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SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

## **Doctoral Handbook**

# **For Prospective and Current Students**

## **Academic Year 2017-2018**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Doctoral Handbook (the Handbook) contains information regarding the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Public Health Sciences at the University of North Texas Health Science Center (UNTHSC) School of Public Health (SPH). Current and prospective students should refer to the Handbook whenever they have questions about program requirements, policies or procedures. Current PhD students will be held responsible for the contents outlined in the Handbook regardless of whether the students are notified of this information through other means. General policies, procedures, and other information that applies to all students at the SPH and/or UNTHSC can be found in the UNTHSC catalog (<http://catalog.unthsc.edu/>) and are not included here.

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

### Concentrations

The PhD program in Public Health Sciences prepares professionals to engage in research, teaching, and service with the overall goal of improving the health of populations. To meet this objective, all students in the program pursue excellence in conducting research and disseminating knowledge. The primary focus is on research that advances knowledge about etiology, interventions, and policies that promote health at the individual, population, societal, and/or global levels. There are two PhD concentrations:

- **Epidemiology**, offered by the Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, prepares students contemplating careers as scientists employed in academia, research institutions, or in research units within industry or other agencies and organizations. The program 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. Upon completion, students will demonstrate proficiency in the following areas:
  - Describe the theory underlying epidemiological methods.
  - Comprehend 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**, offered 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, 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.

## Curriculum

The PhD program requires a minimum of 87 semester credit hours (SCH) post-baccalaureate degree. As a part of the program, students must meet all requirements for the corresponding Master of Science program including a Master's thesis. The required SCH are designated as follows.

Masters of Science Requirements	36 SCH
Doctoral Coursework 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 UNTHSC-SPH is a member of SOPHAS (Schools of Public Health Application Service). Prospective students must apply to the program online at [www.sophas.org](http://www.sophas.org). The application deadline for SOPHAS is January 15<sup>th</sup> each year. It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that all application materials are received by the SPH 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 subsequent 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.

### Admissions Decisions and Deferments

Applicants will be furnished written notification regarding their admission status by the SPH Office of Academic Services. Statements by other UNTHSC personnel concerning the applicant's admissibility are not valid until confirmed in writing by the SPH Office of Academic Services.

Students who are admitted to the program and plan to enroll are required to submit an Admissions Decision Form along with a non-refundable \$200 assurance fee that will be used toward tuition upon matriculation into the program. Applicants who are admitted to a program in which they do not intend to enroll in the semester for which they applied must contact the Office of Admission and Academic Services 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.

## Funding package

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 Annual Review

All PhD students are expected to be enrolled full-time for the duration of their studies. As a condition to receive the funding package, outside employment of any kind is prohibited. PhD education is much more than completing coursework. It is intended to be a rigorous training in research with the goal of producing graduate who will become independent researchers. 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. During the times outside of class, they are expected to be working on their research projects under the guidance of faculty mentor(s). These projects should lead to scholarly products such as peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations.

Additionally, all PhD students are expected to regularly attend the SPH Journal Club. The Journal Club is a student-driven gathering that meets regularly throughout the year to critically evaluate scientific journal articles. 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.

All requirements for the PhD degree must be completed within seven (7) years, but in general, students are expected to graduate in 3 to 5 years after being admitted to the program. Students who anticipate that they will exceed the time limit should apply for an extension by submitting a letter to the Office of Academic Services before the seven-year time limit expires. All requests for extension will be reviewed and evaluated by the corresponding Department Chair. 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.

Each PhD student is reviewed annually by the Department Chair. The review is based on the student's performance in coursework, grade point average (GPA), level of engagement, feedback from faculty, and scholarly productivity. The student will receive a letter notifying them of the results of the review indicating either satisfactory or unsatisfactory progress in the program. Two unsatisfactory reviews will lead to dismissal from the program.

## Academic Advisor

Upon admission to the program, each student will be assigned to an Academic Advisor according to the “best fit” in the student’s area of research interest as approved by the appropriate Department Chair. The roles of the Academic Advisor include, but are not limited to, advising coursework, determining advanced standing (see section below), research mentorship, and serving as a liaison between the student and other faculty who may have research opportunities for the students. Students should meet with their respective Academic Advisors at least once a week. Although discouraged, students may request a change of Academic Advisor during the first academic year of their studies. Such requests will be reviewed and evaluated by the Department Chairs. An Academic Advisor must have a full-time faculty appointment in the UNTHSC-SPH and must be appropriate to the concentration where the student was admitted.

## Advanced Standing Credit

Students may apply semester credit hours (SCH) earned in relevant graduate coursework from other U.S. accredited institutions toward the 87 SCH required for the PhD program, thus, 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 UNTHSC-SPH allows up to 42 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 are eligible for advanced standing. For any course taken more than seven (7) years prior to entry into the program, the student must provide written justification explaining why the course is still relevant. The burden of proof of accuracy and relevancy for any course considered for advanced standing is on the student. As such, it is the student’s responsibility to provide official transcripts and course syllabi from the institution where the original course was taken.

For appropriate advising, it is important for the advanced standing request to occur at minimum two months prior to the first semester of attendance. No advanced standing requests will be accepted following completion of the first matriculation semester. Advanced standing is subject to approval by the Academic Advisor and the Department Chair where the potentially waived course is housed.

## Major Professor

Within the first year of study, PhD students will be encouraged to meet with all faculty members within their concentration and with other faculty within the SPH who have related research interests. By the time students accumulate 60 SCH (including traditional transfer and advance standing credit), students must finalize the selection of their Major Professor who will guide them through their remaining doctoral studies including the PhD dissertation. If the Major Professor is different than the originally assigned Academic Advisor, the Major Professor becomes the Academic Advisor of record for the PhD student. A Major Professor must have a full-time faculty appointment in the UNTHSC-SPH and must be approved by the appropriate Department Chair. Although discouraged, students may request a change of Academic Advisor during the first academic year of their studies. Such requests will be reviewed and evaluated by the Department Chair.

## Advancement to Candidacy

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 the Major Professor. 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. In general, the Exam is administered once per academic year during the Summer semester. Although the content, format, length, and other details of the Exam vary by concentration, the rigor of the Exam is similar. To sit for the Exam, a student

must have completed or be concurrently enrolled in all required courses, have written permission from the Academic 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. Each unsuccessful attempt will result in an unsatisfactory annual review.

## Dissertation

The PhD dissertation is the culminating experience required for the fulfillment of the degree. The dissertation research may commence once the student has advanced to candidacy or earlier in situations where approval is granted by the Major Professor and the Department Chair. The reputation and quality of the UNTHSC-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, spelling, consistency of terminology and citations, and appearance. In addition, all research protocols must be approved by the UNTHSC institutional review board (IRB). The Major Professor will guide the doctoral student throughout the dissertation process and will chair the dissertation committee. This faculty member will ensure that all requirements and procedures for the dissertation are met and that the dissertation is correct in form, grammar, and content.

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 (or sole) author on all three manuscripts. Two of the manuscripts must have been accepted in final form for publication in peer-reviewed journals. All journals must be deemed appropriate by the dissertation committee. The third manuscript must be considered publishable by the dissertation committee and be submitted for peer review prior to scheduling the dissertation defense.

For the three-paper model and some traditional dissertations, it will be necessary for the student to begin the dissertation work prior to the advancement to candidacy. In such cases, the student must have finalized the selection of a Major Professor and the rest of the dissertation committee, as well as work out with the dissertation committee a "Memorandum of Understanding" (MOU; no more than five pages). The MOU anticipates the more fully developed formal presentation of the dissertation plans at the dissertation proposal

defense, and must be approved by the dissertation committee and the appropriate Department Chair. No dissertation research shall occur prior to the approval of the committee, completion of the Memorandum, and all necessary IRB approvals. If a modification to the dissertation focus or method occurs prior to the dissertation proposal defense, the MOU must be amended. For a traditional dissertation, the problem, methodologies, and relevant literature should be noted and characterized. For the three-paper model, the MOU should delineate the nature, structure, content, and anticipated authorship of all three papers. No research articles can be submitted for peer review and publication until the MOU is approved. Only one manuscript is allowed to be submitted for peer review prior to successful completion of the Comprehensive Exam and the dissertation proposal defense; no additional manuscripts may be submitted for peer review prior to successful defense of the proposal. It is important to note that the approval of the MOU does not guarantee that the student advances to candidacy, successfully defends the proposal, successfully defends the dissertation, or successfully completes the dissertation process. Its approval merely acknowledges the fact that the work proposed has the potential to be worthy of a PhD dissertation, and that the said work may commence prior to the advancement of candidacy.

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 Academic 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), and the MOU must be approved.
2. **Select Major Professor (prior to candidacy):** By the time 60 total semester credit hours (including traditional transfer and advanced standing credit) are complete, the student must have already selected a Major Professor who conducts research in the chosen area and agrees to supervise the student during the completion of the dissertation. The student will work closely with the Major Professor to develop a dissertation proposal, identify dissertation committee members, and create a timeline for completing the requirement for the degree.
3. **Form PhD dissertation committee (prior to candidacy with approval of MOU otherwise after candidacy):** The Major Professor and the doctoral 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 Major Professor 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 Major Professor 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 Major Professor 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 appropriate Department Chair.
4. **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.
5. **Defend dissertation proposal (after candidacy):** The dissertation proposal approval process consists of a public defense. The public defense should be attended by the entire dissertation committee and an additional faculty identified by the corresponding Department Chair 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. 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:

- a. Pass with no revisions;
  - b. Defer with minor revisions – the requested revisions must be completed, and the revised proposal must be approved by the Major Professor, subsequently leading to a successful proposal defense;
  - c. 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;
  - d. 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. **Obtain IRB approval (prior to candidacy with approval of MOU, otherwise 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.
7. **Write and revise the dissertation (after candidacy):** The dissertation must be acceptable to the Major Professor 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.
8. **Schedule and complete the dissertation defense (after candidacy):** Once the Major Professor 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 administrative assistant for the Department will create a public announcement for the defense. The candidate will be responsible for submitting the following information to the administrative assistant at least three weeks prior to the defense: the title, date, time, location, candidate's name, the name of the Major Professor and committee members, and an electronic copy of the abstract. The announcement will be posted as printed flyers in the SPH, and included in the SPH FYI electronic newsletter, and the UNTHSC Daily News for at least two weeks. The candidate should bring the PhD Defense form (<https://www.unthsc.edu/school-of-public-health/office-of-admission-and-academic-services-forms/>) to the dissertation defense to obtain the necessary signatures after successful completion of the defense. The public defense must be attended by the entire dissertation committee and an additional faculty identified by the appropriate Department Chair. 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:
  - a. **Pass** – the candidate is deemed to have passed the defense;
  - b. **Pass with minor revisions** – the candidate must complete the revisions and submit the revised dissertation to the Major Professor for final approval no later than a month from the date of the defense;
  - c. **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 on the SPH academic calendar.