



# Student Handbook

## 2021 - 2022



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## ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Van Andel Institute Graduate School (VAIGS) directors, faculty, and administrators know that the quality of a program is directly related to the quality of the students. For that reason, VAIGS strives to recruit talented students to the program and provide excellent support for the students when they are enrolled. VAIGS has a supportive culture expressed in the collaboration among investigators and students. Students are considered full participants in the life of the Institute, contributing to the present and shaping the future of the Institute. As such, they are required to uphold the policies and values of the Graduate School and of the Institute, as do the faculty and staff. Students are responsible for adhering to all VAI policies, which are available at the [Human Resources SharePoint site](#). Academic policies and requirements are summarized in the Graduate School Catalog and are available at the [VAIGS SharePoint page](#).

### **Onboarding and Orientation**

Once students receive and accept admission offers to VAIGS, they will receive communications that provide welcome and onboarding information and activities, including messages regarding:

- Peer mentor assignments
- Relocation assistance
- Summer events: Current Student Panel & Virtual Mixer
- IT services and laptop selection

Prior to orientation, VAIGS **MUST** have received final, official transcripts for all previous academic work confirming that the course of study was completed and the degree was awarded.

Matriculating students begin the academic year with two weeks of intensive orientation before courses begin. Some activities might extend into the first week of classes. New student orientation includes:

- an introduction to the research community at Van Andel Institute (VAI)
- overview of general policies of VAI
- academic policies and procedures of VAIGS
- official enrollment process
- introduction to student support services
- online training for safety and policy compliance
- physical security, parking, and building access
- information technology
- research administration departments
- library resources
- writing support
- vivarium
- connection to peer mentors and other graduate students

## Academic Records

The official academic records for graduate students are kept by the Director of Enrollment and Records. The academic record is a permanent record and is subject to change only upon written authorization from the Dean. Academic records include:

- personal and emergency contact information. Students are responsible for reporting changes in personal information (name, address, etc.) through the [VAIGS Student Portal](#), and with Human Resources
- course grades
- thesis advisory committee (TAC) reports
- comprehensive exam reports
- other documentation that provides evidence of the fulfillment of graduation requirements

VAIGS makes the academic record available to the student upon request. It is also available to the Academic/Thesis Adviser and the Director of Student Support Services for use in counseling the student. VAIGS will furnish an official academic transcript upon the written request or approval of the student. The request can be made through SharePoint under 'VAIGS Alumni'.

VAIGS complies with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which assures the student the right to:

- 1) inspect and review their education records
- 2) request amendment to parts of the student's education record that are shown to be inaccurate
- 3) consent to all disclosure of personally identifiable information in the record except that which is authorized for school officials with legitimate educational interests
- 4) review letters of recommendation written for the student's file unless the student has signed a waiver, and
- 5) file a complaint to the U.S. Department of Education concerning alleged failures of VAIGS to comply with requirements of FERPA. The Act also permits VAIGS to release certain information upon request under the guidelines of FERPA. Additional information about FERPA can be found [here](#).

## Advisers, Academic and Research

A congenial and respectful student relationship with the faculty is vital to VAIGS culture and the continuing development of the student as a research scientist. In order to ensure the students' goals are achieved (as well as those of the Institute), students will be guided in their work by Academic and Thesis Advisers.

The Dean serves as the students' first year Academic Adviser. The Thesis Adviser is selected in the first year following completion of laboratory rotations. The Thesis Adviser guides the student in their research and their educational progress from thesis proposal to thesis defense.

Although the students will become acquainted with the entire faculty, the formal responsibility of advising the students resides with the designated Thesis Adviser, with additional input from the Thesis Advisory Committee (TAC) for that student. The Thesis

Adviser will be an intellectual mentor who advises the student regarding academic work and progress toward fulfilling the requirements, serves as a liaison between the student and the faculty and administration, recommends the student for a degree, and is a colleague in the life of the Institute. The Thesis Adviser also approves courses for students throughout their time at VAIGS. The TAC as a whole provides advice on the thesis project; assesses the progress of the student in completing that project; monitors the student's overall progress towards degree completion; and advises the student on career planning and preparation, including letters of recommendation.

Individual Development Plans (IDPs) are a valuable tool for students to map out their long-range interests and ambitions and to build short-term plans to help fulfill those goals. VAI uses the myIDP tools made available without cost from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), which publishes the premier journal *Science*. Students are strongly encouraged to discuss their profiles of interests and aptitudes with their thesis adviser. The current goals of the IDP will be also updated by the student each time they meet with their TAC, as part of the Student Progress Report Form that is completed for each TAC meeting.

Students will have many opportunities to interact and form relationships with one another and with faculty and staff through courses, seminars, informal discussions, social events, and personal friendship, all of which contribute to desired collegiality. The collegiality among students provides them support and an avenue for advice from VAIGS faculty and administration.

## **Facilities**

As of February 2021, VAIGS teaching, office, study, and social functions have moved to new facilities within a renovated space in the building at 234 Division Ave., on the VAI campus. The new space features a lot of natural light and expressive colors. The layout offers large and smaller classrooms to accommodate VAIGS problem-based learning approach, a reading room, student carrels, lounge areas, a meditation room and lactation room. VAIGS also operates within the physical facilities of VAI, an exceptional building that opened in year 2000. The open-concept research space fosters collegiality, and core technology laboratories provide exceptional support for research. Additional information about VAI's facility, research services, and technology can be found on VAI's SharePoint. Phase II of the facility (completed in 2009) was awarded Leadership in Energy and Environment Design (LEED) Platinum status by the United States Green Building Council.

## **Library**

VAI's Hope Library subscribes to a number of core journals in cancer biology, biochemistry, genetics, cell biology, and molecular biology. Most journals are available online, although a few titles are available only in print. The library also houses a small book collection. VAI contracts with Grand Valley State University (GVSU) for library services, and the VAI book collection is searchable in the GVSU library catalog. VAI books and online and print journals, along with other pertinent information, can be accessed from the Hope Library's SharePoint site.

GVSU provides VAI with a Library Services Manager who has a deep understanding of the biomedical literature and is available to assist with developing literature search

strategies. The Library Services Manager also facilitates access to GVSU's book and journal collection, both in print and online, as well as GVSU's licensed databases. Interlibrary loans for journal articles and books not owned by VAI or GVSU are also obtained by contacting the Library Services Manager.

Additionally, VAI researchers can utilize [Spectrum Health's Health Sciences Library](#). The Health Sciences Library provides system-wide access to professional electronic resources to all users who are affiliated with SH and have SH network usernames and passwords, including books, journals, and databases. For additional support, contact the Health Sciences Library at [medical.library@spectrumhealth.org](mailto:medical.library@spectrumhealth.org)

### **Information Technology (IT)**

VAI provides a IT infrastructure to support teaching, learning, and research. VAIGS students will be provided with a laptop computer, software (e.g., Microsoft Office Suite), an e-mail account, personal file storage space, local shared printer capability, and an institute-wide wireless network. The VAI IT Department supports and provides services to the Institute and has policies that protect the IT infrastructure. Orientation to VAI's infrastructure and to IT policies is provided during the new student orientation. Failure to follow the IT policies can result in disciplinary action up to and including possible dismissal. Information about the IT ServiceDesk and additional support can be found on [VAI SharePoint](#).

The IT Service Desk can be reached by calling x5555 or 616-234-5555 for urgent matters. All other needs require completion of a help desk ticket, which can be initiated [here](#).

## **STUDENT RESOURCES**

### **Financial Assistance**

Applications for regular admission to VAIGS include application for financial assistance. Students who are accepted into the graduate program, and who do not have an external fellowship, receive a fellowship from VAIGS that is competitive with those of regional universities. VAIGS fellowships include a stipend for living expenses, health, dental and vision insurance, life insurance, travel allowance, and tuition waiver. VAIGS fellowships will be awarded for up to five years if the student is making satisfactory progress and are engaged full-time in graduate work. The student's Thesis Adviser will be responsible for continuing financial support beyond the fifth year.

The source of funds to support the internal fellowships may vary depending on the number of graduate students doing thesis research in any given laboratory. The first student in any lab is supported by funds from VAIGS. For the second student in any lab, the costs of stipend and benefits are shared equally by VAIGS and by the lab's research funds. For the third (or more) student in a lab, the fellowship will be borne by the lab's research funds. VAIGS students are not directly appointed as graduate research assistants (employees) on their thesis adviser's research grants.

VAIGS students are expected and encouraged to apply for external fellowships with the support and assistance of their Thesis Adviser and the VAI Office of Sponsored Research. VAIGS provides financial incentives for obtaining external fellowships, including supplements to the student's stipend and additional allocations of research support funds.

## Stipends

Stipends are issued on the 20<sup>th</sup> of each month for the following month. Students are highly encouraged to set up direct deposit. For those who do not use direct deposit, paper check are distributed by Accounts Payable and/or the Director of Student Support Services. Income tax is not withheld from stipends. VAIGS students will need to plan how to pay their own taxes.

## Tuition

Block tuition for a full academic year (three semesters, including summer) is \$25,000. For individual courses, tuition will be assessed at a rate of \$835 per credit hour. Tuition will be waived for students supported by internal (VAI) fellowships. Enrollment of non-VAIGS students in VAIGS courses is permitted under certain conditions and requires establishing a mechanism for assessing tuition for individual course enrollment.

## Benefits

Students who are enrolled in the PhD program and who are recipients of a VAIGS fellowship, or comparable support, are eligible to participate in medical, dental, vision and life insurance plans administered through Human Resources. Family members are also eligible for medical, dental and vision insurance coverage when the student is receiving those benefits.

**Medical Plan:** The medical plan is a preferred provider (PPO) plan provided through Priority Health. VAIGS students are eligible for Medical Plan B only. Details and summaries of Medical Plan B can be found on the VAIGS SharePoint site under the [stipend and benefits link](#). Medical insurance premiums are paid by VAIGS. Students are responsible for paying out-of-pocket expenses (e.g., office and prescription co-pays). Certain deductibles and maximums will apply depending on whether service was provided in-network or out-of-network, and on whether the student is enrolled as an individual or with eligible dependents.

Students may opt out of the medical insurance plan if they demonstrate to Human Resources that they are adequately covered by another insurance plan. Students receive no payment in lieu of not participating in the medical insurance program.

**Dental/Vision Plan:** Dental and vision insurance are offered as a package and not separately. Dental coverage is through Delta Dental of Michigan, and vision coverage is provided through VSP Vision Care. Students are responsible for paying a portion of the premium and any out-of-pocket expenses (co-pays).

**Life Insurance Plan:** VAIGS students are provided life and accidental death and dismemberment insurance valued at \$10,000.

**Benefits Enrollment:** New student benefit enrollment occurs in August each year. Medical open enrollment occurs each year in November. Dental and vision open enrollment occurs each year in June. For questions regarding benefits, see the Human Resource page on SharePoint.

## Immigration

VAIGS is authorized to sponsor international students on either the F-1 (student) or J-1 (exchange scholar) visas. Nearly all international students will come to the United States on an F-1 visa. The J-1 visa is used only in exceptional circumstances. Immigration policies and procedures are supported by the immigration specialist in the VARI HR department, with additional support from the VAIGS Director of Student Support Services and the Director of Enrollment and Records. Any questions related to student visas and travel should be directed to the HR department.

## Outside Employment and Concurrent Degrees

Students enrolled in VAIGS are presumed to be devoting their full professional efforts toward the pursuit of their PhD. Therefore, outside employment or concurrent pursuit of other degrees may be undertaken only with explicit permission from the Thesis Adviser and the Dean. Please see VAIGS Policy on Students' External Work – [GS-POL-021](#) for further information.

## STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

The VAIGS Director of Student Support Services is available to help with:

- Confidential holistic advising regarding stress, personal issues, and adaptation to VAIGS
- Coordination of career planning and preparation resources and opportunities
- Referrals to local and national resources
- Support of the well-being of VAIGS students

## Disabilities/Accommodations

Requests for accommodation based on documented disabilities should be brought to the Director of Student Support Services. Further information can also be found in the Disability Policy.

## Peer Mentors

Entering students will be assigned a peer mentor in late Spring before the student matriculates. This allows the mentor/mentee to get to know one another before classes begin giving time for questions and suggestions that can aid in the transition to Grand Rapids and VAIGS.

A more formal introduction to the peer mentoring process will take place during the first month of the academic year. Follow up meetings will take place at the end of the semester.

## Graduate Student Association (GSA)

VAIGS graduate students, Michigan State University students working in VARI labs, and graduate students from other institutions who are guests in VARI labs comprise GSA. The purpose of the GSA is to provide a platform for professional development and a medium through which graduate students can communicate with one another on both personal and scientific levels. The GSA has the opportunity to invite external speakers as part of the ongoing VARI Seminar Series program. The GSA also organizes an annual retreat and a monthly “chalk talk” event for informal, structured discussions of their research progress.

Calendar and contact information is communicated through a VAIGS GSA page in the Canvas course management system. [tps://vai.instructure.com/courses/302](https://vai.instructure.com/courses/302). Financial support for the GSA is provided through the Dean's budget and thus is subject to the same reporting and audit procedures as other aspects of VAIGS.

GSA is led by the Leadership Council. This group of VAIGS graduate students is elected according to the GSA By-Laws. The Director of Student Support Services acts as the liaison for the GSA. The liaison assists with elections, supports the transition meeting, discusses town hall meeting agenda, and overall supports the GSA.

### **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**

VAIGS recognizes the importance of maintaining a productive and healthy academic environment. Occasionally, problems related to work, family, drugs, alcohol, or personal issues affect a student's performance. In addition to the resources provided by the Director of Student Support Services, students may access the Institute's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which provides professional, confidential assistance in resolving issues/problems as the need arises. Additionally, students' family members and other persons residing with the student in their home who are eligible dependents as defined by the health plan are eligible for EAP benefits. Students are encouraged to seek assistance through the EAP before performance and morale are negatively affected. Up to five sessions per issue are available to those using the EAP.

Additional information about EAP can be found on the Human Resources SharePoint site, Work/Life Balance, or by contacting the Employee Assistance Center (EAC) at 1-800-227-0905 or <http://www.eaccare.com/>.

### **Hepatitis B Vaccinations and Titer Screenings**

The VAI covers the cost of Hepatitis B vaccinations and titer screenings for students. On-site clinics are held on the second Wednesday of each month from 10 am to 11 am. Email notifications are sent out to alert individuals of the upcoming clinics. Walk-ins are welcome at the clinic. Additional information about Hepatitis B vaccinations and screenings can be found in the Hepatitis B vaccinations for VAIGS Graduate Students Policy on [SharePoint](#).

### **Flu Shots**

Free Flu shots are offered on site each fall for all students covered by VAI health insurance. Human Resources coordinates the clinic with the goal of providing two clinics per year. Email notifications of future clinic dates will be sent out.

### **Café**

The Café and their Catering services accommodate food allergies and intolerances. Café charges can be paid via payroll deductions or via gift card on the student's badge. The Café is part of the VAI benefits package and offers food and beverages at a reduced price compared to outside vendors and restaurants.

The VAI Café is normally open Monday through Friday 7:00 am – 5:00 pm:

Breakfast:	7:00 am – 9:30 am
Lunch:	11:30 am – 1:30 pm
After Hours:	1:30 pm – 5:00 pm
Wednesday Recharge:	3:00 pm – 4:00 pm
Friday Refresh:	4:30 pm – 5:30 pm

### **Fitness Center**

The Institute has a Fitness Center located in Phase 2 on Level 2 at the Institute. The Fitness Center is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with the exception of VAI observed holidays. Students are invited to use the Fitness Center under the same guidelines as employees. A signed Fitness Equipment Use Waiver Form ([VARI Waiver of Liability and Covenant Not to Sue Agreement](#)) is required from all persons using the Fitness Center and is part of HR's new hire process. Additional information about the Fitness Center, and the form, can also be found on [SharePoint](#).

### **Child Care**

The Institute does not provide childcare. Information about local, licensed childcare providers is available on SharePoint under [Work/Life Balance](#).

### **Lactation Rooms**

The Institute has lactation rooms within the lounges located in the Phase 2 of the 333 Bostwick building on Levels 1, 2, 4 and 5, as well as in the 234 Division building. The lactation room provides a private, lockable space for parents. The rooms are equipped with a comfortable chair or couch, a small table, a sink and an electrical outlet and a mini refrigerator intended for milk storage only (refrigerators in the employee break areas are for lunches). Use the signage available to indicate when the rooms are "In Use." Please contact the Director of Student Support Services (for the 234 Division building) or the HR department (for rooms at 333 Bostwick Ave) to receive information to access these rooms.

### **Housing**

The Institute does not provide housing for students. Housing resource information is available through the HR department and the Director of Student Support Services.

### **Parking**

Parking is a privilege provided by VAI to employees and students. Employees, guest workers, visiting scientists and students must attach the parking sticker to their windshield and park in the designated VAI parking areas.

Parking in the Michigan Street Development (MSD) structure and all other Institute parking areas will be assigned based upon availability. Parking in the MSD structure is not available to visitors or contractors. Bicycle racks are available both at the 333 Bostwick Ave location and the 234 Division Ave building.

### **Professional Development – In House**

Professional development opportunities for students are coordinated by the Director of Student Support Services and the Director of Assessment and Professional Development. Professional development opportunities provided by VAIGS may include career preparation and planning, in-class professional development, co-curricular opportunities, and other topics.

## Professional Development – Conferences

Students are eligible for financial support up to \$2,000/year for travel to scientific conferences or workshops as documented in the [VAIGS Student Travel Allowance Policy](#) on SharePoint. These funds are allocated on an academic year basis (i.e., renewed each September). Unused balances do not carry over into the subsequent year.

All student travel expenses should be processed through their lab's administrative assistant. Students can check the balance of their travel stipend in the Campus Café student records system. More detail on how to access this information is available on [SharePoint](#). After attendance at a VAIGS paid professional development event or conference, the student is responsible for writing a review of the experience. This should be presented within two weeks to the Director of Enrollment and Records.

## Student Conduct

Students are expected to conduct themselves in a manner that promotes and supports the educational process, promotes the safety and welfare of others, and follows established policies, statutes, ordinances, and public law. Students are responsible for adhering to all VAI policies, which are available at the Human Resources [SharePoint](#) site.

Any incidents that are contrary to this expectation should be reported to the Dean, the HR department, and/or the Director of Student Support Services. An investigation will be completed in accordance with the [Student Code of Conduct Policy](#).

## Culture

Each of us brings with us our unique personality and culture. This combination makes us an even stronger educational environment. Culture is not always obvious and can relate as much to the part of the United States you are from, as it can be a home address in another country. This allows for a wonderful learning process for everyone both inside and outside of the classroom and the lab.

Whether a student is from a different part of the United States or from another country, VAIGS will strive to make the transition to West Michigan and VAI/VAIGS as smooth as possible. This includes making sure students have options for housing, providing a positive match through peer mentors, providing culture mentors within the organization, and meeting other individualized needs. A meditation room is available in the 234 Division Ave building.

## Time Off and Leave of Absence

Graduate students are entitled to 20 days of vacation and/or personal time off (PTO), beginning September 1 of each academic year, in addition to the official holidays announced by the Institute. Students should schedule vacations in consultation with their Thesis Adviser, or in the case of first year students, the Academic Adviser. Students should report days taken as personal time off to their Thesis Adviser or Academic Adviser or mentor. Unused vacation/PTO days cannot be carried over into the next academic year.

Students who are unable to continue in their educational and research activities due to illness, birth or adoption of a child, personal condition, or injury will continue to receive their stipend and benefits for up to thirteen weeks of absence. Please refer to the [Leave of](#)

[Absence policy](#). After an absence of one week, a letter from your physician may be required to verify that any continuing condition prevents a return to normal student activities. The Institute retains the right to request third-party review or confirmation, at the Institute's expense. After thirteen weeks, the student will be placed in inactive status with respect to the graduate program. The student's placement in the graduate program will be assured for an additional twenty-six weeks (without stipend or benefits). If the student is unable to return to normal student activities after this time, the student will be withdrawn from the program. Such students may request re-admission to the program, by written appeal, to the Dean.

### 2021 Holiday Schedule

Friday, January 1	New Year's Day
Monday, May 24	Memorial Day
Monday, July 5	Independence Day
Monday, September 6	Labor Day
Thursday, November 25	Thanksgiving Day
Friday, November 26	Thanksgiving Holiday
Friday, December 24	Christmas Holiday
Thursday, December 30	New Year's Holiday
Friday, December 31	New Year's Holiday

Find the current holiday schedule [here](#).

### Student Grievances

Student grievances regarding coursework, grading, academic progress, and VAIGS policies or practices should be addressed in accord with the VAIGS Student Grievance Process.

In most cases, grievances should be directed to the Academic or Thesis Adviser if they cannot be resolved directly with the person involved. If the grievance remains unresolved, the student should consult the Ombudsman (in most circumstances, the Vice President of Human Resources), who will advise the student and serve as a liaison with the faculty and administration. Unresolved issues or appeals should be presented in writing, to the Dean.

Grievances regarding research should first be directed to the Thesis Adviser. Should further resolution be necessary, the student can appeal to the Thesis Advisory Committee (TAC) and the Dean.

Students who experience or observe sexual harassment or assault, racial or ethnic discrimination, or scientific misconduct are encouraged and expected to address those concerns by following the VAIGS Student Code of Conduct and VAI employment policies and procedures. These policies can be found at the [Human Resources SharePoint site](#).

Academic policies on Probation and Dismissal, Grade Appeals, Remediation, and Incompletes are summarized in the VAIGS Catalog and are available in full at the [VAIGS SharePoint](#) site.

## **Sex Discrimination, Sexual Harassment, and Sexual Misconduct**

VAI and VAIGS have established and strongly support policies and procedures to ensure a safe, respectful environment free from discrimination or harassment based on race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex, disability, pregnancy, height, weight, marital status, U.S. military veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, genetic information or other characteristics protected by applicable state, federal or local laws, for all employees and non-employees (including graduate students). These institute-wide policies, including the [Equal Employment Opportunity and Non-discrimination policy and the Harassment policy](#), are available through the Office of Human Resources, including at the SharePoint site.

In 2020, the US Department of Education issued a Final Rule regarding Title IX, which addresses sex discrimination in educational settings. The Title IX regulations recognize that sexual harassment, including sexual assault, is unlawful sex discrimination. In support of and in compliance with these regulations, Linda Zarzecki, Vice President for Human Resources for VAI, serves as the Title IX Coordinator for VAIGS. Any person may report sex discrimination, including sexual harassment (whether or not the person reporting is the person alleged to be the victim of conduct that would constitute sex discrimination or sexual harassment) in person, by mail, by email, or by telephone, using the following contact information:

- Office address: Room 6232 East  
Van Andel Institute  
333 Bostwick Ave. NE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
- Email: [linda.zarzecki@vai.org](mailto:linda.zarzecki@vai.org)
- Telephone: 616-234-5310