

**Commission on Research**  
**Resolution to Revise Research Faculty Non-Professorial Rank Structure in**  
**Faculty Handbook**

COR 2025-26A

Resolution Proposal Form Sent to University Council Cabinet	October 6, 2025
First Reading by Commission	December 11, 2025
Approval by Commission	Date
First Reading by Senate	Date
Approval by Senate	Date
Faculty Senate Comment	Date
Staff Senate Comment	Date
Administrative and Professional Faculty Senate Comment	Date
Graduate and Professional Student Senate Comment	Date
Undergraduate Student Senate Comment	Date
First Reading, University Council	Date
Approved, University Council	Date
Approved, President	Date
Approved, Board of Visitors	Date
Effective Date	Upon Approval or Date

**WHEREAS**, research faculty are essential contributors to the university's research ecosystem by advancing the creation and dissemination of knowledge by applying their specialized expertise to research programs, projects, and collaborations that serve the university sponsors, and the broader research community; and

**WHEREAS**, the university's research mission is best supported by a research faculty structure that establishes consistent expectations across research specializations and levels, aligns responsibilities with institutional standards, provides competitive compensation practices, and promotes professional growth while ensuring flexibility to meet the diverse needs of the university's research enterprise; and

**WHEREAS**, the current research faculty structure does not provide the agility, predictability, competitive alignment, or precision necessary to meet the diverse and growing requirements of Virginia Tech's research enterprise;

**WHEREAS**, the *Faculty Handbook* sets forth the structure and policies governing research faculty ranks;

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that the Faculty Handbook shall be amended to combine the ranks of research associate, senior research associate, research scientist, and senior research scientist into a single rank of research professional faculty with appropriate levels and specializations designed to provide a flexible, predictable career structure for research faculty; and

**THEREFORE, BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Faculty Handbook, section 2.1.1.3, shall be amended as shown below in red; and

**THEREFORE, BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Faculty Handbook, section 6.1, shall be amended as shown below in red; and

**THEREFORE, BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Faculty Handbook, section 6.2, shall be amended as shown below in red.

## CHAPTER TWO: ALL FACULTY

### 2.1.1.3 Research Faculty

Research faculty are designated to promote and expedite university research activities. Research faculty are typically employed on sponsored grants and contracts and are on a restricted appointment to carry out research or outreach projects. The duties of research faculty may have a small or no instructional component. Some research faculty may hold full- or part-time positions in academic departments, schools, or colleges.

As valuable contributors to institutional missions, research faculty members are entitled to fair treatment and compensation, access to professional development opportunities, recognition for their accomplishments, and participation in the life of the university community.

See chapter six of this handbook.

TRACK	RANKS
Postdoctoral Associate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ N/A</li></ul>
<del>Research Associate</del>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <del>Research Associate</del></li><li>▪ <del>Senior Research Associate</del></li></ul>
<del>Research Scientist</del>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <del>Research Scientist</del></li><li>▪ <del>Senior Research Scientist</del></li></ul>
<u>Research Professional Faculty</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <u>Research Professional Faculty</u></li></ul>
Research Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Research Assistant Professor</li><li>▪ Research Associate Professor</li><li>▪ Research Professor</li></ul>

## CHAPTER SIX: RESEARCH FACULTY

### 6.0 Employment Policies for Research Faculty

The following policies address specific aspects for research faculty appointments. Research faculty are supported by the Office of Research and Innovation.

Appointments to the faculty may be made for which there is no presumption or consideration of renewal. Such appointments are called “restricted” and are designated with start and end dates in the terms of faculty offer (TOFO). See “Restricted Appointments” in chapter two of this handbook.

See “Regular Appointments” in this chapter for circumstances in which a research faculty member may be on a regular appointment.

### 6.1 Research Faculty

The [Office of Sponsored Programs](#) maintains resources on research faculty including [Principal Investigator Eligibility](#).

Track	Ranks
Postdoctoral Associate	postdoctoral associate
<del>Research Associate</del>	<del>research associate, senior research associate</del>
<del>Research Scientist</del>	<del>research scientist, senior research scientist</del>
<u>Research Professional Faculty</u>	<u>research professional faculty.</u>
Research Professor	research assistant professor, research associate professor, research professor

#### 6.1.1 Considerations for Establishment of Research Faculty Positions

A summary matrix of qualifications, approval requirements, general expectations, salary guidelines, and typical position responsibilities can be found at [Research Faculty Ranks](#).

Research faculty appointments are designated to promote and expedite university research activities. Research faculty rank descriptions create several series common to current sponsored research or outreach projects.

When establishing research faculty positions, ~~in this track, particularly at the research associate level,~~ departments must ensure that the work anticipated for the employee is sufficiently complex and sophisticated to warrant a faculty position. A variety of staff roles

are appropriate for research personnel, depending on the nature of the work proposed and the credentials required. For example, laboratory and research specialist I or II is usually the appropriate staff role for personnel overseeing laboratory, animal care, or research support, conducting routine tests, compiling data, collecting and preparing samples. Furthermore, departments must ensure that the work is sufficiently creative and research-based to warrant a research faculty position, otherwise, an Administrative and Professional ~~P~~ faculty positions may be more appropriate.

Careful preparation of the position description by the principal investigator and/or department head, chair, school director and/or supervisor is essential in determining whether the position is staff or research faculty. Staff positions must be used where appropriate; exceptions are granted only in very rare cases.

### **6.1.2 Postdoctoral Associate**

The Office of Research and Innovation administers and supports the [university's postdoctoral associate](#) positions. Appointment to this faculty rank is for persons with a terminal degree who are engaged in research for a restricted period under the direction of faculty mentors. The position of postdoctoral associate is intended to be a limited-term traineeship, during which the individual works under the supervision of one or more faculty mentors in preparation for a career in academe or research. Funding is usually from a grant, contract, or a postdoctoral fellowship. Postdoctoral associates are considered temporary or short-term appointments by definition and are always on restricted n appointments. Consult section 2.3.2 for additional information on restricted appointments.

Individuals are eligible to be postdoctoral associates for a maximum of five years, including prior experience in a postdoc position at another institution. Generally, eligibility is calculated from the date of conferral of a terminal degree. Appointment to this faculty rank is usually for persons who have been awarded a doctoral degree no more than four years prior to the effective date of the appointment with a minimum of one year of eligibility remaining. Continued appointment beyond five years requires a promotion in rank. Exceptions for extenuating circumstances may be made by the Office of Research and Innovation.

Typically, postdoctoral associates have very limited responsibility for project management, supervision of personnel, or design of the research project on which they are funded. Rather, the position enables the individual to continue studies in a specialty area while gaining practical experience in the field. The postdoctoral traineeship may include opportunities to write and submit grant proposals. With the approval of the department head, chair, or school director, the postdoctoral associate may serve as co-principal investigator. In certain cases (such as young career award proposals), a postdoctoral associate is permitted to submit a grant as a principal investigator. Requests for principal investigator status may be submitted to the Office of Research and Innovation.

Searches are not required to fill a postdoctoral associate position. Review by the Office of Research and Innovation is required before an offer is made.

### **6.1.3 Research Professional Faculty Associate Ranks**

A person appointed to the research professional faculty ~~a research associate rank~~ contributes to research activities using standard and non-standard procedures appropriate to the field. Research professional faculty positions are aligned to two independent dimensions: a job specialization and a level as provided in the required qualifications and essential responsibilities of the role. The level is defined by the position's scope, complexity and accountability. There are six levels within the research professional faculty rank: Research Associate I, Research Associate II, Research Scientist I, Research Scientist II, Senior Research Scientist, and Principal Research Scientist. The job specialization is defined by the essential disciplinary focus of the position. Detailed information regarding the classification structure will be maintained on the Research and Innovation website [\[link\]](#).

Research professional faculty typically hold an advanced or doctoral/terminal degree. Exceptions may be made to include a bachelor's degree with significant professional training or certifications essential to the field that may be accepted in lieu of an advanced degree. Requirements of prior supervisory experience vary according to the and scope of responsibility.

The research professional faculty level structure defines eligibility for principal investigator (PI) status. Research professional faculty who do not hold automatic PI status may submit a request ~~Persons appointed to research associate ranks are not eligible to be principal investigators; however, exception requests for principal investigator status for senior research associates may be submitted~~ to the Office of Research and Innovation for consideration.

#### **6.1.3.1 Research Associate**

~~The research associate rank is the entry, or most junior, rank for research faculty members involved in sponsored projects. However, the work may vary from that which is appropriate for a relatively new professional to broader or more significant responsibilities expected of more experienced research faculty personnel. Research associates generally conduct research under supervision. They may provide input into the preparation of proposals or supervise staff or student personnel, but typically they have limited responsibility and authority in these areas.~~

~~A master's degree in a relevant field is the minimum qualification for appointment as a research associate. The Office of Research and Innovation must approve requests for exceptions for individuals with a bachelor's degree and significant related experience before an offer is extended.~~

### **6.1.3.2 Senior Research Associate**

~~The rank of senior research associate requires greater qualifications than the research associate either in education, experience, or both. Senior research associates conduct research under limited supervision.~~

~~Typically, they have some significant supervisory responsibility for lower level personnel and may contribute to the conceptualization and preparation of research proposals, reports, and resource acquisition.~~

~~A doctorate or a terminal degree in the field and some experience are required. The Office of Research and Innovation must approve an appointment or promotion to this rank for individuals with a lesser degree and substantial related experience before an offer is extended.~~

### **6.1.4 Research Scientist Ranks**

#### **6.1.4.1 Research Scientist**

~~Research scientists fulfill a senior role in the university's research program. They conduct independent research under limited supervision. By virtue of their expertise and experience, research scientists make significant contributions to the conceptualization and conduct of the research. They may be involved in the preparation of proposals, reports, and publications, presentation of research results, and development of patents. The rank of research scientist is parallel to that of research assistant or research associate professor. A doctorate or terminal degree in the field and significant experience are expected.~~

#### **6.1.4.2 Senior Research Scientist**

~~The senior research scientist is the highest rank in the research faculty series for those who are not involved in a graduate program. As experienced research faculty members, senior research scientists are often responsible for the design and execution of a project and interpretation of research results. Typically, they have significant responsibility for supervision of personnel, budget preparation and execution, and organization and management of the research project. Guidelines and information regarding Principal Investigators is located in chapter ten of this handbook and on the Office for Sponsored Programs Principal Investigator Resources page.~~

~~The rank of senior research scientist is parallel to that of research associate professor or research professor. A doctorate or terminal degree in the field and a considerable record of research are expected.~~

### **6.1.5 Research Professor Ranks**

The research professor ranks are designed for research faculty members whose appointments are expected to last more than one year and whose credentials are comparable to those of the tenured and tenure-track faculty of similar rank. ~~This track is~~

~~parallel to research scientist and senior research scientist, not necessarily above it.~~

Appointment to research professor ranks is not appropriate for those with short-term or limited appointments since this would disadvantage the graduate or professional students with whom they might work. Research faculty members with appropriate credentials and approvals whose primary appointment is in a research unit not affiliated with a degree-granting academic department or school may also be appointed to these ranks with appropriate credentials and approvals. Tenure cannot be earned in any of the research faculty ranks and service is not applicable toward the probationary period if the employee is subsequently appointed to a tenure-track position.

With approval by the degree-granting program, those appointed to any research professor rank may direct graduate theses and dissertations and serve on graduate committees consistent with program and graduate school policy.

At the discretion of the academic department or school, departmental faculty membership with or without voting privileges may be extended to an assistant, associate, or research professor. However, a person appointed to a research professor rank is not eligible to vote on matters relating to faculty appointment, retention, promotion, or tenure.

Faculty members in this series may teach occasionally in their areas of expertise in accordance with guidelines below and by providing the appropriate credentials required of instructional faculty. For more information, consult [Faculty Qualifications for Teaching](#). Faculty in the research professor series may teach one course per year or two courses in a two-year period. They may teach more if funding is appropriately charged to the instructional budget and approved by the principal investigator/supervisor, department head, chair, or school director, and dean.

Promotion to a higher rank may be granted to research professorial faculty who have sources of continued funding and demonstrate outstanding accomplishments in appropriate activities. The curriculum vitae together with annual faculty activity reports, reprints of publications, reference letters, and other similar documents comprise a dossier, which furnishes the principal basis for promotion decisions. Besides consideration of specific professional criteria, evaluation for promotion should consider the candidate's integrity, professional conduct, and ethics. To the extent that such considerations are significant factors in reaching a negative recommendation, they should be documented as part of the formal review process.

Research professor faculty members being considered for promotion have their dossiers reviewed at as many as three levels: (1) by a departmental or school committee and the head or chair; (2) by a college committee and the dean/senior management; and (3) by the office of the provost. Faculty members are not permitted to serve on department, school, or college committees that will be reviewing a family member (spouse or dependent immediate family member) or an individual with whom they have a close personal relationship such as partner or extended family member.



#### **6.1.5.1 Research Assistant Professor**

Persons appointed as research assistant professors are required to have a doctoral degree or terminal degree appropriate to the field and credentials consistent with those for appointment to the rank of assistant professor. Research assistant professors ~~are equivalent to research scientists in terms of their credentials; however, appointment to this~~ rank indicates actual or anticipated involvement with the academic program.

Research assistant professors are expected to contribute significantly to the design and execution of research projects. They conduct independent research in their field of specialization under general supervision. They may have supervisory responsibility for project personnel and contribute to project management.

The approval of the department head, chair, school director and dean (or next level administrator), and the Office of Research and Innovation is required before an offer is extended for an original appointment or reappointment, including approval of the proposed rank, salary, and other conditions.

#### **6.1.5.2 Research Associate Professor**

Persons appointed to this rank are required to have a doctoral degree or terminal degree appropriate to the field and credentials consistent with those for appointment to the rank of associate professor. Research associate professors are typically responsible for design and execution of research projects and interpretation of research results. They may have significant supervisory responsibility for project personnel and contribute to project management.

Original appointments follow standard departmental or school procedures for tenured and tenure-track faculty appointments. Typically, this involves approval by the appropriate departmental/unit/school committee, followed by approval of the department/unit head or chair, school director, and dean (or next level administrator), and the office of the provost. Promotion to this rank requires evidence of continuous professional development, documentation of excellence in the disciplinary field, contribution to research or creative activity supported through grants and contracts, and at least regional recognition. The promotion review and approval process is described in this chapter “Research Faculty Promotions: Professorial Ranks”.

#### **6.1.5.3 Research Professor**

Persons appointed to this rank are required to have a doctoral degree or terminal degree appropriate to the field and credentials consistent with those for appointment to the rank of professor. Research professors are typically responsible for design and execution of research projects and interpretation of research results. They may have significant supervisory responsibility for project personnel and contribute to project management.

Original appointments follow standard departmental or school procedures for tenured and tenure-track faculty appointments. Typically, this involves approval by the appropriate

departmental/unit/school committee, followed by approval of the department/unit head or chair, school director, dean (or next level administrator), and the Office of Research and Innovation. Promotion to this rank requires evidence of continuous professional development, documentation of excellence in their disciplinary field, outstanding research or creative activity supported by grants and contracts, and national and/or international recognition. The promotion review and approval process is described in this chapter “Research Faculty Promotions: Professorial Ranks”.

## **6.2 Policies Related to Research Faculty Appointments**

For additional information, consult the [Office of Research and Innovation Human Resources](#). Research faculty members ~~will~~ **may** be assigned a functional title in addition to their official faculty rank to facilitate their work or clarify their role to internal or external constituencies. (A functional title may not be an official faculty rank other than that held by the research faculty member.) In some cases, increased responsibilities lead to a change in functional title and possibly a salary adjustment rather than a promotion in faculty rank.

Appointments to research faculty ranks, except the rank of postdoctoral associate, are indefinitely renewable. However, tenure cannot be earned in any of the research faculty ranks and service is not applicable toward the pre-tenure probationary period if the employee is subsequently appointed to a tenure-track position.

The source of funds is not the determining factor as to whether a position carries a research faculty rank, but rather the nature and purpose of the assignment. Thus, a research faculty member may be funded by sponsored projects, facilities and administrative funds, state dollars, or other sources. Policies related to research faculty apply, regardless of the source of funding.

Research faculty may participate in activities outside of their direct source of funding, such as providing significant contributions to the conceptualization or writing of new proposals, or teaching. However, support for any time or effort spent on activities outside of their sponsored research must come from non-sponsored research funds. Special attention should be given to the development of position descriptions where funding is limited to only sponsored funding. For further information, consult [the Office of Research and Innovation Financial Compliance, Effort Reporting](#).

Original appointments and reappointments, including rank, salary, and other conditions, require the approval of the department head, chair, school director and dean (or next level administrator), and the Office of Research and Innovation before an offer is extended.

### **6.2.1 Instructional Responsibilities for Research Faculty Members**

The primary responsibility of a research faculty appointment is to conduct research and contribute to the university’s research mission through the acquisition of and successful implementation of sponsored grants and contracts. Federal guidelines require truthful and auditable documentation of the faculty member’s efforts on a semester basis. If the faculty

member's salary is paid for by sponsored grants and contracts, then there is a concomitant expectation that the faculty member's time is allocated to those projects.

While keeping the primacy of the research role in mind, there are circumstances in which the university and its instructional programs benefit from the occasional participation of research faculty members who have the appropriate credentials, expertise, and interest. The usual limitation on teaching by research faculty members is one (three-credit) course per academic year, or no more than two courses in a two- year period. The principal investigator/supervisor, department head, chair, school director and dean must approve exceptions. The academic department or school provides instructional funding for the teaching appointment and research duties are adjusted accordingly. A three-credit course equates to 0.25 FTE during an academic semester; this is the usual basis for salary charges to the instructional budget.

Research faculty members may receive additional compensation to teach a class that exceeds their normal research assignment. To qualify for additional compensation, the research faculty member may not be 100 percent supported from sponsored funds, must be the instructor of record, and must usually be assigned to teach for the entire semester. For courses with block teaching, the research faculty member must have a formal teaching assignment for a specified portion of the course. The academic department or school responsible for the course must fund the payment from non-sponsored funds and initiate the payment as a temporary pay action. The payment must be approved jointly by the academic and home department, school, and college, and by the Office of Research and Innovation.

For more information, consult [Faculty Qualifications for Teaching](#). It is the responsibility of the hiring department/unit or school to obtain and verify documentation of credentials of all faculty prior to employment.

Research faculty members with appropriate credentials and experience may serve on graduate student committees in accordance with policies of the graduate school and the department or school. Those with appointment to the research professor ranks may chair a committee, if approved by the degree-granting department or school. Involvement in supervision of graduate student research may be directly related to fulfillment of sponsored grants and contracts and thus may have a synergistic effect.

Contributions to the instructional program are monitored and evaluated by the academic department or school and by the supervisor.

#### **6.2.2 Research Professional Faculty Promotions: ~~Research Associate, Research Scientist~~**

For additional information, consult [Research Professional Faculty Promotion Guidelines](#). While there is logic to the progression between and among ~~career track levels~~~~ranks~~, employees may ~~progress levels~~~~change ranks~~ as appropriate or necessary to reflect a change in role or project that aligns best with the essential responsibilities of the position.

Promotion for research professional faculty is usually recognized by changes in career track level rather than promotion in rank. A promotion from one level~~rank~~ to another may be recommended by the supervisor to recognize a faculty member's increased responsibilities, credentials, and/or contributions to the program over time. Guidelines for the necessary skills, experience and education for each level may be found {insert web link}.

Recommendations for promotions within the ~~research professional faculty career levels non-professorial ranks (such as research associates and research scientists)~~ may be requested at any time during the year in recognition of significant increases in responsibilities, credentials, or contributions. The promotions require approval by the department head, chair, school director, dean, and Office of Research and Innovation. A faculty member may not serve on any committee that is evaluating a spouse, family member, or other individual with whom the faculty member has a close personal relationship. Following approval of the promotion request, a promotion letter signed by the department head, chair, or school director should be presented to the employee.