



School of
Public Health

SPH Handbook for MS and PhD Students

**Master of Science (MS) in
Public Health Sciences**

**Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in
Public Health Sciences**

Academic Year 2020-2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
AIM OF THE DEGREE SEQUENCE	3
MS/PhD Concentrations.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
MS/PhD Sequence of Coursework	4
PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS	4
Admissions Requirements	4
Admissions Decisions and Deferrals.....	4
Appeal/Grievance Process.....	5
MS and PhD Student Funding Package	5
CURRENT STUDENTS	5
Expectations and Performance Review	5
Faculty Advisor.....	6
Advanced Standing Credit	6
Doctoral Level Coursework Requirement	7
Advancement to Candidacy	7
PhD Dissertation	7

INTRODUCTION

This SPH Handbook (the Handbook) provides information about the components, requirements, operations and procedures that govern the Master of Science (MS) in Public Health Sciences degree program and the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Public Health Sciences degree program at the University of North Texas Health Science Center (UNTHSC) School of Public Health (SPH). The purpose of the Handbook is to provide answers to questions that prospective and current MS and PhD students may have about the course of study. General policies, procedures, and other information that applies to all students in the SPH and UNTHSC can be found in the UNTHSC catalog (<http://catalog.unthsc.edu/>) and are not included here.

AIM OF THE DEGREE SEQUENCE

The MS and PhD degree programs are research intensive academic programs that jointly provide a pathway to a career in academia focused on research, teaching, and service, with the overall objective of improving the health of populations. Thus, the MS/PhD degree sequence is designed to train public health scientists rather than public health practitioners. Students who commit themselves to this challenging path are expected to become the future stewards of academic public health.

The specific aim of the MS program is to prepare students for subsequent uninterrupted study in the PhD program. In the Fall Semester of their second year, MS students are expected to apply for admission to the SPH's PhD program, among other PhD programs. It is important to note that the MS in Public Health Sciences is not a terminal professional degree. Students who do not wish to move without interruption to the PhD degree program should instead pursue the MPH degree.

The specific aim of the PhD program is to prepare students for post-doctoral fellowships or assistant professor positions at research universities. To be competitive for these positions, successful PhD students will do more than complete coursework. Importantly, they will author or co-author multiple peer reviewed publications, complete a rigorous dissertation process, and serve as an effective teacher. In other words, PhD students will demonstrate the ability to engage in the scholarship of discovery and the scholarship of teaching.

MS/PhD Concentrations

- **Epidemiology**, this MS/PhD degree sequence is supported by the Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, places a strong emphasis on epidemiologic methods, theory, and practice. This broad and rigorous training will equip students with skills needed to conduct cutting-edge epidemiologic research within the many areas of public health and to teach university courses in an epidemiology curriculum. Upon completion, students will demonstrate proficiency in the following areas:
 - Describe the theory underlying epidemiological methods.
 - Design and apply epidemiologic methods to solve a variety of public health problems.
 - Conduct primarily etiologic or other analytic and descriptive research studies, through appropriate formulation of a health problem, and the collection, assimilation, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of data on human populations and the physical, chemical and biologic environment.
- **Health Behavior Research**, this MS/PhD degree sequence is supported by the Department of Health Behavior and Health Systems, provides a rigorous scientific approach to the study of the psychological, social and cultural factors that impact human health and health behavior. An understanding of these factors at multiple social-ecological levels including: individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and population, is expected. Students will be prepared to perform basic and applied research, to teach university courses in a health behavior curriculum, and to serve communities with the goals of promoting healthy lifestyles, reducing risk behaviors, and eliminating health disparities related to race, ethnicity,

socioeconomic status, or gender. Upon completion, students will demonstrate proficiency in the following areas:

- Identify the role and impact of the psychological, behavioral, social, and cultural factors that promote population health as well as those which contribute to increase morbidity and mortality.
- Effectively engage communities as partners in promoting health, reducing risk behavior, and changing social conditions that undermine public health and safety.
- Develop, test, and implement interventions designed to achieve social and behavioral change. Conduct scientifically rigorous research on the social and/or behavioral determinants of health, and ways to reduce health disparities.

MS/PhD Sequence of Coursework

The MS/PhD degree sequence requires a minimum of 87 semester credit hours (SCH) post-baccalaureate degree. PhD students who hold a master's degree but did not complete the MS degree program must meet all requirements of the MS program by the end of the Summer of their second year of study, including a discovery-based paper submitted for peer review. The required SCH are designated as follows.

MS Degree Requirements	36 SCH
PhD Degree Requirements	39 SCH
<u>Dissertation</u>	<u>12 SCH</u>
Total	87 SCH

Concentration-specific curriculums may be accessed through the following link.

<https://www.unthsc.edu/school-of-public-health/doctor-of-philosophy-in-public-health-sciences/>

PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

Admissions Requirements

The SPH is a member of the Schools of Public Health Application Service (SOPHAS). Prospective students must apply to the MS and PhD programs online at www.sophas.org. The application deadline for SOPHAS is January 15th each year. It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that all application materials are accessible to the SPH through SOPHAS by the designated admissions deadline; incomplete applications will not be reviewed. Applicants are reviewed by a group of SPH faculty. Qualified applicants are invited for an interview, either in person or remotely, before final decisions are made. The SPH admits potential students once each academic year, and as such, all incoming students must enter the program in the Fall Semester.

Information submitted in the application process must be complete and correct. Prospective students must notify the proper institution officials regarding any changes in the information provided on their application. Falsification or omission of any information on the application documents may void a student's admission, cancel their enrollment, and/or result in appropriate disciplinary actions including dismissal. This holds true even after full admission into the program. All materials submitted during the application process become the property of the UNTHSC and cannot be returned.

Admission Decisions and Deferments

Applicants will be furnished written notification regarding their admission status by the SPH Office of

Admission. Statements by other UNTHSC personnel concerning the applicant's admissibility are not valid until confirmed in writing by the SPH Office of Admission.

Students who are admitted to the program and plan to enroll are required to submit an Admission Decision Form along with a non-refundable \$200 assurance fee that will be used toward tuition upon matriculation into the program. Admitted applicants who change their decision about the semester they will begin matriculation must contact the Office of Admission to request deferment. Deferments must be made in writing and cannot exceed one year from the original acceptance date. There is a deferment fee of \$300; the non-refundable deferment fee is due at the time the request is made.

Appeal/Grievance Process

Appeals concerning admission to the SPH should be addressed to the Dean of the SPH.

MS and PhD Student Funding Package

Each admitted MS student may be offered a funding package that includes the following:

- Full waiver of tuition and fees for the first two years;
- Office space for the duration of the program;
- University-supported laptop computer.

Each admitted PhD student may be offered a funding package that includes the following:

- Full waiver of tuition and fees for the first four years
- Annual stipend, paid monthly, for the first four years;
- Student health insurance for the first four consecutive years;
- Office space for the duration of the program;
- University-supported laptop computer.

Funding is contingent on the student maintaining good academic standing. An applicant who defers admission is not guaranteed of the funding package the following year.

CURRENT STUDENTS

Expectations and Performance Review

All MS and PhD students are expected to be engaged full-time for the duration of their studies. As a condition to receive the funding package, outside employment of any kind is prohibited. The MS/PhD degree sequence is much more than completing coursework. It is intended to provide rigorous training in research and teaching with the goal of producing graduates who will become independent investigators. Students are expected to proactively engage and participate in both independent and collaborative research projects. As such, students, in general, are expected to be on campus during normal working hours, Monday through Friday. Outside of class, both MS and PhD students are expected to be working on teaching assignments and/or research projects 20 or more hours a week under the guidance of faculty mentor(s). These projects should lead to scholarly products, such as peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations. Students may also be asked to TA for courses, and advanced PhD students may be asked to independently teach a full course.

Additionally, all MS and PhD students are expected to regularly attend the SPH Journal Club. The Journal Club is a student-centered gathering that meets regularly throughout the year to critically evaluate studies in the scientific literature. It is intended to give students exposure to various health disciplines and fields, as well as to foster the development of skills necessary to prepare and present scientific manuscripts of their own. For each

Journal Club meeting, one or more students will lead the session with the help of a faculty facilitator. They will be responsible for choosing and distributing the article(s) that will be discussed during the meeting, as well as deciding the structure, format, and/or activities for the meeting.

University policy indicates that all requirements for the MS degree must be completed in six (6) years. However, in the SPH, successful MS students will graduate in two (2) years and then continue in the PhD program. Also, University policy indicates that the PhD degree must be completed within seven (7) years. However, in the SPH, PhD students who have successfully generated a competitive research record will normally be graduated 4 years after being admitted to the program. Thus, the complete MS/PhD degree sequence should be completed in six (6) years.

Students who anticipate exceeding the University time limits identified above should apply for an extension by submitting a letter to the Office of Academic Services before the appropriate MS or PhD time limit expires. All requests for extension will be critically evaluated by the Department Chair (see UNTHSC policy 15.613 – SPH time limitations). Time spent in active service in the U.S. armed forces will not be used in computing the time limit. However, career members of the armed forces should consult with the Office of Academic Services concerning credit given to coursework completed before or during active military service.

All MS and PhD students are reviewed each December and July by the MS/PhD Program Director. The review is based on the student's performance in coursework, grade point average (GPA), feedback from faculty, and scholarly productivity. The student will receive an evaluation notifying them of the results of the review indicating either satisfactory or unsatisfactory progress in the program. An unsatisfactory review is equivalent to a course letter grade of F. Two unsatisfactory reviews can be cause for dismissal from the program.

Faculty Advisor

Upon admission to the program, each student will be assigned to a Faculty Advisor according to the “best fit” in the student's area of research interest as approved by the MS/PhD Program Director. The roles of the Faculty Advisor include, but are not limited to: academic advising, research mentorship, and serving as a liaison between the student and other faculty who may have research opportunities. Students should meet with their respective Faculty Advisor(s) at least once a week. Students may request a change of Faculty Academic Advisor during the first academic year of their studies. Such requests will be reviewed and evaluated by the MS/PhD Program Director. A Faculty Advisor must have a full-time academic appointment in the SPH and must be able to adequately represent the concentration to which the student was admitted at matriculation.

MS Program Culminating Experience: The Discovery-Based Paper

The culminating experience of the MS degree program is a discovery-based paper. The paper must report the findings of an empirical study. Guided by the Faculty Advisor, work on the paper will begin no later than the beginning of the Summer Semester of the first year of the program. The paper must be suitable for submission to a peer-reviewed journal as determined by the instructor of PHED 5350 and the student's Faculty Advisor.

Advanced Standing Credit (applies only to PhD applicants who did not complete the UNTHSC SPH MS degree program)

PhD applicants who did not complete the UNTHSC SPH MS degree program may apply semester credit hours (SCH) earned in relevant graduate coursework from U.S. accredited institutions toward the 87 SCH required for the PhD program, thus possibly waiving some course requirements. Advanced standing credit is a form of transfer credit that refers to SCH from past graduate coursework regardless of whether it was used for another degree or not. The SPH allows up to 36 SCH of such credit, and there must be a course match in content with the course being waived. Only courses where a grade of B or higher were attained (or grade of

“pass” in a pass/fail course) are eligible for advanced standing. For any course taken more than five (5) years prior to entry into the program, the student must provide written justification explaining why the course is still relevant. The burden for demonstrating the worthiness of any course for advanced standing rests with the student. As such, it is the student’s responsibility to provide official transcripts and course syllabi from the university where the original course was completed.

Upon acceptance, program applicants will be given the opportunity to submit an advanced standing request. However, all accepted applicants seeking to matriculate in August are required to submit their request for advanced standing by the prior date of May 1. After that date, no advanced standing request will be considered.

Doctoral Level Coursework Requirement (applies to PhD students only)

In the SPH, 6000-level courses are designated as doctoral-level coursework, whereas 5000-level coursework constitute the bulk of master’s degree programs. A limit of 9 credit hours, earned from completion of 5000-level coursework in the SPH, may be used to satisfy doctoral-level course requirements. The Faculty Advisor is responsible for ensuring that all degree requirements are met.

Advancement to Candidacy (applies to PhD students only)

Advancement to candidacy, i.e., transitioning from a PhD student to a PhD candidate, indicates that the student has demonstrated the potential and high likelihood of becoming an independent scholar and is qualified to begin significant dissertation research under supervision of their Faculty Advisor. Advancement to candidacy is attained after successful completion of the PhD Comprehensive Examination (the Exam). The Exam is designed to assess the student’s potential to conduct independent research. The Exam is usually administered in the Summer Semester. The content, format, length, and other details of the Exam vary by concentration. To sit for the Exam, a student must have completed or be concurrently enrolled in all required courses, have written permission from their Faculty Advisor, and enroll in the PhD Comprehensive Exam course during that semester (0 SCH course). A student has two (2) attempts to successfully pass the Exam.

PhD Dissertation

The dissertation is the culminating experience required for the fulfillment of the PhD degree. Dissertation research may commence after the student has been advanced to candidacy or earlier in limited situations with the approval of the Faculty Advisor and the MS/PhD Program Director. The reputation and quality of the SPH and its PhD program is measured in part by the quality of dissertations, which are available for scrutiny by scholars and the general public. As such, dissertations must be prepared with exceptional rigor, not only with respect to proper references and conclusions, but also with respect to grammar, consistency of terminology and citations, and appearance. In addition, all research protocols must be approved by the North Texas Regional IRB. The Faculty Advisor will guide the PhD student throughout the dissertation process and will chair the dissertation committee. The Faculty Advisor is responsible for ensuring that the dissertation is correct in form, grammar, and content. The MS/PhD Program Director is responsible for ensuring that all procedures are met for defending the dissertation are followed by the student and the committee.

Students are permitted to choose either a traditional or non-traditional dissertation format (three-paper model). In either case, it must comprise a genuine, scholarly contribution to knowledge in a public health field.

- **Traditional format:** This format normally includes at least five chapters. The first chapter provides a statement of the problem, its background and significance, the hypotheses to be tested and/or aims to be achieved, and an overview of the remaining chapters. Chapter two provides a critical review of the scientific literature that thoroughly reviews and critiques what is already established, identifies knowledge gaps, and explains which of the identified gaps in the literature will be filled-in by the proposed research as well as

how this will be accomplished. The third chapter presents a detailed presentation and justification of the design of the proposed study and the research methods as well as the analytic procedures that will be used to conduct that investigation. Chapter four presents the results of the research study in considerable detail. Chapter five discusses the implications of those results, draws the appropriate conclusions, and lays out an agenda for future research on the issues addressed in the dissertation. The quality of a dissertation must be sufficient to warrant multiple publications in peer-reviewed journals.

- **Three-paper format:** This format normally includes at least five chapters as well. However, the body of the dissertation consists of at least three thematically-related original peer-reviewed manuscripts. The first chapter provides a statement of the problem, its background and significance, the hypotheses to be tested and/or aims to be achieved, the rationale and justification for how the three manuscripts are thematically related, and an overview of the remaining chapters. Chapters two, three, and four are the manuscripts themselves. Chapter five discusses the implications of the cumulative results of all three manuscripts, draws the appropriate conclusions, and lays out an agenda for future research on the issues addressed in the dissertation. In most situations, a copyright release may need to be obtained. The student must be the first author on all three manuscripts. At least two of the manuscripts must have been accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal prior to the final defense. The quality of the journal(s) must be deemed appropriate by the dissertation committee. The third manuscript must be in publishable form by the time of the final defense.

The following steps outline the general dissertation process with approximate timelines. The latter steps should commence once the student has advanced to candidacy. However, some of the earlier steps should commence or be completed prior to the advancement to candidacy.

1. **Identify dissertation topic (prior to candidacy):** Students are encouraged to discuss potential dissertation projects with their Faculty Advisor and other faculty while in the early stages of their doctoral coursework. For students who begin the dissertation process prior to advancement of candidacy, the topic should be finalized prior to the completion of 60 SCH toward the degree (including traditional transfer and advanced standing credit).
2. **Form PhD dissertation committee (before or after candidacy):** The Faculty Advisor and the PhD student will identify potential committee members. The dissertation committee will consist of a minimum of three faculty, of which at least two must be full-time faculty in the UNTHSC-SPH. The committee will be comprised of the Faculty Advisor and a faculty member with strong expertise in quantitative or qualitative methods, depending upon the nature of the research. The exception will be those cases where the Faculty Advisor meets criteria for being a strong quantitative or qualitative methodologist. Additional committee members can be from the SPH, other Schools within the UNTHSC or the UNT System, and when appropriate, from another accredited university or an individual with specifically identified expertise relevant to the proposed dissertation. If needed, there may be as many as five members on the committee and all must approve all dissertation matters. The Faculty Advisor shall serve as the chair of the dissertation committee and should be a faculty member with experience in the dissertation process. The chair leads the proposal approval, the final dissertation defense, and ensures that the process moves forward smoothly. Before dissertation research can begin, the composition of the dissertation committee must be approved by the MS/PhD Program Director.
3. **Write dissertation proposal (after candidacy):** The dissertation proposal should follow the National Institute of Health guidelines for research proposals and should contain the following sections: Specific Aims, Significance, Innovation, Approach, Environment, and Bibliography. The written proposal should not exceed 25 pages.
4. **Obtain IRB approval (before or after candidacy):** The student must obtain approval from the UNTHSC IRB and other participating sites (if applicable) prior to starting the data collection for the dissertation. The student shall have completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) IRB course online and complied with all IRB regulations that may be related to their research.

5. **Defend dissertation proposal (after candidacy):** The dissertation proposal approval process consists of a public defense. The candidate is responsible for making a public announcement for the proposal defense following guidelines provided by the MS/PhD Program Director. The public defense should be attended by the entire dissertation committee and an additional faculty identified by the MS/PhD Program Director to ensure the consistency, fairness, and rigor of the process. All dissertation committee members shall have read the proposal and provided feedback to the doctoral candidate prior to the defense. The student must present an oral review of the proposal and answer questions by the dissertation committee members, the faculty representative, and other attendees. The student should also present a timeline for submitting the three papers or dissertation for publication. After which the public audience will be asked to leave the room. Based on review of the proposal and the oral presentation, the committee members will provide one of the following ratings. A pass or defer rating must be based on a unanimous decision:
- Pass with no revisions;
 - Defer with minor revisions – the requested revisions must be completed, and the revised proposal must be approved by the Faculty Advisor, subsequently leading to a successful proposal defense;
 - Defer with major revisions – the requested revisions must be completed, and the revised proposal must be approved by the entire committee, subsequently leading to a successful proposal defense;
 - Fail – the dissertation proposal is not acceptable even with major revisions, and the candidate will be requested to select a different research topic and to undergo the entire dissertation process again.
- Failure of the proposal defense will result in an unsatisfactory annual review.
6. **Write and revise the dissertation (after candidacy):** The dissertation must be acceptable to the Faculty Advisor and the dissertation committee. The PhD candidate shall have the primary role in the design and execution of the dissertation research and must be the sole author of the dissertation document submitted to the University. If following the three-paper format, at least two of the papers should be submitted for publication during this period. Committee members must approve the manuscript before submission.
7. **Schedule and complete the dissertation defense (after candidacy):** Once the Faculty Advisor and the other members of the dissertation committee agree that the candidate is ready to defend the dissertation, the candidate distributes the draft to all dissertation committee members. Dissertation committee members shall be given between four and eight weeks to review the draft submitted for the defense. The candidate is responsible for making a public announcement for the defense following guidelines provided by the MS/PhD Program Director. The Faculty Advisor will ensure that PhD Defense form is electronically circulated for signatures. The form can be found at: (<https://www.unthsc.edu/school-of-public-health/office-of-admission-and-academic-services-forms/>). The public defense must be attended by the entire dissertation committee and an additional faculty identified by the MS/PhD Program Director. Family members of the student are prohibited from attending the defense. The session will include a formal public presentation of the research and major findings, usually about 30 to 45 minutes in length, followed by questions to the candidate by the dissertation committee members and other attendees. Following that, the candidate and attendees will be asked to leave the room temporarily so that the dissertation committee can review the candidate's defense and will grade the performance with one of the following ratings based upon a majority decision:
- Pass** – the candidate is deemed to have passed the defense;
 - Pass with minor revisions** – the candidate must complete the revisions and submit the revised dissertation to the Faculty Advisor for final approval no later than a month from the date of the defense;
 - Fail** – the dissertation is not acceptable even with major revisions, and the candidate is not recommended for the degree. Failure of the defense will, at a minimum, result in an unsatisfactory annual review.

Finally, the candidate will be summoned back to the room for discussion with the committee and communication of results. The committee members will describe any additional changes that need to be made moving forward. After successfully defending the dissertation, the final approved dissertation must be submitted to the Office of Academic Services for proper publication and cataloging no later than the date to submit all graduation requirements as indicated by the SPH academic calendar.