

Communication to Chairs & Directors of Rackham Programs

COVID-19 Related Extended Time to Degree for Doctoral Students and Accompanying Planning for Future Cohort Sizes of Doctoral Programs

Rackham Graduate School
September 18, 2020

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.

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

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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 13, 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 fellowships 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

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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 13, 2020
4. Rackham review complete – December 1, 2020

Frequently asked questions (FAQ) for Rackham Extended Time to Degree Planning

Rackham Graduate School
October 23, 2020

The sections of this FAQ are:

- [Scope and Formulation of Plans](#)
- [Rackham Review of Program Plans](#)
- [Implementation of Plans](#)
- [Funding Considerations](#)

Scope and Formulation of Plans

1. Why is Rackham requiring all doctoral programs to plan for extended time to degree due to disruption in research, scholarship, and degree progress?

The disruption has been experienced across all disciplines and therefore warrants a coordinated response. It has necessitated building flexibility into the scope and direction of the dissertations of individual students. The scale of the impact also requires that programs will need to consider ways to support additional time necessary for degree completion of current students. For many programs this will include modestly scaling back admissions of future doctoral cohorts to free up needed terms of funding. This planning will promote the support of current students and the sustainability of doctoral education by matching guidelines and procedures for extended time to degree for current students with admissions plans for the next 3-5 years.

2. Should programs distinguish between COVID-related vs. other delays when discussing the need for extended time to degree with students?

The plan should be written to address the broad set of factors that have generated disruption of the research, scholarship, and degree progress of doctoral students. COVID-19 has created disruptions affecting doctoral students in disparate ways; these disruptions have been compounded by anti-Black violence, racial injustice; by new federal policies affecting international and undocumented students; and by family and/or self-care responsibilities generated by the pandemic.

3. How does the planning apply to grant-funded doctoral programs?

Programs provide full-funding to doctoral students in their offers of admission. The sources and sequencing of funding vary widely across campus but are principally generated by program faculty through departmental curricula offered to undergraduates (GSIs) and external research grants (GSRAs). Programs that support their doctoral students on faculty-generated grants need to develop a clear plan for extended time to degree because of the broad disruption of research, scholarship, and degree progress.

Through guidelines and procedures developed by programs, extensions in time to degree can be granted equitably, likely by students continuing their work as GSIs on faculty grants. Since grant

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funding is not significantly expanding during this period, we anticipate that faculty will bring new doctoral students into their research group at a reduced rate. That is, faculty will recruit fewer new students since some research grant funding will be used to support senior students who have been determined to need extra time to finish their degree. Programs should plan to scale future admissions of doctoral students according to how individual faculty will choose to deploy their largely fixed grant funding to support current mentees.

4. How will this planning be accomplished for doctoral programs who already have small cohort sizes (2 or fewer)?

Programs with entry cohorts of two or fewer students should approach admissions suspensions with care, because of its potential effect on program sustainability. A period of alternating year admissions might be appropriate in some cases. Programs will need to plan carefully to ensure the sustainability of academics and student experience in their programs. Programs should be purposeful in providing community. These programs could, for example, support small cohort size, perhaps as small as a single student on average, in the next few years, by exploring orientation and community-building activities in collaboration with programs that are disciplinarily proximate to their own. Please contact your disciplinary Rackham associate dean to discuss your planning.

5. How can plans achieve equity within doctoral programs?

Programs are correct to include student equity as a critical feature of these plans, including in grant-based disciplines where faculty are making available funding for extended time to degree through their grants. Transparency and communication are critical features of equity. Creating guidelines, procedures and criteria that are communicated to all faculty and students will help assure equity within each program and can guide decisions, for instance, in whether to support a student with an additional GSIship or fellowship, as available. In addition, identifying program-level sources of funding (e.g. block grant fellowships or additional instructional opportunities) can provide a degree of flexibility in sourcing needed funding in case primary sources, such as grant funding, are unavailable. This flexibility will support equity.

6. How might the modest reduction in cohort sizes be accomplished -- for example, should it be accomplished by a one-year suspension of admission or over a longer period of admitting smaller cohorts?

Generally speaking, Rackham encourages programs to pursue modestly reducing cohort size over a 3-5 year period rather than a one-year admissions suspension.

In Rackham's view, a suspension of admissions is less desirable for a number of reasons:

1. it eliminates the opportunity for a whole cohort of applicants to pursue doctoral studies;
2. it can produce ripple effects in subsequent years for sequencing of GSI terms, fellowships, etc.;
3. a single-year suspension might not be sufficient to address program needs over time as well as provide programs less flexibility in dealing with a set of funding challenges that are likely to go on for 3-5 years;

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4. as many peer programs are suspending admissions for one year, maintaining admissions creates a recruiting opportunity that can enhance diversity and excellence in programs; and,
5. a suspension could result in reputational harm to the program in subsequent years.

Nonetheless, we acknowledge that a one-year admissions suspension might be the only practical option for a small doctoral program. Please contact your disciplinary Rackham associate dean if you are considering this.

7. Does the extended time to degree funding program address students whose degree progress has not been impacted by COVID-19, but who face a difficult job market?

As in any year, there is some flexibility in the timing of the degree completion of doctoral students, and empathy at this moment is critical. At the same time, planning should address disruption in research, scholarship, and progress to degree. Students who have completed the dissertation and all other requirements should receive their degrees. The determination of when all requirements have been satisfied results from discussion of the student and the dissertation committee, which has the discretion to determine the completion timeline. The discussions leading to this determination provide for individual flexibility in scope of the dissertation and the timing of its completion.

8. Junior faculty received the option for an additional year on their tenure clocks; why can't the same practice be extended to doctoral students by each receiving an option for an additional year to complete their degrees?

We acknowledge that every member of the university community has been affected by the disruption of the pandemic and associated factors. At the same time, the specific circumstances that affect the career stage of junior faculty and students are not equivalent. Accommodations for extended time to degree should address in an appropriate and flexible way the particular circumstances of doctoral education, taking into account the significant number of doctoral students, the distributed nature of their funding, and the diversity of their career pathways.

Rackham Review of Program Plans

9. What will be Rackham's considerations in reviewing these plans?

Rackham asks that programs prepare plans that reflect their particular needs, resources, and contingencies. Plans are determined at the program level, and in some instances through coordination of schools and colleges. Plans will be reviewed to see that they are responsive to anticipated needs and practicable, that the procedures and criteria for decision-making are clearly explained, that admissions practices will be pursued to achieve diversity and excellence, and that they will be communicated to students and faculty to assure an equitable and transparent process. Plans will be checked to ensure that the assessed need for extended time to degree is matched by the availability of freed up terms of funding. While plans should be as specific as practicable, we recognize that they need to be flexible and not over-determined so they can be adapted to changing circumstances. Each plan is a starting point; it is expected that these will need to be updated annually.

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10. Are there expectations as to what a reasonable extension for students will be?

Disruptions to research and degree progress are experienced differentially by discipline, field of study, and by individual students; as a result, there is no yardstick for determining extensions. Disruptions that are fairly brief may be resolved by recent changes to Rackham's deadlines for [dissertation grace periods](#). Longer disruptions, as identified by the program's guidelines and procedures, will warrant extended funding for one or even two additional terms. It is important that programs maintain equity, fairness, and transparency in decision-making.

11. Will Rackham have a role in determining funding extensions for specific students?

Doctoral programs are in the best position to recognize and determine the impact of disruptions to students' research and degree progress and to make decisions about funding extended time to degree. Each program should develop and communicate the criteria and procedures for making these decisions. The discussion of whether to extend funding to a particular student should involve program faculty leadership, the faculty mentor or mentors, and the student. In exceptional circumstances, students who have concerns about the fairness of decision-making may bring this concern to the attention of Rackham which will resolve disagreements in accordance with Rackham's regular dispute resolution procedures.

12. How will equity between different doctoral programs be achieved?

Rackham will review the equity safeguards of program procedures. It is anticipated that programs in related fields, that share similarities in how doctoral education is structured and funded, will have broadly similar criteria and procedures. Rackham will share with programs any significant differences found among such similar programs in guidelines, procedures, and plans so that programs can understand the reasons for these differences and consider if they should be resolved.

Implementation of Plans

13. How does Rackham envision collaborative-decision making on extended funding taking place? What role do students have in this process?

The development of the extended time to degree plans is in the hands of each doctoral program and its faculty who determine the structure, curriculum, and requirements of the program and commit the funding to support students. Many programs regularly engage with their students – e.g. through student representation on graduate committees or consultations by program chairs with the departmental graduate student organization – and Rackham believes that consultation with students about plan development through such mechanisms will be helpful. The plans that programs develop must be communicated to both students and faculty.

As plans are implemented, specific decisions about funding extending time to degree for individual students should involve the program, the faculty mentor, and the student. Faculty mentors are in the best position to have discussions about degree disruption with their graduate students but programs play a role in supporting consistency and equity, and, in some cases, in providing necessary supplemental funding. One model would be to ask faculty mentors to engage individually with their students to explore how time to degree has been impacted and to estimate if additional time will be needed and, if so, how much. This information can be passed onto program leadership

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for review according to the program's guidelines, and for identification/confirmation of the funding source for the extension.

14. In cases where students are supported as GSRAs on research grants, how can they continue on grants for extended time to degree when grants are of fixed term?

Faculty already act flexibly to reconcile the mismatch between the fixed term of grants and the variable time that students in their groups take to complete. Program plans should encourage this flexibility, and anticipate that faculty who need to continue current students for an additional period will need to offset this by slowing down the rate at which they recruit new students into their research groups.

15. How should programs prepare for the current recruitment process when target cohorts are smaller and traditional yields may not apply?

Programs should anticipate that historical yield estimates used to plan for the number of offers needed to reach a certain cohort size may not hold in the current cycle. A number of factors are at play--some may increase yield and others may depress it. For example, peer programs that are instituting admissions suspensions could lead to higher yields. On the other hand, ongoing uncertainty about visa availability and international travel may pose continuing impediments for international students. Programs should take specific steps to ensure program diversity and excellence in this unusual admissions environment. Continuing to solicit applications from a broad array of institutions and pursuing holistic admissions practices are of critical importance to the success of plans.

16. How can Rackham be supportive of those faculty, including junior faculty, who themselves have been disproportionately affected by the disruption of the pandemic?

Rackham is playing a coordinating role in responding to the needs of doctoral students through the present planning, but we also recognize how faculty are affected by the same issues that this planning addresses. Rackham is tracking studies, reports, and discussions of the impact of the disruption on faculty, including that the impacts are disproportionately felt by women and that they are exacerbating race and gender inequities generally present in research and the academy. Rackham is alerting programs to the potential connection between extended time to degree planning and these disparities. We are in conversation with other campus organizations that are responding to these challenges. We are providing supplemental funding to programs – as described in the next section – which may be deployed to address this differential impact. We are interested in learning of further needs and ideas because this issue is critical to graduate faculty, doctoral education, and the research enterprise.

Funding Considerations

17. Will Rackham increase funding to programs to support their plans?

Rackham Graduate School will provide additional funding to doctoral programs which create guidelines, procedures, and plans to support the extended time to degree of their students. Because of the scale of doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, the primary mechanism by which programs will offer additional funding to their students is by freeing up terms through modest contraction in the size of future doctoral program admission cohorts. To moreover provide

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additional flexibility and support for doctoral education, Rackham will provide supplemental funding to programs that have developed and communicated plans.

This funding is drawn from reserves that Rackham has long maintained to respond to disruptions in the system for full funding of doctoral education at the University of Michigan. Rackham will deploy those reserve funds in the amount of \$7 million over the next two years (AY20-21 and AY21-22). This funding will be provided through two mechanisms: supplemental block grants in AY20-21 and supplemental funding for the Rackham Merit Fellowship program in AY20-21 and AY 21-22.

In addition, Rackham will provide programs with additional flexibility in awarding certain disciplinary fellowships and a mechanism to request advances on future block grant funding.

Although Rackham's reserve funding is significant, given the scale of the research disruption that has occurred, it is insufficient to replace the need for programs to attend to cohort size in the next 3-5 years.

18. Does Rackham plan to offer any extended funding for current RMF students?

Yes. The RMF Program is a partnership between doctoral programs and Rackham to increase the diversity and excellence of Rackham programs. In addition to opportunities for inclusive community, RMF Fellows are offered five years of fellowship through collaborative funding arrangements in which Rackham and program contribute in approximately equal proportion. To fulfill its role in the funding partnership, Rackham will provide support to doctoral programs of estimated value \$4.5 million, to be dispersed in AY20-21 and AY21-22. RMF Fellows will be considered for support under the regular guidelines and procedures of their doctoral program. Specific details of the partnership are being communicated to Chairs and Directors of Rackham programs.

19. Why can't Rackham fund all the extended time to degree plans of doctoral programs?

The University of Michigan is a national leader in the scope, scale, and quality of its doctoral programs, which include about 5,500 students. We are able to recruit and support outstanding students through to degree completion because all are admitted with a commitment of full funding. The scale of doctoral education, the magnitude of the disruption, and the distributed nature of doctoral funding rule out the ability of any one unit – Rackham included – to address the level of need. In any year, Rackham's contribution to overall doctoral funding is secondary to the contributions that graduate programs and faculty themselves commit through the availability of GSRA and GSI positions. Given these factors, the mechanism available to support current students is to modestly contract future doctoral admissions. The planning being undertaken will match need and resources within each program, with Rackham providing some secondary funding to promote flexibility, equity, and as much relief as possible at this challenging moment for doctoral students, graduate faculty, and graduate programs.