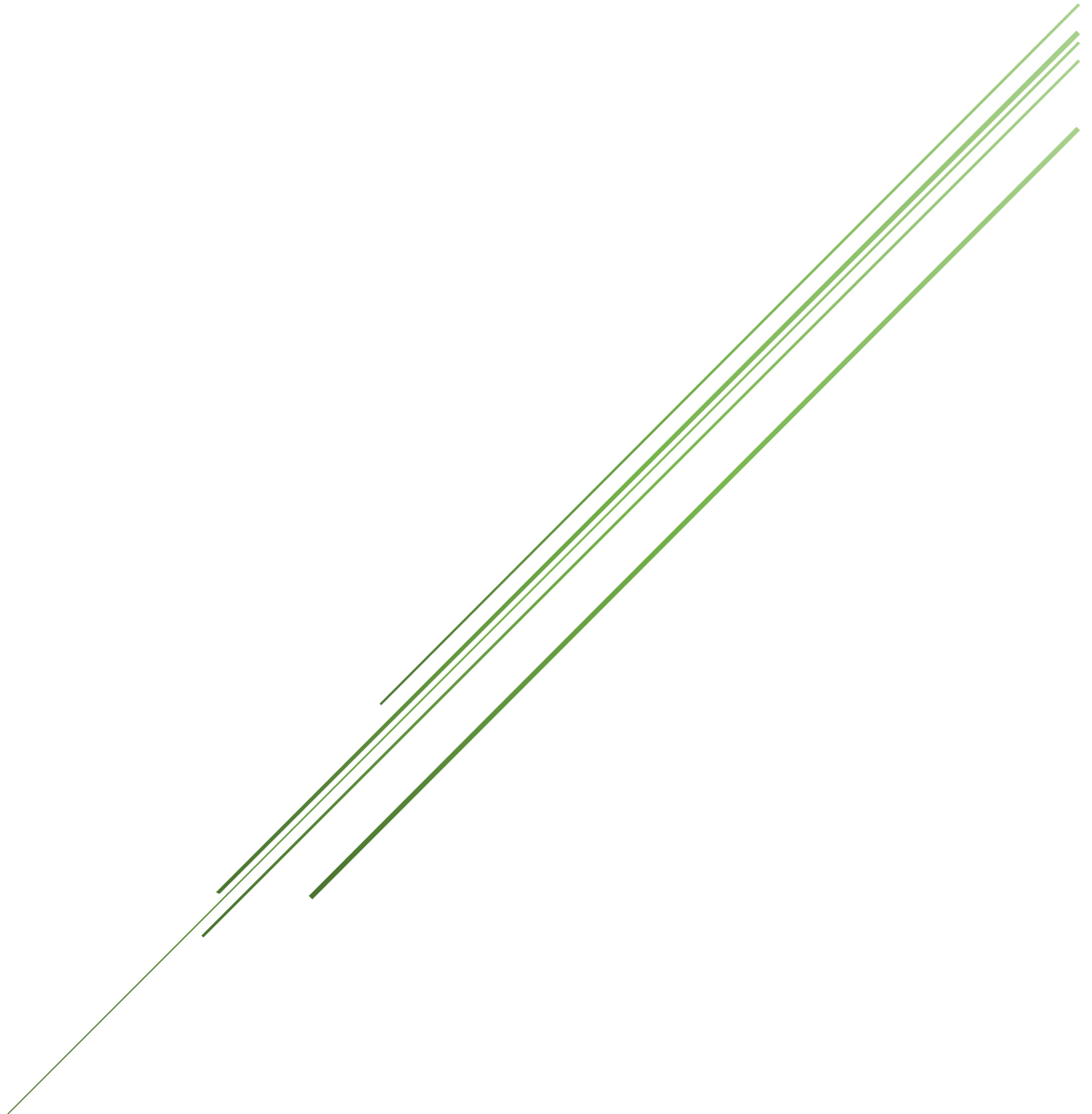


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Postdoctoral Scholar Handbook

1.0 Introduction

Postdoctoral Scholars are an integral part of Michigan State University's research mission. They play a vital role in advancing research, mentoring students, and contributing to the intellectual life of the university, while also building a foundation for a robust career in academia or elsewhere.¹

1.1 Forward

The Postdoctoral Scholar (PS) Handbook provides information and guidance to support postdoctoral scholars, their supervisors, and human resources administrators across MSU. Many of the university's policies are not contained in this handbook and can be found elsewhere. While this handbook provides key information, numerous university policies are maintained separately and may be accessed through other university sites or documents, such as the following:

1. The [Faculty Handbook](#) – a centralized reference for employment policies, procedures, and expectations for faculty and academic staff at MSU.
2. The [Board of Trustees Policy Manual](#) – the official compendium of MSU's governing policies, as established and approved by the Board of Trustees. It articulates the Board's authority and oversight responsibilities and provides the foundational policy framework for the university's governance, administration, academic affairs, finance, and operations.
3. The [Bylaws of the Board of Trustees](#) – establishes the structure, rules, and procedures by which the Board governs and delegates authority at MSU.
4. [Ordinances of MSU](#) – a set of binding regulations adopted by the Board that provide a formal legislative framework that governs specific areas of university operations and conduct.
5. The [Manual of Business Procedures](#) – provides guidance on proper university business procedures and fiscal oversight.
6. [University Policies](#) – the official repository for university-wide policies.

The following university policies support the commitment to a safe, respectful, and inclusive working environment. All members of the university community are entitled to work in an environment free from harassment, discrimination, and other forms of inappropriate or unlawful conduct.

7. [Notice of Nondiscrimination, Anti-Harassment, and Non-Retaliation](#)
8. [Anti-Discrimination Policy](#)
9. [Relationship Violence and Sexual Misconduct and Title IX Policy](#)

¹ This position title, formerly designated as *Research Associate*, has been reclassified as *Postdoctoral Scholar*, effective Dec. 11, 2025. Further information about these updates can be found on the [FASA website](#).

The Postdoctoral Scholar Handbook is periodically updated by the Office for Faculty and Academic Staff Affairs (FASA), in conjunction with the Office of Postdoctoral Scholars. It is the responsibility of the department chairperson/school director to direct postdoctoral scholars to the handbook for employment policies. The responsibility for distributing information about changes rests with the Office of the Provost. Questions regarding content should first be addressed to your departmental chairperson or the director of your school.

1.2 Disclaimer

This document contains university policies, procedures, and other information in effect as of the date of issuance. Any subsequent changes in policies, procedures, or other information are effective as of the date of action or issuance by the appropriate university body, even if they have not yet been reflected in this document. Revisions or additions will be issued to deans, chairpersons, and directors, and to individual postdoctoral scholars as appropriate.

1.2.1 Revisions and Amendments

This document is maintained by the Office of the Provost in consultation with the Vice Provost and Associate Vice President for FASA and the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs. The provisions of this document may be changed by the university. The Postdoctoral Scholar Advisory Committee may propose revisions and amendments to this document. Committee review may also be initiated by the Office of the Provost, FASA, the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs, or by written request to any of these offices. Following consultation with the Postdoctoral Scholar Advisory Committee, proposed amendments will be forwarded to the Associate Provost and Associate Vice President for FASA for final review.

2.0 Employment Guidelines

Postdoctoral Scholars are considered fixed-term academic staff and, thereby, are subject to any policies and guidelines related to academic staff. Noted in this handbook are considerations specifically for Postdoctoral Scholar positions. Postdoctoral Scholars may not be hired into on-call positions or no-pay positions (unless they are working here as an employee of another organization that is collaborating with MSU).

2.1 Hiring

2.1.1 Definitions and Qualifications

The Postdoctoral Scholar appointment category (formerly referred to as Research Associate) is established to meet the needs of a research-intensive, land-grant university in recruiting individuals who support the research mission of the university. Postdoctoral Scholar appointments are consistent with the university's goal to enrich and develop independent and talented leaders across a diverse group of academic scholars. Postdoctoral Scholars are appointed to work with a member or members of the MSU faculty on a fixed-term basis (i.e., with an end date); they are not eligible for tenure. Postdoctoral Scholars are supported by individual fellowships, sponsored projects, or other university

funds payable through MSU systems. The appointment is contingent on the availability of funding and cannot extend beyond the period of availability of supporting funds (see sections on hiring and reappointment).

Postdoctoral Scholars must provide proof of completion of a terminal doctoral degree (PhD, MD, or equivalent) before the position start date. Residency requirements follow the same guidelines that apply to other faculty and academic staff. The university endorses the definition of a postdoctoral scholar jointly adopted by the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health:

An individual who has received a doctoral degree (or equivalent) and is engaged in a temporary and defined period of mentored advanced training to enhance the professional skills and research independence needed to pursue their chosen career path.

2.1.2 Posting Positions

Units are required to post Postdoctoral Scholar positions in accordance with the provisions outlined in the Academic Hiring Manual. This includes the following key hiring components:

- **Employment openings** shall be posted on careers.msu.edu (regardless of FTE or length of appointment).
- **Positions are advertised** on careers.msu.edu as part of the posting process. MSU will post all position openings locally through its applicant tracking system and through Michigan Talent Connect. MSU Human Resources will manage the posting process for Michigan Talent Connect. Units will submit position postings through the applicant tracking system. If a unit chooses to advertise a position in additional venues, the unit is responsible for covering the associated advertising costs.

2.1.3 Recommended Unit Hiring Process

- The hiring unit will establish a standing search committee for vetting and hiring Postdoctoral Scholars, consisting of the Department Chair, Associate Chair, and one additional member.
- The hiring unit will utilize a standing posting for all open Postdoctoral Scholar vacancies that includes the required credentials for the specific areas of expertise sought. The posting may encompass multiple areas of expertise, and the department may hire up to 10 Postdoctoral Scholars from one posting (also known as “pool posting”).
- Faculty members seeking to hire a Postdoctoral Scholar may undertake their own recruitment and are required to direct prospective applicants to the official MSU posting, including the posting number.

- The faculty member(s) hiring a Postdoctoral Scholar will collaborate with the search committee to evaluate applicants and develop a list of candidates who meet the identified requirements.
- Once the interview list is approved, the department will move forward with the standard vetting and hiring process.

2.2 Pay and Benefits

Postdoctoral Scholars are subject to the same annual salary adjustment guidelines that apply to other non-union fixed-term faculty and academic staff. These guidelines cover merit-based pay, typically on an annual basis, and are reviewed and updated each year. Minimum salary levels are established each year in these guidelines.

Postdoctoral Scholars are covered by the benefit programs provided to non-union fixed-term faculty and academic staff, including health, dental, and prescription drug coverage. Eligibility for participation in the university's retirement match program commences upon employment.

2.3 Terms of Appointment

The initial appointment for a Postdoctoral Scholar may be up to three years, with the possibility of extension/renewal, provided the total cumulative appointment period does not exceed five years. In all cases, the appointment length is based on available funding (internal and/or external) and may not exceed the end date of the available support. Postdoctoral Scholars may be appointed on an annual (AN) or academic year (AY) basis. Appointments are typically full-time positions.

Postdoctoral Scholars are appointed on a fixed-term basis to collaborate on research projects with MSU faculty, recognizing that the positions also serve as a period of professional training. While the role is primarily research-focused, it may include other mentored responsibilities (e.g., teaching, administrative projects that should be documented in a mutually agreed upon Individual Development Plan (IDP). At least 10% of a Postdoctoral Scholar's effort must be dedicated to structured professional development and skill-building activities outside of research projects.

IDPs are updated annually and are used to inform evaluations. After three years, the Postdoctoral Scholar can be reappointed for an additional period of up to two years. This additional period must be approved by the unit and College Dean (or designee) based on a review of an updated IDP that demonstrates the need for, and opportunity to continue, further training and professional development broadly defined, not limited solely to research activities.

2.4 Expectations

The postdoctoral scholar and their mentor must establish clear, written expectations that will inform the required annual review.

Setting Goals and Expectations

At a minimum, written expectations need to be established in agreement with the scholar. Best practice is for the Postdoctoral Scholar and faculty mentor(s) to collaboratively develop an IDP within the first 30 days of the appointment to support the scholar's success. Writing goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) helps to provide clarity for all.

An IDP generally includes goals related to the following areas:

1. Overall assessment related to career goals:
 - a. Skills (both research/field specific and general/professional)
 - b. Interests (desired focus/efforts in areas of research, communications, teaching, leadership, and other)
 - c. Values (regarding type of organization targeted, work style, and other aspects of work and life)
2. Career exploration
3. Identification of mentors who can address specific gaps and needs—recognizing that no single mentor can meet all the mentee's requirements and that faculty supervisors must acknowledge their own limitations and connect and provide trainees with access to resources outside the primary research group.
4. Identification of activities that will help address gaps and needs in training. [The Office of Postdoctoral Affairs](#) organizes regular meetings and workshops and offers individual advising to postdocs on a variety of topics, helping to navigate career and life. IDP templates can be found online at various sources, or this [sample template](#) can be utilized.

Discussions regarding the IDP should not be limited solely to interactions between the Postdoctoral Scholar and the appointing faculty; they should also be shared with and communicated to other mentors involved in the scholar's professional development.

The [Office of Postdoctoral Affairs](#) is available for consultation on this approach.

2.5 Annual Review

As noted in the [Annual Performance Review for Fixed-Term Faculty and Academic Staff policy](#), units must establish procedures for the performance review of Postdoctoral Scholars. Faculty mentors are encouraged to consider the following points:

- Evaluation based on established goals and expectations—such as those outlined in the offer letter, research plan, [postdoctoral compact](#), and IDP—that emphasizes skill-building across multiple competency areas.
- Assessment of engagement/participation in professional development opportunities offered by MSU and other external sources.
- Discussion about career plans and the steps taken to advance, with the overarching goal of postdoctoral training being to prepare for and successfully transition into the next professional position.

Annual reviews are required and ideally should occur within six to nine months after appointment or reappointment, allowing enough time to prepare for any possible transitions. Following the review, a recommendation should be made to either reappoint as a Postdoctoral Scholar, reclassify under a different title to support career advancement, or not reappoint.

2.6 Reappointment

Reappointment is ultimately at the discretion of the individual faculty supervisor, with consideration of the research project needs as well as the training sought by the Postdoctoral Scholar. Decisions not to reappoint may be for failure to meet unit standards for competence or performance, changes in program needs, or budgetary issues (e.g., lack of external funding support). It is recommended that units are thoughtful about providing as much notice as possible on these decisions, particularly if there are visa implications.

Postdoctoral Scholars may be reappointed and are limited to a maximum of five years total length of appointment. When Postdoctoral Scholars receive external support that necessitates a change of appointment to “Postdoctoral Fellow” (See Policy on Postdoctoral Fellow), the total time in ranks (time as Postdoctoral Scholar + time as Postdoctoral Fellow) should not exceed five years.

2.7 Reclassification of Appointment

Postdoctoral Scholars may be reclassified to a fixed-term academic specialist-research or a fixed-term faculty classification when Postdoctoral Scholars have reached maximum time in rank or when training objectives have been completed. This must be a mutual agreement between the individual and the supervisor, with the support of the department or unit. This would also be dependent on available funding and the need for the work.

Postdoctoral Scholars are eligible to apply for other MSU position openings in accordance with standard university appointment policies and procedures or positions at other organizations.

2.8 Termination and Discipline

The process for discipline or dismissal for cause is outlined in the [Fixed-Term Faculty and Academic Staff Discipline or Dismissal for Cause](#) policy.

Termination may occur during the contract term for performance, budget, or other issues, in keeping with the fixed-term policy.

Ordinarily, a fixed-term position will be eliminated for financial reasons at the end of the current appointment period. However, when budgetary circumstances warrant the elimination of a fixed-term position before the end date of the current appointment, the employee shall be notified in writing of the effective date of his/her termination at least 60 days before the effective date of separation. Before notifying the employee, the unit administrator shall confer with the dean/separately reporting director, and FASA.

2.9 Grievance

Postdoctoral Scholars are covered by the provisions of the [Faculty Grievance Policy](#).

3.0 Additional Resources

- [Office of Postdoctoral Affairs](#)
- [Postdoc Academy](#)
- [Center for the Improvement of the Mentored Experiences in Research](#)
- [Employee Assistance Program, University Health and Wellbeing](#)