



TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY  
School of Public Health



Applied Practice Experience  
Manual  
for  
MHA, MPH, and DrPH  
Degree Programs

Effective Fall 2024

# APPLIED PRACTICE EXPERIENCE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

## OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the Texas A&M School of Public Health (SPH) Applied Practice Experience (APEX) is to provide students with an opportunity to apply the concepts, strategies and tools acquired throughout the course of their classroom studies. Regardless of the exact nature of the host facility, activities, preceptor, or specific student goals, it is expected that the experience will include the majority of the following objectives:

- Expand knowledge of basic public health and health services practices.
- Increase awareness of the complexity of the problems and concerns involved in the public health and health services arena.
- Facilitate a stronger understanding of the relationships among public health organizations, health service organizations, and other governmental entities.
- Afford the opportunity to provide valuable service(s) to the host site organization by participating in and/or completing projects or other work assignments.
- Increase appreciation of cultural differences in populations served by public health and health services professionals.
- Provide an opportunity to apply training and concepts learned in coursework.
- Increase self-confidence as a professional in the public health and health services arena.
- Develop opportunities for references, job placement, and professional contacts.

## STUDENT PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS

- Obtain approval for the APEX from the Department Practicum Coordinator.
- Initiate contacts with potential host sites or allow faculty members or Department Practicum Coordinator to do so on their behalf.
- Determine and confirm the location and scope of the APEX.
- Become familiar with the role and expectations of the Department Practicum Coordinator and the Practicum Preceptor during the finalization of APEX arrangements.
- Define their APEX objectives with the assistance of the Department Practicum Coordinator and/or other faculty advisors.

- Arrange activities for their APEX that build on their background and expertise while avoiding duplication of previous work experiences.
- Ensure a complete APEX work plan signed by the student, Practicum Preceptor, and Department Practicum Coordinator is submitted before the start of the APEX.
- Ensure that the curriculum objectives of their enrolled degree program are met during the APEX.
- Take up the challenge of learning new perspectives and employing new practices to prepare for a career in public health and health services.

## PREREQUISITES

To be eligible for their APEX, students must be in **good academic standing**; they cannot be on academic probation or facing any student conduct disciplinary actions. Students are also required to have completed a **majority of their core classes** (two out of the three) to ensure their ability to meet the expectations and competencies required of a graduate level public health student in an applied practice experience. In some instances, a student may have previous experience or a degree that allows for an exemption from this requirement.

## REQUIREMENTS

The number of contact hours required for academic credit is defined by degree programs. Although specific departmental guidelines may vary, all students will be expected to complete the following minimum requirements:

1. Work Plan
2. Periodic Reports
3. Project Deliverables
4. Final Report
5. Final Presentation
6. Preceptor Evaluation Form

## MASTER OF HEALTH ADMINISTRATION STUDENTS

Students pursuing the Master of Health Administration (MHA) degree are required to complete a three (3) credit hour APEX\* as part of their curriculum. MHA candidates are expected to gain supervised experience in his/her chosen area of professional development, to learn new methods and perspectives that link health administration

theory and practice, to interact with and participate with additional mentors, and to expand their network of contacts.

## MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH STUDENTS

Students pursuing the Master of Public Health (MPH) degree are required to complete a three (3) credit hour APEX\* as part of their curriculum. MPH candidates are expected to gain supervised experience in a professional public health setting which will allow them to successfully demonstrate competency attainment through an applied practice experience. More specifically, each student must select and demonstrate attainment of a minimum of five competencies. Three competencies must be **MPH foundational competencies** and the remaining two competencies may be either **MPH foundational competencies** or **concentration-specific competencies**.

\*In special circumstances a student in MPH and MHA degree programs may receive up to six (6) hours of academic credit. The student's Department Head must approve, in advance, any APEX that is to be more than three (3) credit hours.

## DOCTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH STUDENTS

Students pursuing the Doctor of Public Health must, regardless of previous experiences (amount or level), complete nine (9) or more credit hours of an applied practice experience, depending on department guidelines, as part of their curriculum. This APEX must be completed with an organization that advances public health practice. Each DrPH student must, with their practicum coordinator, identify at least five **DrPH foundational** or **concentration-specific competencies** that will be attained. At least one of the five selected competencies must be from the domain of **Leadership, Management, and Governance**.

## WORK PLAN AND OTHER DOCUMENTATION

The work plan is the formal agreement between the student, Practicum Preceptor, and Department Practicum Coordinator. At a minimum, the work plan must identify the required number of competencies that will be attained by the experience. Each competency that is identified must have specific objectives, proposed activities, and target products or materials that will demonstrate attainment.

Access to the approved work plan template is granted after students complete online training modules through Canvas. To begin training modules students must request access to the online training modules through their Department Practicum Coordinator and Department Administrator. Once a student has successfully completed the online training modules, the Office of Public Health Practice will send the approved work plan template.

The Practicum Preceptor and Department Practicum Coordinator must approve the APEX site and all objectives, activities, and products. Signing of the work plan by each party indicates approval and allows the student to be cleared to register and begin the APEX. All signed work plans must be submitted to the Practicum Portal [tx.ag/practicumportal](https://tx.ag/practicumportal).

## **AFFILIATION AGREEMENTS**

Some organizations and agencies may require an Affiliation Agreement be in place prior to students engaging in an APEX. All APEX Affiliation Agreements are managed by the Office of Public Health Practice. Affiliation Agreements are made between the school and the organization/agency and may only be signed by those with appropriate institutional authority.

Discuss with your Department Practicum Coordinator whether or not an Affiliation Agreement exists. If needed, please contact [publichealthpractice@tamu.edu](mailto:publichealthpractice@tamu.edu) for additional information regarding Affiliation Agreements.

## **IRB APPROVAL REQUIREMENTS**

Often, within the context of an APEX, students are asked to conduct research for a host organization or agency. Students must be aware that before gathering or analyzing any data from human subjects for an organization, agency, or community within the context of the required APEX, both the student and Department Practicum Coordinator are required to review the proposed research to determine whether Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval will be required prior to beginning the research and from whom approval should be obtained. The IRB Approval Decision Tree (<https://public-health.tamu.edu/practice/documents/international-practicum-experience-form-packet.pdf>) can be used to help make a determination of the need for IRB approval. Once a determination is reached, the appropriate selection should be made on the APEX work plan form.

Students are encouraged to conduct research that may require a full IRB review when opportunities arise. However, in these cases, the student should be aware that the IRB application for review and approval must be prepared the semester prior to beginning their study. In all other cases, Department Practicum Coordinators will likely guide students to comparable learning opportunities considered exempt, expedited, or covered by existing an IRB review.

## **INTERNATIONAL APEX REQUIREMENTS**

International applied practice experiences can greatly enhance a student's education. Travel to high-risk areas, as designated by the Texas A&M University System, require prior approval. In addition, students are required to purchase insurance through the Texas A&M University System to assure coverage meets guidelines and requirements.

Students who pursue an international APEX must complete the following additional paperwork before leaving the country, as well as all other APEX paperwork:

- Student International Practicum Experience Travel Form,
- HSC Request for Travel,
- International Travel Questionnaire.

Forms must be submitted to the Office of Public Health Practice at least 45 days prior to departure for the international site. Late forms will not be processed. In addition to all other APEX approvals, international travel must be approved by Texas A&M Health Risk Management for academic credit to be received.

**Students interested in pursuing an international practicum experience should be aware of early deadline requirements for submitting paperwork to the Office of Public Health Practice.**

## **GRADING**

Upon completion of the APEX, the Department Practicum Coordinator will award a grade of either an "S" or a "U" for satisfactory or unsatisfactory work based on satisfactory completion of the requirements outlined above and any additional requirements outlined in departmental policy. If a student defaults on the terms of the work plan, the student may receive an 'unsatisfactory' grade and thus no academic credit for their APEX.

If, during the APEX, the Practicum Preceptor or the Department Practicum Coordinator determines a student is having difficulty functioning in a particular setting, the student may be reassigned or asked to withdraw and retake the APEX during a future semester. If the student's behavior is determined to be unprofessional, unethical, or outside the rules of the agency or university, the student may be given an unsatisfactory ("U") grade and thus no academic credit will be received for the APEX, and/or they may be removed from the degree program depending upon individual circumstances.

Likewise, if during the APEX the student deems the activities as inappropriate or not contributing to the educational experience, the student may request a review by the Department Practicum Coordinator, the student's Department Head, the Director of Public Health Practice, or the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. If the APEX is determined to be inconsistent with the philosophy or guidelines for applied practice experiences, the student will be permitted to affiliate with another agency to fulfill the APEX requirement. If necessary, the Department Practicum Coordinator will assist the student with identifying an alternate APEX site.

Finally, if a student completes an APEX but is unable to successfully address all competencies selected in their work plan, they may still receive academic credit for work completed. However, they must work with their Department Practicum Coordinator to identify and complete additional applied practice experiences until the minimum requirements for competency attainment are met. Students will not be cleared for graduation until they have successfully met minimum competency requirements for the applied practice experience.

## **COMPONENTS OF THE APEX GRADE**

### **PERIODIC REPORTS**

Throughout the APEX, students are required to submit written periodic reports to their Department Practicum Coordinator and/or Practicum Preceptor. Students should verify the correct entities to include with their Department Practicum Coordinator and use any provided templates. The purpose of a periodic report is to:

1. Provide the Department Practicum Coordinator with information describing the progress of the APEX;
2. Provide a guide to direct experiential learning;
3. Allow the student to reflect and link to classroom experiences; and
4. Assist the student in preparation of a final report.

The frequency and due dates for periodic reports are to be negotiated with the Department Practicum Coordinator prior to the beginning of the APEx. Each report should be sent as an electronic attachment via email to designated entities. An average report will vary in length from one to two pages (single-spaced). Periodic reports must address the following, in addition to any department specific requirements:

1. Activities
  - a. List the most important (enlightening) activities of the period. Include dates and times only as needed for clarity.
  - b. Include interesting meetings, either group meetings or with individuals, duties assigned, other organizations visited, training completed, projects worked on, and other significant activities.
2. Key Learning Experience(s)
  - a. Write one or two paragraphs about the key learning experience(s) of the period. Describe how the experience(s) has added to your knowledge base and relate it to your responsibilities or to your coursework.
  - b. Describe how the key experience(s) relate to the objectives in the work plan.

No client or host site individual names are to be used in written material without consent. Students must be aware of issues related to patient, client, and corporate confidentiality (see “[Ethical Guidelines for Students](#)”).

## FINAL REPORT

At the conclusion of the APEx all students are required to submit a final report. The final report should include:

- A summary of major projects and activities engaged in over the course of the APEx.
- An assessment addressing how competencies selected for the APEx were met through the established objective, activities and deliverables.
  - This aspect of the final report is the most important and should thoroughly address each of the competencies identified.
- Evaluative statements about the Practicum Preceptor and APEx host site.
- A thoughtful reflection on how the APEx contributed to the student’s overall educational experience and professional development.

Format, length, and additional required components are determined by the Department Practicum Coordinator or specified in departmental APEx addendums.



## **PRESENTATION**

***All students are required to give a presentation to departmental or SPH faculty and students.***

Specific guidelines for the nature, timing, and content of presentations will be determined by the Department Practicum Coordinator or specified in departmental APEX policies.

If students make a formal public presentation over the course of their degree program during a research symposium or similar activity (beyond a class-specific assignment), this requirement may be waived with approval of the Department Practicum Coordinator, and the student's Department Head or delegate (e.g. Program Director). Likewise, if students give formal presentations at their APEX site, the SPH presentation requirement may be waived, with the approval of the Department Practicum Coordinator, and Department Head.

## **APEX PRODUCTS AND DELIVERABLES**

Students must provide copies of at least two products or deliverables from their APEX that demonstrate the attainment of competencies selected in the work plan to the school to receive academic credit. These materials will become part of the student's ePortfolio and may be visible to the public\*.

## **PRECEPTOR EVALUATION FORM**

Students will be evaluated by their Practicum Preceptor at the conclusion of the APEX. The Practicum Preceptor's evaluation of the student will be considered in determining the student's satisfactory completion of the APEX.

## **EPORTFOLIO REQUIREMENTS**

All students, regardless of degree program, are required to upload their APEX work plans, final report, and final presentation slides to their ePortfolio. In addition, students pursuing MPH and DrPH degrees must upload a minimum of two deliverables/products from the experience. These deliverables/products must demonstrate completion of work plan objectives.

\*It is possible that some products and deliverables may not be shared outside of the organization. The student should verify with their Practicum Preceptor what can and cannot be shared through the ePortfolio requirement. Students should discuss with their Department Practicum Coordinator any concerns and to identify alternatives to meet this requirement when actual products and deliverables cannot be shared outside of the organization. Failure to post required APEX materials will result in a student's grade to be held or a hold on a student's account preventing graduation.

## RESPONSIBILITIES

In the effort to plan, organize, and execute a successful APEX, the student is expected to take the primary role and can expect assistance from their Department Practicum Coordinator and Practicum Preceptor. In addition, the Office of Public Health Practice provides administrative support to all parties in the process.

### **STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES**

*All APEX arrangements are ultimately the responsibility of the student and subject to departmental approval.*

#### **PLANNING AND COORDINATION:**

- Initiate inquiries and arrange meetings with potential host sites.
  - This can include consulting your Department Practicum Coordinator or other faculty for recommendations or networking assistance.
- Discuss and confirm all details of the APEX timetable, including:
  - start and completion dates
  - total number of weeks
  - number of days worked per week
  - hours per day, etc.
- Collaborate on the practicum work plan with Practicum Preceptor and Department Practicum Coordinator.
- Ensure that all preliminary arrangements required by the host site are fulfilled, including any organizational onboarding tasks.

#### **COMMUNICATION:**

- Maintain effective communication among involved parties.

- Seek advice from former and current students, faculty, and Practicum Coordinator.

## **FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT:**

- Manage all living and travel arrangements.
  - Explore funding options for travel-related expenses; students are encouraged to clarify whether the host site will reimburse travel expenses to conferences and/or meetings during or following the APEx for the purpose of presenting the project's final report or publication(s).
- Clarify potential salary or compensation with the host institution.
  - Address income tax and social security payments associated with potential compensation.
- Discuss sick leave, vacation, and time restoration with Practicum Preceptor.
- Arrange and maintain personal health insurance coverage.
  - While enrolled at SPH, students may be covered by student health insurance, but other arrangements may be needed to receive care out of the service area.
- Obtain professional liability insurance if required by the host site.
  - Communicate with the Office of Public Health Practice for liability insurance details.

## **PERFORMANCE AND BEHAVIOR:**

- Adhere to approved APEx commitment details as outlined in the signed work plan.
- Follow the guidance of Department Practicum Coordinators regarding placement, competencies, objectives, and activities.
- Maintain professional behavior, personal presentation, and performance during the APEx.

## **ACADEMIC COMPLETION:**

- Take personal responsibility for timely completion and submission of all pre-APEx documentation requirements.
- Complete all graded components of the APEx by their designated deadlines.

## **ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS**

- All information related to clients of the host agency is to remain confidential.

- Students should be guided by the Aggie Honor Code and the rules, guidelines and expectations of their host organization.
  - Any student identified as having engaged in any acts of academic dishonesty while engaged in APEX activities will be subject to the same standards and review process outlined in student rules, including the possibility of dismissal.
- Students may undertake only those program activities explicitly assigned or authorized by host site personnel or their Department Practicum Coordinator.
  - Students are encouraged to discuss with the Department Practicum Coordinator any activities they believe may potentially compromise legal or ethical standards.
- Students must report harassment of any form or any unusual/inappropriate behavior by the host agency, personnel, or clients to the Practicum Preceptor, the Department Practicum Coordinator, or the Director of Public Health Practice.
- Students may not visit clients socially during regular working hours or correspond with clients regarding matters of a professional nature without explicit approval of the Practicum Preceptor.

## **PRACTICUM PRECEPTOR RESPONSIBILITIES**

The Practicum Preceptor is the student's primary resource at the host site. Practicum Preceptors should:

- Guide the student's experience in a supportive and professionally stimulating environment.
- Act as a professional role model during the APEX and facilitate the student's identification as a public health professional with the profession.
- Serve as the point of contact for the student at the host organization.
- Function as the student's immediate supervisor and provide workplace guidance and knowledge to the student.
- Commit time beyond the student's direct supervision, including before and after the APEX.
- Collaborate with the student and Department Practicum Coordinator to develop a work plan and confirm all details of the APEX timetable before the APEX start date.
- Assist in evaluating the student's performance by completing the Preceptor Evaluation Form at the end of the APEX.

## **DEPARTMENT PRACTICUM COORDINATOR**

Each department has a Department Practicum Coordinator whose responsibilities include:

- Acting as a resource for identifying possible APEX locations.
- Assisting the student in developing an appropriate work plan and approving that work plan on behalf of SPH.
- Functioning as the SPH point of contact while monitoring the student's progress during the APEX.
- Maintaining records associated with each student's APEX, including the periodic report timeline, documentation of the required student presentations, and completed APEX evaluations.

## **OFFICE OF PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE**

The Office of Public Health Practice assists students, departments, and preceptors with the following logistical elements of the APEX:

- Granting access to online training modules and providing logistical/technical support for Practicum Portal and ePortfolio issues.
- International APEX packet processing and tracking.
- Management and oversight of APEX-related Affiliation Agreements and related requirements.
- Hosting SPH professional networking events, like the annual Skills, Careers, and Opportunities in Public Health Expo



TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY  
School of Public Health

# The APEX Journey



A Guide for Students

Effective Fall 2023

Office of Public Health Practice

# The APEx Journey

A step-by-step guide

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*If you're reading this, congratulations! You are setting yourself up for success with one of the most important pieces of your higher education journey- your applied practice experience. You may hear other universities or even other disciplines here at Texas A&M refer to an applied practice experience as an internship, an externship, or a practicum, so for our purposes, we'll call it your APEx. It is never too early to start thinking about your APEx, and depending on the kind of experience you're seeking, lengthier planning time may be a must.*

The first step towards a successful APEx is understanding APEx requirements outlined in this document and completing the required online training modules. Completion of the online training will assure students have access to all required documentation and the Practicum Portal.

## BEFORE THE APEX

Students should plan to complete the steps highlighted in the sections below the semester prior to going out for their APEx.



## IDENTIFY

The student should schedule a meeting with their Department Practicum Coordinator no later than the beginning of the semester prior to the start of the APEX to discuss:

- Eligibility to complete an APEX
- Overall goals for an APEX based on student experiences and interests
- Avenues to identify potential APEX opportunities, including:
  - Websites
  - Visiting speakers
  - Emailed announcements
  - The annual Practicum and Career Fair
  - Current and former students
  - Faculty
  - Family and friends.

During this time the student should update their résumé. Once potential targets are identified, the student moves to the application stage.



## APPLY

By the middle of the semester prior to starting an APEX, the student should have narrowed their search, made contact with potential sites and begun the application process or negotiations for conducting a practicum experience. The application process may include submitting applications and/or participating in interviews. It is important for the student to work closely with their Department Practicum Coordinator as they begin to contact sites to ensure the opportunity will fulfill requirements and meet the goals desired. Once the student receives an offer, they move to the formal planning process.



# PRECEPTOR MEETING CHECKLIST

*Once you have accepted an offer, use this checklist as a guide to ensure you are discussing everything needed from your preceptor to develop your work plan.*

## Contacts:

- Preceptor's first and last name
- Preceptor's email address and phone number
- Organization full name (spell out acronyms)
- Organization address

## Working Conditions:

- Is this APEX in-person, remote or hybrid?
- What category best describes this organization? Government, Non-Profit, Healthcare-Clinic, Healthcare-Hospital, Healthcare-Veterans Affairs, Academic, Commercial/Private,
- APEX begin date
- APEX end date
- What is the average number of hours you will work each week?
- Is this a paid or unpaid experience?
- What types of activities will you be involved with? Select all that apply. Education, Outreach, Service, Training, Other
- Do the activities associated with this APEX take place in rural areas?
- Do the activities associated with this APEX serve or benefit the underserved population?
- What types of observational activities will be available during this APEX?



## PLAN

Once an APEX opportunity is secured, the student must complete the formal work plan. Access to the formal work plan template is granted by the Office of Public Health Practice after a student has completed the required online training modules. Through discussions with their Department Practicum Coordinator and Practicum Site Preceptor, the student should create a work plan that includes:

- Objectives aligned to competencies

- Activities
- Deliverables
- Any potential observational experiences

IT IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT THE STUDENT REVIEW THIS PLAN WITH THEIR DEPARTMENT PRACTICUM COORDINATOR TO DETERMINE IF AN IRB APPLICATION IS REQUIRED (<https://public-health.tamu.edu/practice/documents/practicum-irb-approval-decision-tree-2.2.18.pdf>).

Once the student and Practicum Preceptor agree and approve the finalized work plan, the document is sent to the Department Practicum Coordinator for final approval. Approval signatures from both the Practicum Preceptor and Department Practicum Coordinator are required on the draft work plan in order for students to submit it to the Practicum Portal.

The student cannot begin or register for an APEx until all paperwork is signed and approved. Registration blocks for academic credit are in place for all students until all pre-APEx requirements are fulfilled. Once approved, an academic advisor will remove the registration block and register the student for academic credit.

## **DURING THE PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE**



### **DO**

Once the student begins the APEx, they are required to submit periodic reports according to the specifications of the Department Practicum Coordinator. Meeting the department deadlines is imperative as late submissions of these required reports will impact a student's ability to obtain academic credit for the APEx. The student should continue to review their work plan throughout the APEx to ensure that competencies, objectives, and deliverables are being fulfilled.

## AFTER THE APEX



### DOCUMENT

Shortly after the completion of the APEX, the student is required to complete several additional steps to receive academic credit:

1. A final report must be submitted to the Department Practicum Coordinator.
2. Copies of deliverables related to APEX objectives and activities must be provided.
3. The student is required to give a formal presentation on their APEX according to the guidelines established by their department. In some cases, the student presents at his/her site, though ultimately it is at the Department Practicum Coordinator's discretion, along with the Department Head, to determine if a presentation completed on site or in another formal professional venue can be used for the presentation requirement.
4. All required documentation must be posted to the student's ePortfolio by the department's stated deadlines.

Some departments require additional documentation at the conclusion of the APEX, so the student should review department addendums for specific requirements. Failure to complete all post-APEX requirements can impact the ability of a student to register for further course work or apply for graduation.