COVID-19 has created disruptions in research and scholarship that will affect the degree progress of doctoral students in disparate ways. These disruptions have been compounded by anti-Black violence and racial injustice, as well as federal policies and proclamations affecting international and undocumented students. Rackham programs will need to develop and implement plans to support the degree completion of doctoral students whose research and scholarship was, and continues to be, impacted.

Consequences of these disruptions include:

1. Lack of access to laboratories, libraries, and fieldwork.
2. Restrictions on human subject research.
3. Prohibition of travel to pursue research and scholarship at archives, museums, and field research sites.
4. Interruption in research progress due to family and/or self-care responsibilities generated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. Impeded scholarly progress due to the stress and uncertainty of the interrelated conditions of the pandemic, racial injustice, and federal policy in the last six months.

Throughout this challenging time, Rackham has encouraged programs and the graduate faculty to address these disruptions by promoting flexible approaches, including adopting alternative research methods and directions, as well as offering flexibility in preliminary exam formats and dissertation scope relative to pre-COVID-19 plans.

Moreover, because Rackham seeks to promote degree completion and the experience of its students, its policies and practices—such as flexible academic deadlines and program funding practices—have long supported variable time to degree that acknowledges the wide range of dissertation projects, circumstances, and disciplines of Rackham students.

There is now an additional, widespread need for programs to offer some doctoral students additional time and funding to complete their degree programs. The need for support for extended time to degree completion is likely to differ by field, project, time in program, and individual circumstance. That is, some doctoral students will be not at all or only modestly delayed by the disruptions; others will be much more impacted—by as much as a full year.

Through this communication, Rackham is implementing a process in which each doctoral program will create and report the following:

1) Guidelines and procedures by which it will offer an additional term or terms of stipend, tuition, and benefits to doctoral students whose degree progress was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
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and whose funding committed by offer letter has been exhausted. The decision to extend additional terms of funding will be the collaborative decision of the faculty, student, and doctoral program. Sources of support can include continuation of GSRA funding as offered by faculty through their grants, graduate student instructor positions available to departments, and fellowships offered through departmental resources, including Rackham block grant. Program faculty will consider equity among students in their program when developing these plans. These plans may incorporate flexibility in dissertation scope. They may also leverage existing program and school/college mechanisms by which variable time to degree is already funded.

We anticipate that guidance and procedures that programs produce will be in place for up to five years, to address the need of any student currently in the program who exceeds or may exceed the funding commitment of their offer letter and who has experienced the consequences of the disruption of the last six months.

2) Doctoral programs will develop a plan to free up the terms of funding needed to support the additional, necessary time to degree for students identified under the program’s guidance and procedures. For many programs, resources may be freed up by a measured reduction of the size of the doctoral cohort that is admitted in each of the next three to five years. The extent of the cohort reduction or other strategies should be sufficient to provide the additional terms of funding needed to address the identified need.

- For purposes of modeling, programs with funding guarantees of five or six years should assume that reducing the cohort size by one student in any year frees up to 10 or 12 terms, respectively, of stipend, tuition, and benefits that can be deployed to support students who require additional time to degree. Of course, the matching of these freed up terms of funding with the students receiving extended time to degree funding will be a complex and program-specific process, involving the specific portfolio of grant, teaching, and fellowship funding available to that program.
- Programs must describe how commitment to holistic admissions practices and its effect on diversity and excellence will continue to be advanced in this period.
- Programs with doctoral cohorts of two or fewer students may need to specially tailor admissions practices in acknowledgement of their program size. These programs should reach out to their Rackham associate dean for further discussion of plans prior to submitting them.
- Rackham acknowledges that program plans to free up the necessary terms of support will be subject to uncertainty and that there will be a need to revisit and update them year by year. Yet, work now will allow changes in admissions plans to be pursued intentionally and with forethought.

To leverage the common features of their doctoral programs, some schools and colleges will coordinate the development of a unified plan for all the doctoral programs in their school/college, in communication and partnership with Rackham.
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Coordinated planning in these two categories will ensure that programs are matching the need for additional funding (#1) with the availability of GSRA, GSI, and fellowship resources (#2) in a way that can support their students and sustain their program. These requirements will catalyze faculty and/or program leadership discussion about how to equitably meet the need for funded extensions of time to degree in their programs.

Doctoral education is led by the faculty who teach, advise, supervise, and mentor graduate students. The chairs and directors of doctoral programs are in the best position to work collaboratively with their graduate faculty to pursue the steps of this plan. That is, this plan appropriately places graduate faculty and doctoral programs in a position to lead academic decisions about extended time to degree. They are best positioned to work collaboratively with their students to identify and support their need. The plan is also cognizant that funding arrangements and sources of funding vary greatly across doctoral programs and provides sufficient flexibility to include the students enrolled in every doctoral program on campus. This coordinated planning, which involves the doctoral programs, their schools and colleges, and Rackham, will effectively commit support that promotes degree completion of current doctoral students and ensures the future sustainability of doctoral programs. It includes a mechanism to appeal to Rackham for resolution when student, faculty, and program do not agree, as described below.

Doctoral programs need to provide these plans to Rackham by November 12, 2020, so that they can be finalized before the end of the academic term. Plans will be reviewed by Rackham associate deans by December 1, 2020. Programs (or schools/colleges) will communicate their plans to support funding for extended time to degree to their graduate faculty and doctoral students.

To support these activities, the Rackham Graduate School will adopt the following measures, in addition to its regular academic policies and funding mechanisms.

1. Continued flexibility with academic time to degree deadlines that aligns with currently available Rackham academic policy. Specifically:
   a. Adjusted grace periods for AY20-21, consistent with the modified academic calendar. These dates will be communicated by October 15, 2020.
   b. Through September 1, 2023, Rackham will approve all requests to extend time to degree limits for doctoral students; as per existing policy, a request consists of a plan for completion that is endorsed by the graduate program.
2. Steady block grant allocations during the up to five-year implementation period. In addition, programs may request advances on future years of Rackham block grant. These advances can support funding needs before the additional resources freed by smaller cohort sizes (or other available resources) become available. The process for a program to negotiate a block grant advance will be announced by November 1, 2020.
3. Strong, continuing investment in the Rackham Merit Fellows and the Rackham Merit Fellowship Program (RMF). The RMF is the graduate school’s premier fellowship program and is a partnership between Rackham and graduate programs; Rackham will extend these
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fellows in alignment with the plans that each doctoral program develops. More details about the extended RMF program will be announced by December 1, 2020.

4. Easing of restrictions on deploying discipline-specific fellowships, including one-term fellowships. For the next five years, Rackham will waive the requirement that certain discipline-specific fellowships can only be used for the same student once. Further details will be announced by November 1, 2020.

5. Rackham will update its current Academic Dispute Resolution Policy to resolve cases in which faculty, student, and program do not agree on the need for extended funding due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further details will be announced by December 4, 2020.

6. Discussions with schools and colleges about their funding policies and financial commitments to graduate and doctoral education will be ongoing during this period.

Because of the extensive scale of doctoral education at U-M—with more than 5,500 students currently enrolled—the amount of reserve funding that Rackham has available to commit to this process is limited. Nevertheless, Rackham will commit significant funding reserves to the supports indicated above.

This plan is formulated in response to student and faculty concerns that began to be raised in the spring. The specific structure of the program has been developed after meetings in July with chairs and directors of Rackham programs. This fall, Rackham Graduate School will hold office hours for faculty with questions about the plan. In collaboration with Rackham Student Government, we will be available to engage in discussion with students during its regular Lunch with the Deans series, which is held in a town hall format. We will also engage with Rackham graduate chairs, directors, and coordinators in our regular forums.

We will create an FAQ for Rackham programs to refer to as this work progresses, in acknowledgement that this process is an evolving one pursued in partnership between doctoral programs, schools and colleges, and the Rackham Graduate School.

After distribution to chairs and directors of Rackham programs, this communication will be publicly posted on the Rackham website.

Thank you for working in partnership to provide this important support mechanism for doctoral education and students at the University of Michigan.

Key Dates

1. Introduction at State of the Graduate School Webinar – September 14, 2020
2. Communication sent to graduate chairs and directors – September 18, 2020
3. Program Response to Rackham – November 12, 2020
4. Rackham review complete – December 1, 2020