

Ph.D. in Health Services Research Program Guide

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Department of Health Policy & Management

Notice

Every effort has been made to verify the accuracy of information in this publication. Nevertheless, the SPH reserves the right to change without prior notice: admission and degree requirements, curriculum, courses, teaching personnel, rules, regulations, tuition, fees, and any other matter described in this handbook. *This handbook does not constitute a contract, expressed or implied, between any student or faculty member and the SPH.*

The SPH at all times retains the right to dismiss any student who does not attain and maintain adequate academic performance or who does not exhibit the personal and professional qualifications prerequisite to the practice of public health.

The Ph.D. in Health Services Research – Program Guide

I. Introduction

The Ph.D. Program in Health Services Research (“[PhD Degree Program](#)”) is based in the Department of Health Policy and Management ([HPM](#)) in the School of Public Health ([SPH](#)) at Texas A&M University. This doctoral degree program is designed to prepare students to conduct high quality research addressing important health services research and policy issues.

The program draws on [HPM faculty](#) with substantial and diverse research experience, supplemented by [faculty](#) in other departments in the School of Public Health, other academic units within the Texas A&M University System, as well as adjunct faculty from health care organizations and public health units. The Ph.D. program receives research support from Texas A&M University, the School of Public Health (SPH), and centers in SPH such as the [Southwest Rural Health Research Center](#), the [Center for Community Health and Aging](#), and from individual grants and contracts awarded to SPH faculty members.

The variety of [research resources](#) available to Ph.D. students provide a rich environment for learning and research, and to otherwise advance knowledge in the field of health services. Students in the Ph.D. program are offered opportunities to learn and sharpen their research skills through roles in research projects.

The SPH also offers teaching opportunities for doctoral students interested in academic teaching and research careers. Master’s degree-prepared doctoral students may be qualified to assist in teaching, or to teach autonomously, one or more courses in degree programs for the Bachelor of Science in Public Health ([BSPH](#)), Master of Public Health ([MPH](#)), and the Master of Health Administration ([MHA](#)) programs.

II. Prerequisites for Admission

General requirements and procedures for [application to the Ph.D. program](#) are provided on the SPH website. Applications are submitted through the [SOPHAS](#) common application system for schools of public health. No specific minimum GPA is required to be considered for admission, but most successful applicants have a GPA greater than 3.0 on a 4-point scale. Applicants are not required to submit GRE test scores. International applicants must submit scores for an acceptable English proficiency exam (TOEFL, IELTS) to confirm that test scores exceed the [score thresholds](#) to be eligible for teaching assistantship support (see “English Language Proficiency Certification for Teaching”), except for applicants who are a citizen of an [exempt country](#) or hold a four-year undergraduate degree from an accredited U.S. institution.

To attain a cohort of Ph.D. students of sufficient size and to assure adequate interaction among students (e.g., for group projects and other peer-to-peer educational activities), **applications are accepted for matriculation in the Fall semester of odd-numbered years only** (e.g., Fall 2023, Fall 2025).

Applicants to the Ph.D. program generally will have completed a Master’s degree in a relevant discipline, or a terminal professional degree (MD, PharmD, JD), prior to matriculation into the Ph.D. program. Applicants who matriculate into the Ph.D. program without a prior graduate or undergraduate degree in public health from an accredited U.S. institution will need to

successfully complete an additional course (PHPM 601) to demonstrate knowledge of the core principals of public health and the organization of the U.S. health system before they may apply for graduation..

Exceptionally well-qualified individuals who have not completed a Master's degree may be considered for admission to the Ph.D. program. However, such students will need to complete additional hours of graduate coursework to satisfy the total semester hours requirement for the Ph.D. degree.

III. Ph.D. Degree Program

The [Ph.D. degree program](#) includes 14 credit hours of core courses required for all Ph.D. students. These core courses cover a broad range of analytic and conceptual tools used in health services research. The program also includes 18 credit hours of prescribed research methods and statistics courses.

Cognate Areas

Each student must select one of two cognate areas: (1) health politics and policy; or (2) health economics. These cognate areas provide students with core knowledge relating to a specific conceptual approach for health services research. Students typically designate their cognate area at or before matriculation but *must designate a cognate area no later than the end of their first semester.*

Each cognate area consists of three specific courses:

Health Policy:

PHPM 633: Health Law and Ethics

PHPM 637: Political Foundations of Public Health

PHPM 643: Health Policy Analysis

Health Economics:

PHPM 654: Health Insurance

PHPM 662: Advanced Health Economics

PHPM 663: Cost-Effectiveness Analysis

The student's advisor, with approval of the Ph.D. program chair, may substitute another course for a cognate course if the content of the substitute course is very similar to the cognate course.

The program also requires completion of at least 9 doctoral capstone (dissertation research) hours and 12 credit hours of free electives, of which no more than 3 hours of the 12 required hours can be in directed study courses. Examples of course sequencing for the two cognate areas are provided on the [Ph.D. program website](#).

Academic Probation for Doctoral Students

If a student's cumulative GPA falls below a 3.0 the student will automatically be placed on probation. The student will be required to raise their overall GPA to at least 3.0 within one semester, unless the Ph.D. Program Committee and the SPH Associate Dean for Academic Affairs approve an alternative plan. A student who is unable to raise his or her GPA to at least 3.0 within the specified time will be dismissed from the program.

Following the annual review of all Ph.D. students, any student placed (or remaining) on academic probation, or who is experiencing other difficulties in the program, must receive a

statement from Ph.D. Program Committee regarding the nature of the problematic condition(s) and actions required by the student to rectify the difficulties. A copy of this statement must be forwarded to the chair of the Ph.D. Program Committee and to the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs.

IV. Program Completion

Most Ph.D. students can complete all degree requirements within 4 years of matriculation, except for those entering the program without a prior Master's or terminal professional degree.

However, in most cases students will not receive assistantship support after 4 years. Further, **all requirements for the Ph.D. degree in Health Services Research must be completed within a period of ten consecutive calendar years from the year of matriculation for the degree to be granted.**

V. Ph.D. Program Committee

The Health Policy & Management (HPM) Committee for the Ph.D. Program in Health Services Research ("Ph.D. Program Committee") must include no fewer than four members of the HPM faculty, including at least one member representing each of the two cognate areas. The HPM Department Head is a non-voting, ex-officio member of this committee.

The Ph.D. Program Committee is responsible for the following duties:

- Reviewing student applications and making admissions recommendations.
- Conducting an annual performance review of each doctoral student, with input from the student's academic advisor and GAT/GAR supervisor, to be scheduled by the PhD Program Chair.
- Proposing and approving program changes, such as changes in curriculum or other program requirements.

Responsibilities for many operational aspects of the Ph.D. Program are delegated to the Chair of the Ph.D. Program Committee (Ph.D. program chair), including scheduling student annual reviews.

VI. Student Advising

Each student will have a primary advisor initially appointed by the Ph.D. program chair.

Students may request a change in their advisor from among the HPM primary faculty at any time, with the approval of the Ph.D. program chair. Responsibilities of the advisor include the following:

- Initial advising and direction of the student and the selection of coursework.
- Facilitating the completion of the student's initial plan of study by providing advice about elective course selections.
- After each academic year, reviewing student progress and forwarding this assessment of student progress to the Ph.D. Program Committee prior to each student's annual review.

VII. Doctoral Student Qualifying Examination

All Ph.D. students must pass a qualifying exam, to be administered after satisfactory completion of all core course requirements and cognate course requirements (*health policy or health economics*) for the Ph.D. program. The exam is administered no later than the first week of June after the end of the second spring semester of the program.

The purpose of the qualifying examination is to assess student knowledge, proficiency, and mastery in applying information and skills from *core courses, methods courses, and cognate courses* to various research tasks pertaining to health services research.

The qualifying exam is a two-day written exam, consisting of two parts. One part of the exam is devoted to research design and analytic methodology (the methods exam). The second part is devoted to questions relating to the content covered in the courses in the student's selected cognate area (the cognate exam). One full business day (8 hours) is allotted to complete each part of the exam, with at least one non-exam day between the two parts. Both parts of the qualifying exam are open-book/open-note, but **students are NOT allowed to confer with each other or any other person when completing the qualifying exam**. Any such collaboration will be referred to the Texas A&M University [Aggie Honor System Office](#) (Aggie Honor Council) for appropriate disciplinary action, which may include expulsion from the University.

The qualifying exam questions are developed by qualifying exam committees: a methods exam committee and two cognate area exam committees (policy and economics). Each committee consists of no less than 3 members of the HPM faculty, appointed by the Ph.D. program chair, and typically includes faculty teaching the content from methods courses or cognate courses. All members of the exam committees review students' written responses to exam questions, and meet as a group, usually within 2 weeks of the exam date, to develop a consensus grade for each student's exam: "Pass," "Fail," or "Pass with distinction." If the exam committee concludes a student's exam responses overall are near but below the "Pass" threshold ("marginal"), the committee will meet with the student to provide the student with an opportunity to respond to committee questions about the student's written answers. Such meetings usually occur within 2-3 weeks of the exam committee's consensus meeting. The exam committee will make a final grade determination after the conclusion of this meeting. At the exam committee's discretion, as a condition of receiving a grade of "pass," students may be assigned specific tasks (such as completing a specific course or training activity) that must be completed before scheduling their dissertation research proposal (see "Preliminary Exam").

Students who fail either the methods or cognate area part of the qualifying examination will be required to retake the part of the qualifying exam they failed. A student who fails any part of the qualifying exam will be provided with: 1) a written report noting the rationale for the committee's consensus grade; and 2) a list of recommended remediation actions for the student to complete prior to retaking the qualifying exam. The Ph.D. program chair, or an exam committee designee, will meet with the student to review these documents and answer any questions the student has regarding the documents.

To allow adequate time for the student to follow recommended remediation tasks, retake exams will be scheduled after January 2nd but no later than the beginning of the following spring semester. Students who failed both parts of the qualifying exam will be allowed at least one non-

exam day between each part. The format and process for the retake exam (or exams) is similar to the initial examination. Failure in the second qualifying exam will result in dismissal of the student from the program, effective no later than one year after the first qualifying exam date (typically the end of the third-year spring semester). Accordingly, students who failed their initial qualifying exam are strongly advised to make contingency plans for possible failure of the retake exam, as the notification of failure may not occur until late February or March of their final semester. One option for students who fail the qualifying exam is to apply to change their degree plan to an MSPH degree, which requires completion of a Master's thesis, typically within one year after failing the initial qualifying exam.

VIII. Dissertation Committee Membership & Charge

After passing the written qualifying exam, students are expected to start the process of selecting members of their Dissertation Research Committee. The members and the chair of the Dissertation Committee are selected by the student (with the consent of the faculty who are selected), subject to approval by the HPM department head and the Ph.D. Program Chair. The student's Dissertation Committee must include a minimum of four voting members. The chair of the student's Dissertation Committee must be a tenured or tenure-track member of the HPM faculty, and must have written a doctoral thesis (i.e., HPM faculty with terminal non-thesis professional degrees are not eligible to be the committee chair but may be a committee member). At least one additional member of the Dissertation Committee must be an HPM faculty member, and one member must not be a member of the HPM faculty (external member). Most often, the external member is a faculty member from another SPH department, but the external member could be from another academic unit at Texas A&M, or another academic institution ([subject to approval](#)).

The responsibilities of the Dissertation Committee include providing guidance to aid the development of the student's dissertation research proposal, administering the preliminary exam (the student's written dissertation research proposal and oral defense), and administering the final dissertation defense.

IX. Preliminary Examination (Dissertation Research Proposal)

After the membership of the student's Dissertation Committee is determined, the student should begin to develop a dissertation research proposal, in consultation with the Dissertation Committee Chair and other members of the Dissertation Committee. There are no specific formatting requirements for the written proposal, but it should include the elements of a typical research grant proposal (study aims, significance, background, conceptual model, and methods/data). The dissertation proposal should specify whether the dissertation will be in the traditional 'book' format or in the form of three professional papers of publishable quality (see below).

For the Ph.D. program in health services research, the preliminary examination is an evaluation of the student's dissertation research proposal, which is based on a detailed written research plan and an oral proposal defense. Students are referred to the Graduate and Professional School ([GAPS](#)) website for specific requirements for the preliminary examination, including a [checklist](#) of conditions that must be satisfied before the student is eligible for an oral dissertation research proposal defense.

The student's dissertation research proposal is developed in consultation with the student's Dissertation Committee, typically within 6 to 9 months after passing the qualifying exam and after satisfactory completion of all required doctoral program coursework. The Dissertation Committee's evaluation of the student's dissertation research proposal considers the scientific significance of the proposed research topic, adequacy of the proposed methodology, and the feasibility of timely completion of the proposed research.

At the conclusion of the student's proposal defense, the Dissertation Committee, by majority vote, will assign a grade for the preliminary exam: "Pass," "Pass with required revisions," or "Fail." For students earning a grade of "Pass with required revisions," the Dissertation Committee will specify the mechanism for determining if required revisions have been completed satisfactorily.

Ideally, during the development of the student's dissertation research proposal, the chair and other members of Dissertation Committee will alert the student to substantive concerns about the proposal and recommend revisions to address those concerns. For students who follow these recommendations, a grade of "Fail" on the preliminary exam should be rare. However, if a student fails an oral proposal defense, the student must repeat the oral proposal defense after revising the written dissertation research proposal to address deficiencies identified by the Dissertation Committee. The Dissertation Committee also may require the student to complete additional coursework or complete other remediation actions prior to the student repeating the oral proposal defense. Failure of the preliminary exam a second time may result in the dismissal of the student from the program.

Admission to Candidacy

To be admitted to candidacy for a doctoral degree, a student must have: (1) completed all formal core and cognate coursework on the degree plan; (2) a 3.0 Graduate GPA and a Degree Plan GPA of at least 3.0 with no grade lower than a C in any course on the degree plan; and (3) passed the preliminary examination. The final examination (oral dissertation defense) will not be authorized for any doctoral student who has not been admitted to candidacy. In addition, candidates must meet all requirements specified by [GAPS](#).

X. Dissertation

The candidate's ability to perform independent research must be demonstrated by the dissertation, **which must be the original work of the candidate**. Whereas acceptance of the dissertation is based primarily on its scholarly merit, it must also exhibit creditable literary workmanship.

All dissertation research conducted by students must comply with all relevant policies and procedures to assure safety and the protection of human subjects. Specific requirements are provided on the web sites of the [Office of Research Compliance and Biosafety](#) and the [Human Research Protection Program](#).

Specific formatting and style requirements for the final dissertation document are provided on the GAPS website ([GAPS Dissertation](#)). Deviations from these requirements are not permitted.

Dissertation Options

The Ph.D. Program in Health Services Research allows both a traditional “book” dissertation format and a “three paper” format:

‘Book’ Format Option: This refers to a traditional dissertation format, which provides an in-depth analysis of a particular research issue, often including detailed subgroup analysis or using different methodological approaches. Typically, a traditional dissertation follows this structure:

Chapter 1: Introduction, including a comprehensive review of the pertinent literature for the project (to establish the significance of the dissertation topic and to summarize current knowledge about the topic)

Chapter 2: Methods (a detailed description of all methodologies, including a theoretical or conceptual model, analytic strategies, and processes used to generate the data to be analyzed)

Chapters 3-n: Results (a detailed report of results from data analysis, with discussion and limitations)

Chapter n + 1: Final chapter with an overall summary of conclusions and interpretation of the data, with integration of new findings into the existing body of knowledge, and implications for future research.

References: A single reference section consisting of all references cited in all chapters.

Three Publishable Papers Option: An acceptable alternative dissertation format consists of the preparation of three manuscripts of publishable quality related to different issues within a common theme (such as a health condition, a specific population, or public program). Generally, each of the three manuscripts addresses a specific research question, but one of the manuscripts may consist of a comprehensive (e.g., systematic) literature review, a contribution to the theoretical literature, or a related scholarly effort. All three manuscripts must be deemed of publishable quality in a peer-reviewed journal by the student’s Dissertation Committee. A typical three paper dissertation follows this structure:

Chapter 1: Introduction (a review of the pertinent context and background literature for the major common theme of the dissertation)

Chapters 2-4: Results presented in manuscript form (i.e., each chapter has the typical manuscript format of sections for overview/background, data, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion).

Chapter 5: Conclusions: (overall summary of conclusions and interpretation of the data with integration of new findings into the existing body of knowledge).

References: In the 3-paper format there is one comprehensive reference section for the dissertation (after Chapter 5).

For either format option, the research contained in the dissertation must be completed by the student following admission to the doctoral degree program. For the three-paper option, all three manuscripts must be based upon empirical research where the candidate was the primary

contributor to the research reported in the paper, and at least two of the three papers must be completed after the student passed the preliminary exam.

XI. Final Examination (Dissertation Defense)

The final examination for the Ph.D. program is the final dissertation research defense. No student may defend his or her dissertation unless his/her current official cumulative and degree plan GPA's are **3.0 or better and he/she has been admitted to candidacy. No un-absolved grades of D, F, or U for any course can be listed on the degree plan.** To absolve a deficient grade, a student must repeat the course and achieve a grade of C or better. Any changes to the degree plan must be approved by the GAPS prior to approval of the final examination. A student must be registered for at least 1 credit hour of dissertation research during the semester or summer term in which the formal degree completion (graduation) occurs.

The student's Dissertation Committee will conduct the final examination. **The final examination will not be administered if the student's written dissertation was not made available in substantially final form to all members the student's Doctoral Committee with sufficient time to review the document prior to the scheduled defense date (typically at least 10 business days).**

The preliminary examination results must have been submitted to GAPS **14 weeks prior** to the date of the defense, and the request to hold and announce the final examination must be submitted to GAPS a **minimum of 10 business days in advance** of the scheduled date. Additionally, all English language proficiency requirements must be satisfied prior to scheduling the examination.

Care should be exercised when scheduling an oral defense date to avoid cancellation. **GAPS must be notified in writing of any such cancellations. Any oral defense that is not completed and reported as satisfactory to GAPS within 10 working days of the scheduled examination/defense date will be classified by GAPS as a FAIL.**

The final dissertation defense consists of a public oral presentation by the student summarizing the content of the written dissertation. Anyone present during the public presentation may ask the student questions about his or her dissertation research. However, following the public presentation, the Dissertation Committee will conduct a private (closed) oral examination by asking the student to respond to committee questions about the student's dissertation without an audience present. After temporarily dismissing the student, the Dissertation Committee will, by majority vote, assign a grade for the final exam: "Pass," "Pass with required revisions," or "Fail." For students earning a grade of "Pass with required revisions," the Dissertation Committee will specify the mechanism for determining if required revisions have been completed satisfactorily. The doctoral committee will submit its grade to GAPS using the [Approval of Written Dissertation](#) form.

For candidates who were responsive to feedback from members of their Dissertation Committee during the process of revising early drafts of their written dissertation, a grade of "fail" for the final examination should be a rare event. If a candidate fails this examination, he/she will be provided with written recommendations by the Dissertation Committee for necessary preparations prior to scheduling a second oral dissertation defense. A failure of the second oral defense can result in dismissal from the program.

XII. Submission of the Final Dissertation

After a successful oral defense and approval by the student's Dissertation Committee and the HPM department head, a student must submit his/her dissertation to GAPS no more than 10 business days after the defense date. Submission deadlines to be eligible for graduation in each semester including summer are available on the [GAPS Calendar](#). The student is referred to the [GAPS website](#) for specific dissertation submission requirements, including style and formatting standards.