

Program Handbook Quick Guide

A strong graduate program handbook is both a reference guide and a governance document—it sets clear expectations, reduces confusion, and ensures students, faculty, and staff share a consistent understanding of policies and processes.

Make it:

- **Clear** Plain language with minimal jargon
- **Searchable** Digital PDF with bookmarks or an online handbook
- **Aligned** Consistent with Graduate School or University policies ([Link directly to the policies rather than restating or rephrasing policy](#))
- **Stable** State the frequency updates and how students are notified
- **Actionable** Include checklists, tables, timelines, and samples

Here's a comprehensive list of elements that well-designed graduate handbooks typically include. Use this as a checklist or structure for building or revising your own. Some programs may not need to include everything listed.

Core Elements of a Good Graduate Program Handbook

1. Welcome & Program Overview
2. Admissions & Enrollment Requirements
3. Degree Requirements
4. Academic Policies & Standards
5. Advising & Mentoring
6. Graduate Student Milestones
7. Research & Professional Expectations
8. Funding & Financial Information
9. Program Culture, Conduct, & Community Standards
10. Resources & Support Services
11. Graduation & Post-Graduation Processes
12. Appendices

For specifics of what topics can be included
in each of the categories above, keep reading!

1. Welcome & Program Overview

- Program mission and goals
 - Overview of degree options (e.g., MA, MS, PhD, certificates)
 - Contact information for program leadership, Graduate School contacts, and key administrative staff
 - Organizational structure (committees, roles, reporting lines)
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2. Admissions & Enrollment Requirements

- Admission criteria and required materials
 - Deferral policies
 - Transfer credit policies
 - Continuous enrollment requirements
 - Full-time vs. part-time status definitions
 - Leave of absence and re-entry procedures
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3. Degree Requirements

Master's Programs

- Minimum credit hours
- Required vs. elective coursework
- Capstone/thesis/project requirements

Doctoral Programs

- Expected timeline to degree
 - Required coursework and milestones
 - Residency requirements
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4. Academic Policies & Standards

- Expectations regarding academic progress
 - Minimum GPA requirements
 - Grade policies (e.g., pass/fail, incomplete, course repeats)
 - Academic probation and dismissal procedures
 - Expectations for timely completion of milestones
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5. Advising & Mentoring

- Advisor assignment process
 - Changing advisors
 - Expectations for faculty mentors and graduate students
 - Meeting frequency expectations
 - Annual progress review procedures and templates
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6. Graduate Student Milestones

Depending on degree type, this may include:

- Program of Study form
 - Candidacy requirements
 - Qualifying/Comprehensive exam policies
 - Thesis/Dissertation proposal requirements
 - Defense procedures
 - Submission requirements (formatting, deadlines, Graduate School policies)
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7. Research & Professional Expectations

- Research conduct and integrity
 - IRB/IACUC guidelines
 - Lab safety or fieldwork requirements
 - Authorship expectations
 - Teaching responsibilities (for GTAs)
 - Professional development or training expectations
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8. Funding & Financial Information

- Types of funding (assistantships, fellowships, scholarships)
 - Guaranteed funding periods
 - Workload expectations for GAs (hours, duties)
 - Tuition waivers and health insurance
 - Renewal and eligibility criteria
 - Outside employment restrictions
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9. Program Culture, Conduct, & Community Standards

- Code of conduct
 - Anti-harassment and grievance procedures
 - Conflict resolution pathways
 - Expectations for respectful communication and professional behavior
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10. Resources & Support Services

- Academic support (writing center, libraries, tutoring)
 - Mental health and wellness services
 - Accessibility/Disability services
 - Career services
 - International student resources
 - Campus safety resources
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11. Graduation & Post-Graduation Processes

- Application for graduation
 - Final clearance checklist
 - Exit surveys
 - Career placement support
 - Alumni engagement opportunities
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12. Appendices

- Flowcharts or milestone timelines
- Forms and links
- Sample curriculum plans
- Internal deadlines relative to Graduate School deadlines
- Glossary of terms