

STATEMENT OF RATIONALE ON SUBSTANTIVE EMERITUS POLICY CHANGES

Background

MSU deeply appreciates the many years of loyal service and creative contributions of its retired faculty and considers them a continuing important resource for the institution. The Emeritus title awarded to faculty, academic staff, and administrators at time of retirement signals honor and accomplishment. It also provides certain rights and privileges such as continued participation in academic ceremonies, events, and governance. Bearing the Emeritus title is not simply a word on a piece of paper - rather, it conveys the continued and sustained esteemed connection to Michigan State University.

Proposed Changes to Policy

We propose several changes to the Emeritus policy within two overarching areas: (1) the award and revocation processes, and (2) the policy title. The identified issue, proposed change, and accompanying rationale are discussed in each section below.

Award & Revocation Processes

Following the Nassar sentencing hearing in 2018, several survivors reported past misconduct to MSU that implicated faculty who were long retired. With the support of academic governance, the Office for Faculty and Academic Staff Affairs (formerly called Academic Human Resources) proposed policy changes to university leadership to strengthen university policies to increase accountability and ensure MSU holds itself to the highest ethical standards. The university adopted the changes and MSU's Emeritus policy was revised in 2019. The revisions included the addition of: (1) a provision that emeritus status is granted upon retirement assuming good standing¹, and (2) a provision to allow for revocation of emeritus status in those exceptional cases in which behavior occurring or discovered after a faculty member was awarded emeritus status is deemed to be substantially inconsistent with the behavior expected of MSU faculty and academic staff.

These two policy changes were the first steps for the university to structurally acknowledge and create a pathway for action to recognize institutional harm to survivors within the emeritus context. Prior to these changes in 2019, MSU granted emeritus status to faculty, academic staff, and administrators automatically upon retirement, without regard to pending discipline/dismissal actions. MSU also did not have a provision or process to revoke emeritus status once it was conferred.

Under the revised processes outlined above, three faculty did not meet the good standing provision, thus, making them ineligible to receive the emeritus status, and eight faculty have had their emeritus status revoked. Actions such as these further the university's commitment to hold itself to the highest ethical standards.

¹ "Good Standing" is assumed unless one ends employment while suspended or during the termination process.

Having policies which allow such actions to occur demonstrates respect to those who have been harmed by individuals at MSU and reflects our values and protects our collective integrity as an institution.

Even with the two policy additions, the current policy contains gaps and can be further strengthened.

1

Awarding of Emeritus Status

Issue: Members of the faculty, academic staff and administrative staff who leave the University with official retirement status and in good standing are automatically granted certain privileges and the emeritus title. Good standing is assumed unless one ends employment while suspended or during the termination process. What about those faculty who engaged in egregious misconduct over the course of employment but were not dismissed? They may not meet the standard of “ending their employment while suspended or during the termination process.”

Proposed Change: Add an affirmative review process for a determination on whether emeritus status is granted at time of retirement. This process should not be administratively onerous.

Rationale:

The Michigan State University Strategic Plan states the following: “As an institution of higher learning, Michigan State University is committed to the highest ethical and academic standards. As a public institution we are committed to transparent decision making and accountable governance. As a community, we commit to live these values.”

Requiring affirmative approval to grant emeritus status will ensure this honorific title takes past misconduct into account. Past misconduct isn’t an automatic preclusion, but it does allow the institution to have a choice as to whether it will grant emeritus status. Having an affirmative process in place to do so demonstrates the continued dedication and commitment of the university community in holding itself to the highest ethical standards when awarding the emeritus title.

Moreover, this change is in alignment with other higher education institutions and the majority of Big Ten institutions. Nine out of fourteen Big Ten schools require an affirmative review and university approval prior to the granting of emeritus status.

2

Revocation of Emeritus Status (for Cause)

Issue: Emeritus status that had previously been granted may be revoked ***in cases in which behavior occurring or discovered after being awarded emeritus status*** is deemed to be substantially inconsistent with the behavior expected of Michigan State University faculty, academic staff, and administrative staff. (Emphasis added) The timing (i.e., the “after being awarded emeritus status” standard) is narrow and limited. For decades, emeritus status was automatically granted without any review or consideration.

Proposed Change: Expand the timeframe standard and allow for emeritus revocation *regardless of whether that behavior occurred before or after the automatic grant of emeritus status.* (Emphasis added)

Rationale: The university will continue to find itself reckoning with its past. The university should not be bound into perpetuity to the actions taken under past policies. Cases may exist from the past in which the university finds itself wanting to take the step to revoke emeritus status in the future. This change will be a major step forward for the university to demonstrate its commitment to survivors of past misconduct. Trauma-informed policies promote a culture of healing and accountability. It is with this intent that this change is being proposed.

3

The Policy Title

Issue: The Emeritus policy defaults to the masculine “emeritus” and is a remnant of the past. The use of the masculine “emeritus” has been commonly used in the past as a default to signify “he or she.” However, the use of the masculine “emeritus” in a university policy is not only non-inclusive, it also isn’t necessary.

Proposed Change: Change “emeritus” to “emeritum” in the policy.

Rationale: The university continues to take action to advance diversity, equity and inclusion. The MSU Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Steering Committee Report and Plan was issued in August of 2021 and provides a university-wide template for advancing this crucial imperative and as a tool for the university to incorporate best practices in DEI. Indeed, one of the recommendations is to promote DEI in university policies. The proposed change to replace the “emeritus” title with a non-gendered title is more than a change in nomenclature; this change is a step toward increasing equity, inclusion, and belonging through MSU’s policies. Policies are foundational structures for an institution and reflect an institution’s values and culture. “Equity is achieved in an environment built on civility, dignity, and mutual respect.” (MSU DEI Report and Plan, 2021). To achieve these aspirations, we must first start with our policies.

The use of the word “emeritum” is gender-neutral and non-binary. The University Committee on Faculty Affairs has been in discussion on this topic since spring of 2021. In adopting the non-binary “emeritum” title, MSU will be one of the first institutions to join the University of Oregon who adopted a similar change.

- The Case for Professors Emerit: [Push in Oregon for gender-neutral retired faculty titles \(insidehighered.com\)](https://insidehighered.com)
- U of Oregon Senate Approves ‘Professor Emerit’ Title: [U of Oregon Senate Approves ‘Professor Emerit’ Title \(insidehighered.com\)](https://insidehighered.com)

Respectfully submitted by:

Allison Berg, Associate Professor, James Madison College

Melanie Helton, Professor, College of Music

Kara Yermak, Director, Office of Faculty & Academic Staff Affairs