The Path to Promotion

Session 3: Questions and Answers

Hover over the question and click the triangle at the left to expand or collapse each answer. Open the Navigation Pane and use the headings at the left to jump to the section or question you are interested in.

# The Review Process

## If you're a specialist not situated in a college (for example a centralized service unit) how does the committee structure or flow change if at all?

No matter where you are appointed, the process must follow the policies in the [Academic Specialist Handbook](https://hr.msu.edu/_resources/pdf/academic-specialist-handbook/acad_spec_man.pdf), section 4.3. Throughout this section, the policies refer to the “unit” and the “unit administrator,” meaning it was written with the understanding that the unit may not be an academic department. The way the process will unfold at the unit level is called the “unit evaluation procedures” and per the Handbook, 4.2.1., you should have received a copy with your offer letter upon initial appointment.

For specialists who are appointed in MAUs that are not colleges or degree granting colleges, who are appointed in the dean’s office unit of a college or other non-departmental unit, or even those appointed in small departments or colleges that do not have many other specialists, it can be challenging for administrators to work out a process that is compliant with the policies. It is important to be proactive about getting the documentation about the process and criteria from your unit early in your appointment, and to involve the Office of Faculty and Academic Staff Affairs (FASA) for clarification and assistance.

## Are “Unit Peer Review” committees required or optional?

Required. See the [Academic Specialist Handbook](https://hr.msu.edu/_resources/pdf/academic-specialist-handbook/acad_spec_man.pdf), 4.3.3.4. (for continuing system reviews for promotion and award of continuing status) and 4.3.3.6 (for promotion to senior specialist).

## Are the timelines/deadlines posted online anywhere? My department had me submit all of the documents by Friday, April 5.

A general timeline is posted here: <https://hr.msu.edu/ua/promotion/faculty-academic-staff/index.html> (near the bottom of the page). MAU recommendations and review materials are due to the university each year on May 1. Your college/MAU will establish deadlines for units that allow them to complete the college/MAU level of review and meet the university’s deadlines. In turn, your unit will establish deadlines for an applicant’s submissions that allow them to complete the department/unit level of review and meet the college’s deadlines. That timeline seems short, especially if external letters are required in your case, but it is up to your unit and college to set the date.

According to the university timeline at the link above, colleges/MAUs are notified in mid-September if they have specialists in the continuing system who must be reviewed in the current year. Colleges/MAUs are provided a list in mid-November of the fixed term specialists who have achieved 60+ FTE service months and therefore have enough service time to be eligible to apply for promotion to senior specialist. (Note that 60 FTE service months is equivalent to five years of full-time, full-year work. A typical promotion case across all systems covers 5-7 years of work that meets the expectations for promotion.) MAUs are expected to share this information with the relevant units, and units should of course share it with relevant specialists.

## What if specialists in my unit don't have voting rights?

Voting rights on departmental/unit matters in general can be separate from voting rights in the context of an academic specialist unit level peer review committee. The bylaws of your unit and/or the policies and procedures around academic specialist reappointment, award of continuing status and promotion must specify who has voting rights in that context. Voting members of the committee would vote on a recommendation on reappointment/promotion separate from whether voting rights are given to any of the committee members for other unit business.

Note, however, that full-time academic specialists do have voting rights in the university, according to the Bylaws for Academic Governance (<https://acadgov.msu.edu/bylaws>), 1.1.2.1. The list at <https://acadgov.msu.edu/resources/constituencies> is a source for the bylaws of other colleges/MAUs, where you can learn about the voting rights of specialists in those contexts. It may be useful to ask why those rights are restricted in your unit.

# External Reviewers

## What if those peers don’t exist at other universities?

External reviewers do not have to be people who do the exact same job as you. They need to be knowledgeable about the kind of work and have stature in the field. For example, they may not have the same title but do similar work. They may have once done your exact kind of work, but now serve in a leadership position overseeing people who do that kind of work. The details can vary by field. Also, because your position may include work in several different areas, an individual reviewer may not know about all the areas of work but may be an expert in one portion of your work. When the chairperson/unit administrator selects the slate of reviewers, they should select a set of people whose commentary is likely to complement each other and provide a robust and nuanced account of how your work would be viewed if it were done in peer institutions.

For some specialists, it may be appropriate that “external” reviewers come from within MSU, but outside your unit. This would comply with the policy. Those reviewers may or may not be specialists. Remember that the specialist system is unique to MSU, so any reviewers outside MSU likely have different kinds of positions.

Several specialists who have gone through the promotion process report that this situation has applied to them. In those cases, unit administrators asked people who are in the same field, even though no one has a position quite like the one under review. In all promotion cases, but especially in these kinds of cases, it is important that these individuals receive documentation explaining the role of a specialist at MSU, the duties of the specific specialist under review and the criteria for promotion for that specific specialist position.

## Again on that peer question: can peers be fully non-academic if people doing the same work don’t really exist within universities?

This has happened. Such people can be reviewers, but they must be able to comment on the quality of the work you are doing and how it fits into the academic context. It would be unwise for all the reviewers to be in this category, so think about others in academia who could comment on the academic contributions you are making, even if they themselves do not do that work. If you are in this situation, contact the Office of Faculty and Academic Staff Affairs early on to talk about strategies for cultivating a good slate of potential reviewers. Be ready to supply your Specialist Position Description and a full job description (e.g., from the job posting) if you have one.

## Are external reviewers part of the unit or the college/MAU-level reviewers?

External reviewers themselves are not part of the peer review committee at the unit level (nor at the college/MAU level, if a peer review committee exists at that level in your MAU’s process). External reviewers write letters which are added to the dossier of materials by your unit, after you submit. They are then read and considered by those who participate in the unit level review, the college/MAU level review, and the university level review.

# Annual Reviews

## What if your supervisor didn't do an annual review one year (we had turn over)?  I will show as having 2023 missing because no one wrote one.

It is the responsibility of the unit, not the specialist, to include the annual reviews. Missing reviews do not reflect poorly on the specialist or their case. The purpose of the review letters is to provide additional context for the reviewers about the feedback and guidance specialists have received from the unit throughout the review period about the work they should be focused on and the unit’s assessments of its quality. It is wise for the unit to include a page for the review in the dossier, with a note explaining the reason for its absence, before passing the materials to reviewers. The provost’s office will determine if additional information is needed to conduct the review at that level and will notify the MAU.

# Appointment Policies

## What does it actually mean to be awarded continuing status?

Continuing status means that you have an appointment without an end date. The only termination of appointment is if the position is no longer needed/funded, or for improper conduct or other reasons that duties are not being fulfilled. From the [Handbook](https://hr.msu.edu/_resources/pdf/academic-specialist-handbook/acad_spec_man.pdf), section 2.4.:

Continuing appointment status assures that the academic specialist will not be dismissed due to capricious action by the University, nor will dismissal be used as a restraint of academic freedom or other civil rights. As in the tenure system and librarian continuing appointment system, continuing appointment status does not guarantee employment if positions are not funded, if gross misconduct occurs, if the academic specialist refuses to perform reasonable assigned duties, or fails to fulfill contractual obligations, or if the academic specialist is no longer able to perform satisfactorily in his or her professional capacity at the University.

Classifying a position *in the continuing system* is not a promotion, but a condition that is attached to a position. It means that your line or position is going to be funded indefinitely, pending the conditions above. It is not given to you, per se, but to your position. To achieve *continuing status*, the appointment with no end date, typically a person in the position serves two probationary periods of three years each (i.e., with an end date), during which time they are expected to demonstrate satisfactory performance in the position at the level specified in their criteria document and other guidelines. Following a successful multi-level peer review process, continuing status is granted (typically after year five). If the review is unsuccessful, the appointment ends, and the person is not eligible for an additional appointment in the unit as a specialist. See the [Handbook](https://hr.msu.edu/_resources/pdf/academic-specialist-handbook/acad_spec_man.pdf), 4.4.1.

## What happens if your request for promotion to senior specialist is not successful? Are you let go? Can you re-apply?

An application for senior specialist that does not result in a promotion has no other ill effect. The specialist continues as before and is free to apply for promotion to the senior specialist rank at a future time, even the following year. The only negative effect may be that it is necessary to solicit external letters again, and in that process, anyone contacted a second time would likely infer the first case was unsuccessful. That, of course, along with the time spent and the emotional toll of an unsuccessful case, are reasons to be confident a case will succeed before submitting it. But don’t let those possibilities stop you. Get advice and support from your supervisor at least annually about your progress toward the criteria and when you are likely to have enough evidence for a successful case.

When a specialist in a continuing system probationary period reaches the point at which their application for continuing status is required, however, the answer is different. In this situation, a negative decision, called “non-reappointment” means that the appointment ends, and the specialist is not eligible for an additional appointment within the unit as an academic specialist. See the [Handbook](https://hr.msu.edu/_resources/pdf/academic-specialist-handbook/acad_spec_man.pdf), 4.4.1.

Contact the Office of Faculty and Academic Staff Affairs if you have additional questions.

## Should I be concerned that the peer review members are not in the same functional area?

They need not all be. They only need to be knowledgeable about the specialist system generally and the position under review. But there must be at least one member whose work is in the same primary functional area and who also meets the other expectations in the [Handbook](https://hr.msu.edu/_resources/pdf/academic-specialist-handbook/acad_spec_man.pdf). See both 4.3.3.4. and 4.3.3.6.:

Unit Review Committee Composition - The Unit Review Committee should consist of individuals knowledgeable about the position under review and the academic specialist appointment (system) and must include at least one academic specialist in a same lead functional area, same appointment system and rank (i.e., individual previously awarded continuing status (or previously awarded the senior specialist rank)). An academic specialist from outside the unit can be appointed, if necessary; the ability for (this) specialist … to vote will be determined by unit bylaws. The Committee may also include faculty, members of other academic personnel systems (i.e., research associates, extension specialists), and/or other qualified university members.

## For applying for promotion to senior specialist, does at least one person on your unit peer review committee need to be a senior academic specialist or just be aware of that role?

Yes, per the Handbook, 4.3.3.4., there must be at least one person who has achieved the action sought.

If there is no senior specialist in your unit (or none that meets all the requirements in the handbook), your supervisor/unit administrator should request a senior specialist with the appropriate qualifications from another unit to serve on the committee. There are many across the university, and the university’s Faculty and Academic Staff Affairs (FASA) office can help locate potential candidates with the appropriate qualifications. Unit administrators should contact [Kathy Charles](mailto:lewlessk@msu.edu) in the FASA office for assistance.