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 & 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 and the National Science Foundation-funded Center for Health and Organizational Transformation (CHOT), 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) program.

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 or GRE score is required to be considered for admission, but most successful applicants have a GPA greater than 3.0 and a GRE-Quantitative Reasoning score above the 50th percentile.

To attain a cohort of Ph.D. students sufficient 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 2019).

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 course work to demonstrate knowledge of the core principals of public health and the organization of the U.S. health system before the end of the fourth semester of the program. The Ph.D. Program Committee (see Section V) will be responsible for noting
deficiencies upon admission and documenting success in removing deficiencies after matriculation.

Exceptionally well-qualified individuals who have not completed a Master’s degree may be considered for admission to the Ph.D. program. However, in addition to demonstrating knowledge of core public health principles (noted above), 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 26 credit hours of core courses required for all Ph.D. students. These core courses cover a broad range of analytic and conceptual tools with which to investigate issues in health services research. The program also includes 12 credit hours of prescribed statistics and methods courses to be selected from an approved list of courses. Other methods courses may be selected with the approval of the student’s advisor and the Ph.D. program chair.

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 a core of 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 640: Health Politics and Policy
- PHPM 641: Health Policy Formation
- PHPM 643: Health Policy Analysis

Health Economics:
- PHPM 654: Health Insurance and Managed Care
- PHPM 663: Cost-Effectiveness Analysis
- PSAA 621: Economic Analysis (or equivalent)

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 includes 9 credit hours of free electives, and concludes with 9 (or more) credit hours for doctoral capstone (dissertation research). 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 of the students 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 both 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 advisor.
- 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).

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 selection of initial coursework.
- Facilitating the completion of the student’s initial plan of study by providing advice about elective course selections.
- After a student has completed the second Spring semester of the program, 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 last week of June (after the end of the second Spring semester of the program).

The purpose of the qualifying examination is to assess the student’s knowledge, proficiency, and mastery in applying information and skills from core 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 (methods exam). The second part is devoted to questions relating to the content covered in the courses in the student’s selected cognate area (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/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. 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 core or cognate courses covered by the methods exam and the cognate area exams. 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 final grade determination after the conclusion of this meeting.

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.

A retake exam will be scheduled allowing adequate time for the student to follow recommended remediation tasks, typically within 6 months, but no more than 9 months, after the date of the first qualifying exam. 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
dismission of the student from the program, effective no later than one year after the first qualifying exam date (typically the end of the third Spring semester).

VIII. Dissertation Committee Membership & Charge

After passing the written qualifying exam, students are expected to start the process of selecting members of their Dissertation 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 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 Office of Graduate and Professional Studies (OGAPS) 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.

After the student’s oral proposal defense, the Dissertation Committee, by majority vote, will assign a grade for the preliminary exam: “Pass,” “Pass with required revisions,” or “Fail.”
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 recommended 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 OGAPS.

**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 site of the Office of Research Compliance and Biosafety.

Specific formatting and style requirements for the final dissertation document are provided on the OGAPS website ([OGAPS Dissertation](https://www.example.com/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 theory/conceptual model, analytic strategy, 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 considered to be 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)

Chapter 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 summary). An exception is that the references for each paper much be reported in single reference section for the entire dissertation.

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 OGAPS prior to approval of the final examination. A student must be
registered in the University in the semester or summer term in which the final examination is taken.

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 of 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 OGAPS 14 weeks prior to the date of the defense, and the request to hold and announce the final examination must be submitted to OGAPS a minimum of 10 working 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. OGAPS must be notified in writing of any such cancellations. Any oral defense that is not completed and reported as satisfactory to OGAPS within 10 working days of the scheduled examination/defense date will be classified by OGAPS 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 private oral examination by asking the student to respond to committee questions about the student’s dissertation. 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 OGAPS 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 during completion of their written dissertation research, 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 OGAPS 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 OGAPS Calendar. The student is referred to the OGAPS website for specific dissertation submission requirements, including style and formatting standards.