

Western Michigan University
Faculty Senate
Memorandum of Action

MOA – 22/01

Revision of Graduation Requirements for Specialist Degree to Include a
Capstone Option for Programs

Name of Council(s)/Committee(s):
Graduate Studies Council

Approval Date:
24 February 2022

Implementation Date:
Upon Administrative Approval

Responsible Office(s) and Responsible Enforcement Official(s):
Graduate College Dean

RECOMMENDATION:

Revise existing graduation requirements for a Specialist Degree at WMU to allow a capstone option (involving field experiences, a field-based project, and/or other culminating work), instead of the currently required Specialist Project (which has process requirements very similar to a mini-dissertation). Total overall program credit hour minimums would not be changed.

Gene Freudenburg

Feb. 24, 2022

Gene Freudenburg, chair, Graduate Studies Council

Date

Approve Disapprove Other Action

Comments:

3/22/2022

Marilyn S. Krizman, WMU Faculty Senate President

Date

Approve Disapprove Other Action

Comments:

05/16/2022

Christopher Cheatham, Acting Provost

Date

Approve Disapprove Other Action

Comments:

5/19/22

Edward B. Montgomery, WMU President

Date

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RATIONALE/PURPOSE

Per the U.S. Department of Education (2008), the Specialist's Degree in the U.S. is considered an "intermediate graduate qualification," which is above a Master's Degree and below a Doctorate. Most Specialist Degrees are in professional fields of study and represent a level of education corresponding to advanced professional standing. Degrees commonly available include a Specialist in Education (Ed.S. or Sp.E.), or a Specialist in School Psychology (Psy.S.); most Specialist Degree programs focus on K-12 education, but some include higher education or other subjects. Program course content is beyond that offered within a Master's Degree, and often include a culminating capstone experience (such as field experiences or field-base projects), but do not typically place an emphasis on conducting original research such as within a doctoral program.

Current WMU policy requires each Specialist Degree student to complete a Specialist Project as a culminating experience that includes a minimum of six 7200 Specialist Project credits, continuous enrollment in such credits, at least a 3-person committee (with member approval processes), HSIRB training and approval, and the WMU document formatting and publishing processes. These are almost identical process requirements for a dissertation within a doctoral program at WMU (except a doctoral program must include at least twelve 7300 dissertation credits).

At WMU, the only program that offers a Specialist Degree is one within K-12 Educational Leadership (Ed.S.).

Table 1 shows how WMU's culminating project requirements compare to those within Specialist Degree programs in other Michigan universities and WMU's Midwestern Peer and MAC institutions (using the requirements for their educational leadership Ed.S. if they offer one). Only one other Michigan university (Northern Michigan) requires a 3-credit thesis that is similar to WMU's 6-credit Specialist Project requirements; while one (Central Michigan) offers a 3-credit thesis as an option to students. All others instead require some type of capstone, action research, and/or internship credits. Table 1 makes it clear that WMU's "mini-dissertation" process requirements are not in alignment with competitor programs in Michigan or the region.

While WMU's current 6-credit project specialist requirements make sense for those engaged in original research and/or those who want to publish their results; in reality, this never/rarely happens within professional-focused graduate programs. For example, all of WMU's Educational Leadership (Ed.S.) students (about 30 active students currently), are full-time working professionals taking graduate classes part-time, who already have a MA degree, and are coming back for further advanced graduate work (as often driven by additional state certification requirements). Few, if any, aspire for working outside the field (for if they did, they would be in WMU's Ph.D. in educational leadership program).

Table 1	Ed. Leadership Specialist (Ed.S.) "Publishable" Project Requirement	Ed.S. Other "Culminating" Requirement
Michigan Universities (with graduate programs)		
Central Michigan	3 credit thesis OR	3-credit capstone course
Eastern Michigan		4 credit field-based research course
Ferris State		No Specialist Degree
Grand Valley		3-credit capstone course
Michigan State		No Ed.S.; Sch Psy (Psy.S.) requires internship and practicums
Michigan Tech		No Specialist Degree
Northern Michigan	3-credit thesis	
Oakland		two 2-credit Action Research courses
Saginaw Valley		Internship credits only
University of MI		Only offer Specialist in Music (performance requirements only)
Univ. of MI - Dearborn		3-credit Internship only
University of MI - Flint		3-credit capstone seminar course
Wayne State		Internship credits only
Western Michigan	6-credit "project"	
Midwest Peers or MAC		
Kent State		Internship credits only
Northern Illinois		Internship credits only
Bowling Green		Internship credits & Core comps
University of Akron		No Specialist Degree

Since WMU's current Specialist Project requirements are more publishable research-focused, many current Ed.S. students complete the content courses (since those credits are needed for state certification), but not the Project requirements. Thus, there is currently a high non-program completion. For those who do complete the Project work, it is a significant workload on existing faculty to handle the current committee, HSIRB, formatting, and continuous enrollment requirements. Like many areas within WMU, the K-12 educational leadership unit has lost faculty lines and does not anticipate them ever fully returning. If the current Specialist Project expectations were of significant value to the Ed.S. students, then faculty would not be requesting this change; but right now, little value is added via the currently required project, despite the additional work for faculty and students. Importantly, it is clear from Table 1, that WMU's expectations for this culminating project are not aligned with other Ed.S. programs in the region, so adding a capstone option (e.g., field experiences and/or field-based project) to existing requirements will not diminish the rigor and value of the degree.

Therefore, WMU's K-12 educational leadership faculty request that a "capstone" option be added within WMU's Specialist Degree policy language. Such a capstone would involve some culminating field experiences and/or field-based project work within their organizations, but the goal is program improvement for an audience of practitioners, not publishable research. Thus, there is no need for a formal committee, HSIRB, six required independent credits, continuous enrollment, and formatting process requirements. Such a capstone still distinguishes the Ed.S. from simply being a second MA (since they all must have an initial MA to be admitted), but such a capstone option is more appropriate for that degree and the students seeking it.

Note: the current Specialist Project, with all existing requirements, still remains in the proposed revised policy as an option for other programs at WMU, if indeed a Specialist Degree was created in another field at some point.

STAKEHOLDERS

The Specialist Degree in K-12 Educational Leadership (Ed.S.) is currently the only Specialist Degree offered at WMU. This is a very practitioner-focused degree, with all students working as full-time educators, taking part-time graduate courses. It requires a Master's Degree prior to admission, and core courses are focused on state requirements/standards for administrative certification.

Therefore, the current stakeholder group for this proposed policy revision are those students interested in the Ed.S. program, as well as faculty who teach within K-12 related educational leadership graduate programs.

HISTORY:

- a) Effective date of current version: Unknown
- b) Date first adopted: Unknown
- c) Revision history: Unknown
- d) Proposed date of next review: None

CURRENT POLICY MODIFICATION (additions in bold and deletions with strikethrough)

Existing Policy is found within the Graduate Catalog, under "Academic Policies/Graduation/Degree-Level Graduation Requirements/Specialist Degree

Specialist Degree

In addition to the minimum University requirements for graduation listed below, each specialist degree program requires students to complete specific courses, examinations, research, and/or experiences. For more complete information about the requirements for a specialist program, read the program requirements section of the relevant program's listing in this catalog or contact the program's graduate advisor or the department office.

1. Minimum Credit Hours: Completion of a minimum of 54 hours of accepted graduate credit in an approved program of study. Additional hours may be required by a specific program; consult the program advisor for complete information.
 - a. After admission to the specialist program, completion of a minimum of 24 hours, including six credits of 7200 Special Project credits **or at least three capstone credits (involving field experiences, a field-based project, and/or other culminating work)**, at Western Michigan University, is required.
 - b. At least one-half of the credits earned for the specialist degree must be in courses numbered 6000 or above.
 - c. A specialist level Graduate Student Permanent Program of Study may include a maximum of four hours of credit in 5980 (Readings).
2. Residency Requirement: A residency requirement is established by each specialist program and approved by the University's curriculum review process and must be met prior to graduation. Unless otherwise approved by the University for an individual academic unit, the general residency requirement for specialist students is one academic semester of full-time study on campus or enrollment in two sessions in consecutive years and the intervening semesters. Consult the program advisor for complete information.
3. Grade Point Average: A degree program grade point average of at least 3.0 is required for all work taken for the specialist degree at Western Michigan University.
 - a. Credit toward the specialist degree is granted only for graduate courses in which a grade of "C" or better is earned. Courses with lower grades will not count toward graduation.
4. Transfer Credit: A student with a master's degree from another institution who completes the remaining credits for a specialist degree at WMU may transfer up to 30 semester hours of approved graduate credit. A student without a master's degree who completes a specialist degree at WMU may transfer up to twelve semester hours of approved graduate credit. Graduate credit earned at another institution is eligible for transfer to a WMU specialist program provided:
 - a. The credit is earned at an institution accredited for graduate study and is of "B"

- grade (3.0) or better. Moreover, the student's overall grade point average for all graduate work taken at the other institution must also be "B" (3.0) or better. [Honor points and grades earned at another institution do not transfer to WMU. Transfer credit will be recorded on the WMU transcript as "Credit" (CR) only and will not be calculated into the honor points earned and the grade point average at WMU.]
- b. The credit is earned within a six-year period prior to graduation from WMU, is represented on an official transcript of the other institution, and is identified on that transcript as graduate credit.
 - c. The student's program advisor verifies that the transfer credits contribute to the student's degree program and includes them in the student's Graduate Student Permanent Program of Study.
5. **Time Limit:** A student admitted to the specialist program with a master's degree is required to complete the specialist program within five years; a student admitted without a master's degree is required to complete the specialist program within six years. Students entering with a master's degree will be permitted five years instead of six. All work must be completed satisfactorily by the day of graduation. Students whose degrees are taken primarily through part-time study have the option of requesting an extension from the graduate dean. Extensions beyond the six years may also be granted for other students by the dean of the Graduate College for such legitimate reasons as illness, injury, or hardship. In such situations, the student and department must demonstrate how the student will bring up to date the content knowledge from courses taken more than six years before the projected date of graduation.
 6. **Research Compliance: If required within a program**, all research conducted under the aegis of Western Michigan University must adhere to federal, state, and local regulations, as well as University policies. Much of the research (human subject, animal, biohazards, genetic materials, or nuclear materials/radiation, and international) you may be engaged in during your graduate student career requires oversight/approval from the appropriate University board/committee/official. Approval must be obtained prior to implementing your research project. There are no exceptions to this requirement. In addition, some research requires a training component that must be completed before the project can be approved. For more information, call the Research Compliance Office, (269) 387-8293 or via email at research-compliance@wmich.edu.
 7. **Continuous Enrollment in 7200 or Other Credits: If required within a program**, the course 7200:Specialist Project, is six credit hours and may be registered for in increments of one to six hours. Following a student's first enrollment in 7200, the student must have continuous enrollment in 7200 or other credits in a student's program of study until all program requirements are completed satisfactorily and approved by the appropriate bodies. Continuous enrollment is defined as enrollment in all fall and spring semesters from the initial enrollment in 7200 to the semester in which the student graduates (some programs may require students to be enrolled during summer sessions as well as fall and spring semesters; students should refer to respective program handbooks).
 - a. A student unable to complete the project within the first six hours of registration will be required to continuously enroll in 7200 or other credits; however, only six hours of 7200 will count toward meeting the program requirements for the specialist's degree.
 - b. If the student will graduate in summer I or summer II, the student must be enrolled in that session.
 - c. Students on continuous enrollment status who are not enrolled in summer I or summer II may not hold graduate appointments during any session in which they are not enrolled and may not qualify for resources restricted to enrolled students, such as the Graduate Student Research and Travel Fund.
 8. **Submission of Specialist Project (7200) Manuscript: If required within a program**, the manuscript must be submitted by the deadline established by the Graduate College and must conform to the style and format requirements explained in the University's *Guidelines for the Preparation of Theses, Specialist Projects, and Dissertations* (deadlines and guidelines available on the Graduate College website). Also, the manuscript may be submitted for review only after it has been approved by the student's project committee and

only with the signed committee approval forms certifying departmental approval of the manuscript and of the student's successful defense of it. Students must submit these approval forms as well as any other documents containing signatures, such as research protocol approval letters, to the Graduate College.

See the Graduate Studies section of this catalog, under GRAD 7200, for additional information regarding the Specialist Project.

REFERENCES

U.S. Department of Education. (2008). Structure of the U.S. Education System: Intermediate Graduate Qualification. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/edlite-structure-us.html>