



University of
Pittsburgh® | School of
Public Health

PhD in Health Services Research and Policy

Student Handbook

Academic Year 2025-26

Coleman Drake, PhD
PhD/MS Director
A614 Public Health
412-383-5340
CDRAKE@pitt.edu

Jessica Dornin, MSL
Recruitment and Academic
Affairs Administrator
A631 Public Health
412-624-3625
jld115@pitt.edu

Table of Contents

Overview	3
Mission	3
Vision	3
Objectives	3
Competencies	4
Additional Program Goals	4
Application Procedures	5
Program of Study	7
Required Courses	7
Electives & Area of Focus	9
Doctoral Research and Professional Development Seminar	9
Teaching Requirement	9
Advising	9
Policies and Procedures	10
Milestones	12
Preliminary Examination (Years 1 and 2)	13
Comprehensive Examination (Year 2)	15
Dissertation Overview (Year 3 or 4)	17
Dissertation Defense	20
Governance	22
Checklists and Forms	23

Overview

Launched in 2008, the Ph.D. Program in Health Services Research and Policy in the Department of Health Policy and Management prepares individuals to enter a career in Health Services Research. Health Services Research is a “Multi-disciplinary field of inquiry, both basic and applied, that examines the use, costs, quality, accessibility, delivery, organization, financing and outcomes of health care services to increase knowledge and understanding of the structures, processes and effects of health services for individuals and populations” (IOM, 1995). Graduates will be prepared to lead research programs in a range of institutional settings including academia, not-for-profit research organizations and think tanks, government agencies, health systems, managed care organizations, health plans, consulting, and other sectors.

Mission

The mission of the Doctoral Program in Health Services Research & Policy is to train students to contribute to health policy development and to the improvement of public health and healthcare systems by designing and conducting health services research and policy analysis; analyzing, formulating and advocating for effective policy solutions; and teaching and mentoring current and future cohorts of health services researchers and scholars.

Vision

Our PhD Program will be identified among the highest quality Doctoral programs in health services research and policy in the nation.

Objectives

Students undertake a rigorous program of study that encompasses skills in research methodologies, including quantitative and qualitative analysis, and provides a strong theoretical grounding in health policy, including health law and regulation, economics, ethics, health behavior, and organizational theory and behavior including leadership. The program integrates experiential and classroom learning. Each student completes a teaching experience, typically by serving as a teaching assistant for a Master’s-level course that includes the opportunity to prepare and conduct at least one teaching module. Each student also completes a manuscript as part of the preliminary exam (which can provide the starting point for their doctoral dissertation). Professional development as a researcher is encouraged through participation in the Doctoral Research and Professional Development seminar series, attendance at relevant health services research seminars throughout the University, and presentations at professional conferences, nationally.

Competencies

The Program goals are linked to a set of competencies that include:

1. Describe salient institutional features of the US health care system and theoretical frameworks for studying health care delivery and policy
2. Formulate policy-relevant research questions and design original research based on foundational knowledge of the US health care system and theory
3. Design original empirical research, applying methods from econometrics and quasi-experimental design to address an applied problem in the delivery, financing, or quality of health care
4. Communicate research findings both verbally and in writing to inform policy
5. Lead applied health services and policy research studies that draw on multidisciplinary expertise to expand the field of knowledge

Additional Program Goals

In addition to the competencies above, upon completion of the doctoral program, each student should be able to:

1. Have gained teaching experience under the supervision of senior faculty
2. Articulate how their research interests and productivity contribute to public health theory and practice
3. Demonstrate effective academic writing and organization skills to prepare conference presentations and publishable articles for submission to appropriate journals
4. Articulate a likely career path based on their competencies, interests, and current market opportunities
5. Assess their aptitudes, interests, strengths, and areas for improvement based on development and review with a faculty advisor of an Independent Development Program (IDP) as required by the School
6. Compete effectively for post-graduate employment in positions relevant to their career path, talents, and interests
7. Serve as an ambassador and advocate for the Doctoral program, HPM Department and School of Public Health
8. Demonstrate ability to contribute effectively to a team-based research study or applied project
9. Contribute to developing a competitive proposal for research funding as an early career/emerging scholar

Application Procedures

- a. All applications must be submitted online through the Schools of Public Health Application Service (SOPHAS) website: <http://www.sophas.org>.
- b. Applicants are required to submit a supplemental writing sample that accurately reflects their written communication skills, including logical organization and clarity of writing, and previous academic and employment experiences that demonstrate commitment to the health services research field.
- c. Applicants whose credentials are reviewed favorably by the Doctoral Program Committee will be asked to participate in an on-campus, online video, or telephone interview. One or more representatives from the Committee and at least one prospective faculty mentor will take part in the interviews.
- d. The University of Pittsburgh School of Public Health, Office of Student Affairs makes final admission decisions based upon the Doctoral Program Committee's and Department Chair's recommendation. Applicants will be notified of the decision in writing by the School of Public Health, Office of Student Affairs.

Minimum Requirements for Admission

- a. Applicants must hold a baccalaureate degree from an accredited University or college, having shown academic promise by attaining a GPA of 3.3 or higher based on a 4-point scale. Although a Master's degree is not required, attainment of a relevant advanced degree will be given consideration. Official transcripts of all college-level study must be submitted.
- b. College level coursework in calculus with a grade of 3.0 or higher is required. Applicants will be required to indicate on SOPHAS which course on their transcript meets this requirement, or else successfully complete a college-level course during the summer prior to matriculation.
- c. Undergraduate or graduate level coursework in statistics and economics is strongly recommended. Familiarity with matrix algebra is also strongly recommended.
- d. Applicants must demonstrate in their personal statement that they have a clear understanding of how the program of study will benefit them in achieving their career goals. The Doctoral Program Committee places considerable weight on the quality of the written personal statement.
- e. The application must be submitted with three letters of recommendation from individuals who are in a position to judge the applicant's professional and/or academic abilities. At least one recommendation must be from an individual who can comment on the applicant's academic qualifications (e.g., former instructor or advisor).
- f. Applicants who hold an international degree must submit their qualifications to World Education Services (WES) for evaluation. They must hold a degree equivalent to a US baccalaureate degree, as determined by WES.

- g. Applicants for whom English is not their first language must submit scores from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam. Students must score a minimum of 90 on the internet based TOEFL (or 550 on the paper-based version). The minimum score for the IELTS is 6.5.
- h. GRE scores are not a required component for the PhD application. Applicants who feel that their past academic performance and/or prior work history do not adequately represent their skill set may submit GRE scores for consideration.

Transfer Students

- a. Transfer credits are accepted pursuant to University of Pittsburgh and School of Public Health policies.
- b. Students who have completed the Master of Science in HSRP, Master of Health Administration or the Master of Public Health in the Department of Health Policy and Management can transfer up to 24 credits.
- c. Where the same course is required for the doctoral program and the MPH or MHA programs, the transfer credits will be accepted if this course has been passed with a B grade or higher
- d. Transfer students who have completed the Pitt Public Health core (or equivalent at another institution) are not required to take PUBHLT 2011, "Essentials of Public Health."
- e. Courses that are taught concurrently at the doctoral and masters level, e.g., Health Policy Analysis, that have two different course numbers include additional material designed for Doctoral students that transfer students must complete. At the discretion of their academic advisor and the course instructors, the student can register for an independent study to complete the doctoral level component of each course.
- f. Courses that are not required can be counted toward the 'area of focus' (See Section 'Program of Study') only if they meet the requirements of defining an area where the student is seeking advanced training. In most cases, it is not likely that master's level coursework will meet this requirement.
- f. Students who are enrolled in the Master of Science in HSRP, Master of Health Administration, or the Master of Public Health in the Department of Health Policy & Management may apply to the Ph.D. program and transfer credits for courses already completed. In most cases, these students will need to follow the recommended sequence of courses beginning with year 1; however, they may be able to begin their 'area of focus' courses if they have already completed courses that are required for both masters and doctoral programs (e.g., Health Economics, Health Policy Analysis).

Application Deadlines

The doctoral program only accepts applications for Fall (August) admission and follows the School of Public Health's application deadline, which is generally January 15th. Please note deadlines are subject to change. Deadlines can be found by visiting the school or program website: <https://www.publichealth.pitt.edu/admissions-aid/admission-deadlines>. For more information please direct all enquires to hsrp@pitt.edu.

Program of Study

Required Courses

The program of study includes HPM (departmental) core courses, Pitt Public Health school-wide courses, and electives offered in more than 15 schools (e.g. School of Medicine, Swanson School of Engineering, School of Law, etc.). Additionally, as part of the doctoral program, PhD students are expected to gain experience in the conduct of research and teaching.

In addition to the list of required courses, all students are required to attend the Doctoral Research and Professional Development Seminar every semester and register for at least 2 semesters. A detailed description of the seminar series is provided in section "c. Doctoral Research and Professional Development Seminar." Students without previous experience in health care are expected to enroll in or audit HPM 2105: Introduction to the US Healthcare Delivery System.

The minimum credit requirement for the PhD program is 72 credits of completed course work and independent research. Twenty-four credits may be awarded for a previously earned master's degree in a similar field (e.g. MS, MPH or MHA) toward the 72-credit total. PhD students must register for a minimum of 1 dissertation credit or Full Time Dissertation Research (FTDR) during their time in the program.

The following table provides a checklist of requirements for the PhD in Health Services Research and Policy.

HSRP Doctoral Program Handbook

Recommended Sequence of Required Courses for Ph.D. in Health Services Research and Policy						
Year	Term	Code	Title	Credits	Total for Term	
One	Fall	BIOST 2041	Introduction to Statistical Methods	3		
		EPIDEM 2110	Principles of Epidemiology	3		
		HPM 2905	Quasi-Experimental Design for Health Services Research	3		
		HPM 3000	Doctoral Research and Professional Development Seminar Part 1	1.5		
		PUBHLT 2022	The Dean's Public Health Grand Rounds	0		
			IRB Ethics Modules (Online)	NC		
			Elective (Students must choose approved elective courses)			
					10.5	
	Spring	BIOST 2142	Applied Regression Analysis	3		
		HPM 3001	Doctoral Research and Professional Development Seminar Part 2	1.5		
		HPM 3064	Health Policy Analysis	3		
		HPM 3501	Seminar in HSR Research Methods 1	3		
		HPM 3505*	Advanced Empirical Microeconomics Methods with Applications for Healthcare Research	3		
		PUBHLT 2022	The Dean's Public Health Grand Rounds	0		
						13.5
Two	Fall					
		HPM 3000	Doctoral Research and Professional Development Seminar Part 1	0		
		HPM 3065	Advanced Health Policy Analysis: Implementation, Evaluation, and Translation	2		
		HPM 3502	Seminar in HSR Research Methods 2	3		
			Electives (Students must choose approved elective courses)			
					5	
	Spring					
		HPM 3001	Doctoral Research and Professional Development Seminar Part 2	0		
		HPM 3125*	Intermediate Health Economics	3		
		PUBHLT 2011	Essentials of Public Health	3		
						6
	Three	Fall				
HPM 3506			Dissertation Grant Writing Capstone	1.5		
PUBHLT 2030			Research Ethics	1		
HPM 3510			Teaching Practicum	1		
				3.5		
Required Courses				Total	38.5	
Other Requirements:						
		In addition to required courses, students must have a minimum of 72 credits to graduate.				
		FTDR 3999: Full Time Dissertation Study				
		HPM 3510 Doctoral Teaching Practicum (1 credit)				
		Area of Focus (Minimum 12 credits, must include one methods focused course)				
Notes:	* HPM 3125 and HPM 3505 are offered alternating years; taken in either the first or second year					
	(a) Students who have not recently take a course in microeconomics should take HPM 2028: Microeconomics Applied to Health					
	(b) Students without previous experience in health care are expected to take HPM 2105: Introduction to the US Healthcare Delivery System 1					
	(c) Students must register for 3 dissertation credits (HPM 3508) or one semester of Full Time Dissertation Research (FTDR)					

Electives & Area of Focus

Students must take at least 12 credit hours of electives that form a coherent area of focus from any school or department of the University or from schools that are part of the Pittsburgh Council on Higher Education (PCHE) cross-registration agreement. The area of focus is a tool for students and advisors to help articulate the student's area of expertise as it relates to their planned dissertation and future career goals. It is intended to help students identify technical and subject matter coursework relevant to their planned dissertation topic.

The area of focus must identify a goal or theme that will be met by completing the listed courses. By the end of their second year, students must complete the area of focus form (the program coordinator will distribute), have it approved by their academic advisor, and submit for approval by the doctoral program director.

Lists of recent electives taken by other students and previous students' areas of focus are available from the program coordinator (example areas include decision science, health economics, and policy analysis). Students identify relevant courses to construct an area of focus that is approved by their academic advisor.

Doctoral Research and Professional Development Seminar

Students are strongly encouraged to attend the seminar for at least 6 terms; they must register for the course in two terms for a total of 3 credits. The purpose of the seminar is to introduce students to the field of Health Services Research and Health Policy and to stay current with issues and articles in the literature. The seminar consists of three related components: research presentations by internal and external faculty of their own research or a discussion of developments in her/his discipline and/or related policy implications; a series of professional development workshops; and a journal club in which students present a critique of one or more topical articles. Students must lead the discussion at least once (typically multiple times) during their 6 terms. Grading is based on attendance and active participation.

Teaching Requirement

It is required that students successfully complete a teaching experience before graduation. This can be met through enrollment in HPM 3510 for one credit.

The student must obtain approval in advance from the program director(s) regarding the course with which they will complete their teaching practicum. Once approval has been given, the student must notify the program coordinator who will track this requirement.

Advising

Each student admitted to the program will be matched to an academic advisor based on interest areas identified during the application procedure. The academic advisor will review course registrations and advise the student on important milestones. In particular, the academic advisor will work with the student and program administrator to ensure that the student is taking required courses in the proper sequence to be prepared for the preliminary and comprehensive examinations. The academic advisor will help the student

select electives that best match the student's interest and that form a cohesive area of focus.

The academic advisor is not required to serve as the dissertation chair or as a member of the Dissertation committee but is expected to continue to monitor the student's progress throughout her/his Doctoral studies until the student identifies a primary dissertation advisor, typically during the third year.

Changing academic advisors can be done at the request of the student at any time. In recognition that the student may be reluctant to breach the issue with their advisor or with a new potential advisor, she/he may make the request of the doctoral program director who must approve this change and assign a new advisor.

Policies and Procedures

Pitt Public Health Academic Handbook: The school maintains an academic handbook that covers and lists many requirements for the degree programs in addition to school and/or university policies and procedures. The handbook is accessible on the school's website at <https://www.publichealth.pitt.edu/academics/forms-handbook/academic-handbook>.

All school and university forms can be found on the School's [Forms and Handbook page](#).

Forms and Deadlines: All departmental forms and deadlines are posted on the Doctoral Program web page or in the Doctoral Program Microsoft Teams folder.

Registration: Course registration for each term must be done in consultation with the student's academic advisor who must sign the registration form. **Registration deadlines are set by the University, and it is the student's responsibility to be aware of them.** The registration should list PPBHL as your school and HPM-PhD as your plan. **Please use your PeopleSoft identification number in lieu of your social security number.**

Course Credit Requirements: Students must be registered for at least one credit in each 12-month interval to maintain active status. Students should not expect to receive guidance or direction from members of the faculty, be able to use the library, online services or other University resources unless they are registered. Students must be registered in the term in which they take preliminary and comprehensive examinations, conduct their overview and final defense of their dissertations. Students must be registered for at least one term of Full-Time Dissertation Research (FTDR) during the semester in which they plan to graduate.

Student Progress: The progress of each student will be reviewed at least annually by the Doctoral Program Director(s). The Director(s) may place a student on inactive status which may require a student to reapply to the program and take additional coursework which may require a student to reapply to the program and take additional coursework if adequate progress is not being made in the student's academic program.

Residency Requirements: Doctoral students must meet the residency requirement of at least one term of full-time doctoral study, excluding other employment except as approved by the

Doctoral Committee.

Grade Point Average: According to Pitt Public Health policy, any time a student's GPA falls below 3.0 she/he will be automatically placed on academic probation by the Educational Policies and Curriculum Committee (EPCC). Students on probation will be counseled by their advisor and be informed in writing of the procedures to remove the probation in an appropriate period of time.

As noted below, students must maintain a 3.3 average in required courses to be eligible to take the preliminary and comprehensive examinations.

Students Admitted Provisionally: Any student who has been admitted provisionally must make sure that she/he has met the requirements for full status prior to applying for graduation. A student admitted pending receipt of a final transcript from a post-baccalaureate degree must submit the final transcript to the Office of Student Affairs prior to taking the Preliminary Examination. A student will not be permitted to sit for the Preliminary Examination until receipt of all transcripts has been confirmed.

Statute of Limitations (from the Graduate and Professional Bulletin): All requirements must be completed within 10 years, or within 8 years if the student has received credit for a master's degree appropriate to the field of study. Under extraordinary circumstances, a student may apply for an extension of the statute of limitations. The request must be approved by the Doctoral Committee, the Department Chair and the Dean.

Credit Requirements: The doctoral program is a 72-credit program designed for full-time study; however, students may be enrolled on a part-time basis. A full credit load is a minimum of 9 and up to 15 credits per term.

Up to twenty-four credits may be awarded for an earned, relevant master's or post-baccalaureate degree that is the equivalent of a U.S. master's degree. For students who have earned a post baccalaureate degree internationally, the decision to award credit for that degree will be made on a case-by-case basis. In all cases, application for Advanced Standing credit must be submitted to and approved by the Director of Student Services.

Up to twelve additional credits may be awarded for relevant graduate work taken after the student has earned a master's or post-baccalaureate degree.

Dissertation Credits & Graduation: Doctoral students must register for at least one term of Full Time Dissertation Research (FTDR) in the 12-month period preceding defense of their dissertation and be registered for FTDR during the term in which they graduate. Students may register for FTDR (the zero-credit full-time doctoral dissertation course) only after they have earned a minimum of 72 credits, including advanced standing credits. **To register for FTDR or dissertation credits, students must also have passed the comprehensive examination.**

Cross Registration: Students may register for courses offered at institutions participating in the Pittsburgh Council on Higher Education (PCHE) cross-registration agreement (Carnegie

Mellon University, Duquesne University, the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and Robert Morris University). Such coursework must be approved in advance by the academic advisor. Credits will not be counted as transfers and will count toward the degree and GPA calculations.

Incompletes and Withdrawing from Class: In order to graduate, outstanding incomplete grades of “G” or “I” must be changed to letter grades or W, and a memo must be submitted from the Program Office to the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs stating that the incomplete course is not required for graduation. A “W” is given when students complete a Monitored Withdrawal permission form to withdraw from the class. (Contact the program coordinator for more information.) The class instructor’s signature is required, and the form must be completed by the Monitored Withdrawal deadline specified in the academic calendar for the given term. Students must register again for the class at a later time when it is offered if it is required for graduation.

Students may choose to audit any graduate course on a space available basis. After obtaining the instructor's permission to audit a course, students should follow the same procedures as registering for credit. Note that N or W grades result in zero credits.

Exemption from a Required Course: Students may apply for a course waiver if they have already taken a course that may be equivalent to a required course in the doctoral program. To do this, students must fill out a Course Exemption form and obtain approval from their advisor and the program director. The appropriate form must be accompanied by a transcript showing a passing grade and the course syllabus. If students are requesting to waive a school core course, the designated instructor will make the decision. If it is a departmental core class, the instructor for that course will make the decision and the department chair must also sign off. The waiver must be submitted at the beginning of the term in which the course would have been taken.

Milestones

Two examinations are required to assess the student’s progress and achievement of general knowledge and skills appropriate for a health services researcher with a Doctorate in Health Services Research and Policy: The Preliminary Examination and the Comprehensive Examination. Subsequent to successful completion of these two examinations, the Dissertation Overview and the Dissertation Defense (Final Oral Examination) are also required.

For each milestone, the Program Coordinator will prepare the form, Report on Requirements for a Doctoral Degree. This must be signed by the appropriate committee and the Department Chair and then submitted to the Office of Student Affairs for official recording. The student should contact the Program Coordinator about obtaining and completing this form.

Preliminary Examination (Years 1 and 2)

The purpose and timing of the Preliminary Examination is described in the University of Pittsburgh Regulations Governing Graduate Study as follows:

The preliminary evaluation should be designed to assess the breadth of the student's knowledge of the discipline, the student's achievement during the first year of graduate study, and the potential to apply research methods independently. The form and nature of the evaluation should be approved at the school level and described in the school bulletin. It should be conducted at approximately the end of the first year of full-time graduate study. The evaluation is used to identify those students who may be expected to complete a doctoral program successfully and also to reveal areas of weakness in the student's preparation.

Evaluation results must be reported promptly to the dean's office, but no later than the last day of the term in which the evaluation occurs.

Requirements

To sit for the preliminary examination, students must have:

- Full academic status (if the student was admitted with any provisions they must be cleared before taking the preliminary examination).
- Completed the IRB online modules related to human subjects research: At a minimum, "Research Integrity" and "Human Subjects Research in Social and Behavioral Sciences" (<https://www.citi.pitt.edu/>) and have submitted the certificate of completion to the program coordinator.
- **Completed all designated courses (i.e. those required in year one) on the Program of Study** for the doctoral program. The required courses in Year One include: BIOST 2041, BIOST 2142, EPIDEM 2110, HPM 2905, HPM 3000, HPM 3001, HPM 3064 and HPM 3501.
- A 3.3 or higher grade point average.

The Topic

For the Preliminary Examination, students will choose a topic related to Health Services Research. The paper need not evolve into the student's dissertation, though many prior students have found it beneficial to do so. Students are expected to demonstrate knowledge of the discipline and apply research methods, quantitative and/or qualitative. The topic should therefore be sufficiently focused to allow the student to implement the proposed research design and data analysis on their own.

Once students have selected a topic, they should discuss with the instructor of HPM 3501 (Seminar in HSR Research Methods 1) and/or the program director; they will help the student determine the appropriateness of their topic, recommend any revisions if needed and approve it. If the topic is not appropriate, the faculty advisor or another appropriate faculty member will assist the student in revising it. Students will have from March 1st of their first year to September 1st of their second year to complete the preliminary exam. Students must submit their exam electronically to the program coordinator by close of business on September 1st. Failure to do so, without prior approval for extenuating circumstances, will

result in the student having to redo the exam.

The Examination

The format of the preliminary exam will be a 4,000 to 6,000 word research paper, not including references; the student is expected to provide a word count upon submission. Please use double spaced, standard 12-point font and standard one-inch margins. The paper should follow a standard format including a structured abstract, introduction, data and methods, results, discussion and conclusions. An acceptable approach would be to pick a well-respected journal, such as *Health Services Research*, and follow the article submission format. Example sections are further detailed below.

Approximately one to two weeks after the paper is submitted to the program office, students are required to give a 15-minute oral presentation of their work to the Examination Committee. This can include a PowerPoint presentation of approximately 10 minutes in length with 5 minutes reserved for questions. Prior to presenting to the exam committee, students must schedule a meeting with the program director and discuss your presentation with them first.

The committee members will then ask students questions about their paper and presentation. Students should be mindful that questions may relate to different aspects of the topic they are addressing. They also may relate to the research methods the student employed or to alternative methods. After the question and answer session, students will be asked to leave the room and the Committee will discuss the student's performance.

In assessing the student's performance, no specific weights are assigned to each part of the examination. Rather, the student's work will be graded as a whole, based on the overall quality and completeness of the paper, the clarity of the presentation, and the student's responses to questions. Finally, the Committee will discuss its evaluation with each student at the conclusion of the session.

The Committee will also provide written comments to each student regarding their performance. Students may pass the exam outright as presented, may be asked to make revisions to the paper for subsequent review and approval, or may fail the examination. If the student fails, the student can retake the Preliminary Examination only once. After her/his presentation, the student may schedule a meeting with the Program Director to receive feedback on her/his presentation.

The student is expected to take the Preliminary Examination after two semesters of full-time study or the equivalent amount of part-time study. **The student must complete the Preliminary Exam by the end of the third semester of full-time study or upon completing no more than 30 credits in the program.**

Format and Examination Details

Paper: The length of the paper should be within the range of **4,000 to 6,000 words, double-spaced pages, excluding references**, and should address all of the topics in the attached outline. Papers should use a 12-point font and 1 inch margins. The paper should follow standard paper structuring guidelines as discussed in first year coursework and as exemplified

through articles in the journal *Health Services Research*.

Oral presentation: The student should use the oral presentation as an opportunity to emphasize the most important points of her/his paper. Since all committee members should have read the paper prior to the presentation, the student should not repeat everything that is included and certainly should not read it verbatim. The presentation should use Power Point or an equivalent graphic display. Equipment to enable the Power Point presentation will be set up for your use. The presentation should not exceed **15 minutes** in length and at least five minutes should be anticipated for Q&A.

Comprehensive Examination (Year 2)

From the University of Pittsburgh Regulations Governing Graduate Study:

The Comprehensive Examination should be designed to assess the student's mastery of the general field of doctoral study, the student's acquisition of both depth and breadth in the area of specialization within the general field, and the ability to use the research methods of the discipline. In some programs, the comprehensive examination is combined with the overview or prospectus meeting. It should be administered at approximately the time of the completion of the formal course requirements and should be passed at least eight months before the scheduling of the final oral examination and dissertation defense. In no case may the comprehensive examination be taken in the same term in which the student is graduated. Examination results must be reported promptly to the dean's office but no later than the last day of the term in which the examination is administered. A student who is unable to complete all degree requirements within a five-year period after passing the comprehensive examination may be re-examined at the discretion of the department, program or school. (Revised 2025)

Requirements

- The student must have passed the preliminary examination and completed all the departmental and school required core courses before sitting for the Comprehensive Examination.
- Typically, students will take the comprehensive examination after four semesters of full-time study or its equivalent of part-time study (approximately 48-52 credits).
- The student must have achieved a minimum grade point average of 3.3.
- The student must be registered during the semester in which she/he takes the comprehensive examination.

Preparing for Your Comprehensive Examination

To prepare for the comprehensive exam, students should meet with the instructors for each of the five courses that make up the comprehensive exam. The courses are as follows: Health Care Organizations and Environments, Intermediate Health Economics, Longitudinal and Clustered Data Analysis, Health Policy Analysis, and Econometrics.

Students will be given a set of sample exam questions in the spring of their second year to guide preparation for the Examination.

The objective of the exam is to assess the student's mastery of content from numerous disciplines in health services research and policy with emphasis on knowledge gained in the following courses:

- BIOST 2142: Applied Regression Analysis
- HPM 3064: Health Policy Analysis
- HPM 3125: Intermediate Health Economics
- HPM 3505: Advanced Empirical Microeconomics Methods with Applications for Healthcare Research

The Examination

The Comprehensive Examination will be held in the summer following the second year of study. The exam will be based on core classes that students have taken during the first two years. The format will be a take-home, open-book, timed exam that will test the students' knowledge and analytical abilities. Students will complete the exam over a five-day period. They will have 2 (business) days to complete the first two sections, 24-hour break, and 2 days to complete the remaining two sections, 24-hour break. A bibliography must be included with each section.

Students will be allowed to use a computer to type their responses and may use any resource available electronically or in the library system. Students are not allowed to consult or discuss the exam with other students, faculty members, or outside sources. Each section of the exam must be submitted electronically to the program coordinator by the given deadline. Failure to do so will result in having to retake the exam.

The use of generative AI is not permitted for the comprehensive exam since responses should reflect your understanding and synthesis of the material covered in HSRP core courses. It is

understood that you may use generative AI to perform functions similar to a Google search. While this is permissible, asking generative AI to answer test questions is strictly prohibited. If you use generative AI while responding to the exam, even for search purposes, you must acknowledge how and why you used AI at the end of your exam responses in a section labeled "Use of Generative AI."

Grading

The comprehensive exam committee, composed of the instructors for the courses listed above, will judge the quality of your work. The committee may decide that you will make modifications. The Committee will sign off on the Report on Requirements for a Doctoral Degree once its members decide that you have satisfied the requirements.

A student who has not completed all degree requirements within 5 years of passing the Comprehensive Examination will be required to re-take the exam based on contemporary standards. This requirement is to assure that students graduate with mastery of current knowledge in the field.

Dissertation Overview (Year 3 or 4)

The Dissertation Overview establishes a formal research plan for the doctoral dissertation. The **purposes** of this milestone are for the student:

- To develop a proposal for the dissertation;
- To demonstrate understanding of how the dissertation will contribute unique knowledge to the field of health services research and policy;
- To show the ability to conduct the proposed research with input from dissertation committee members.

At successful completion of the Dissertation Overview, the student is admitted into candidacy for the Ph.D. Degree. Students must have completed all required coursework and planned electives and have passed both preliminary and comprehensive examinations prior to scheduling the Dissertation Overview. Students should aim to complete the overview by Spring of Year 3 or Fall of Year 4. The Dissertation Overview has three components described in more detail below: a) committee formation, b) development of a dissertation proposal, and c) presentation of the overview to dissertation committee members. The Dissertation Overview process begins with the student and Dissertation Advisor discussing potential areas of research focus.

Committee Formation

The doctoral dissertation committee must be formed in accordance with Pitt Public Health guidelines. The student will identify a faculty member who agrees to be the Dissertation Advisor and Chair. This faculty member may be their academic advisor, or someone different, however, it is useful for the student to select a faculty member with whom he or she has worked closely. Additional committee members should be selected in close consultation with the Dissertation Advisor.

The Pitt Public Health guidelines for committee formation are as follows:

- i. The committee must consist of at least four University of Pittsburgh faculty members.
- ii. At least two members must be on the core list of some GSPH department.
- iii. The majority of members must have graduate faculty status.
- iv. One of the Pitt faculty on the committee must not be on the core list from the student's department.
- v. If thesis work includes internship/practica experience, including data and policies, from the Allegheny County Health Department the committee must include a preceptor from the Allegheny County Health Department. If the preceptor is an adjunct faculty member, they count as a faculty member. If they do not hold an adjunct appointment, they must be added in addition to all faculty on the committee.

In addition to these guidelines, students should consider several other factors when forming a committee including but not limited to the following.

- vi. Development of a dissertation proposal – particularly the formation of the specific research questions – and selection of a committee should be iterative. It is hard for a student to know who should be on his/her committee until he/she knows the questions he/she is asking. Likewise, it is hard to know if he/she is asking the right questions without the feedback of committee members! It is best to start this process with 1-2 faculty members until some progress is made on the dissertation prospectus.
- vii. The committee as a whole should contain the bulk of (though not necessarily all) expertise needed to guide the student on his or her dissertation papers.
- viii. The committee should be large enough to provide the student with the requisite breadth of expertise but not so large as to be unwieldy and make reaching consensus difficult and scheduling impossible.
- ix. Committee members can often be helpful in coaching students to the next phase of their career, and in particular, through the fellowship or job search. As such, committee members may assist through writing recommendation letters and facilitating introductions to others in the field. Students may wish to consider these factors when forming a committee.
- x. The three papers that form the basis of the dissertation will often have multiple co-authors. It is important to remember that not all co-authors need to be members of the committee and that not all committee members need to be co-authors on each paper. Authorship guidelines should be followed independent of the dissertation process.

Dissertation proposal

It is the responsibility of the student to prepare a written dissertation proposal that outlines the conceptualization, rationale and methodology of the proposed doctoral dissertation. In particular, the proposal must include a detailed plan for the three manuscripts that form the written text of the final dissertation. The dissertation proposal should cover the following. It should identify an overall theme (or themes); propose specific research questions with hypotheses (although some papers without testable hypotheses may be appropriate); present a brief and focused review of relevant literature; identify the unique contributions the work will make to the field; describe proposed analytic approaches to be used for each paper (including a description of data sources, study design, quantitative and/or qualitative methods to be used in analyses, descriptions of variables with rationale for their inclusion); discussion of potential challenges or limitations to the approach; finally a discussion of the implications of the potential findings and how they will inform policy or practice.

There is no required length for the dissertation overview and successful documents can vary substantially (e.g., 20 to 60 pages). The dissertation overview should be developed with substantial input from the dissertation advisor and from each committee member. In practice, students typically will have their dissertation advisor review several drafts while committee members may review only 1-2 drafts prior to the Overview Presentation. **Two weeks prior to the scheduled Overview Presentation, the student should provide the committee members with a copy of the final draft of the dissertation proposal.**

Overview Presentation

The Overview Presentation is an in-person meeting between the student and his or her Dissertation Committee. The Overview shall be scheduled through the program coordinator. At the Overview, the student will make an oral presentation of the proposed research and will be examined by the committee. **The Overview is generally scheduled for 2 hours. Students should plan on no more than a 30-45 minute presentation of the key points from her or his Dissertation Proposal.** The Dissertation Committee has the responsibility of ensuring that the student meets appropriate academic standards. This Committee has the authority to require that the student revise his or her proposal. Committee approval does not imply acceptance of the dissertation. In addition, the student may need to revise the methodology as the research progresses, necessitating further meetings of the entire committee. In fact, the majority of students make substantive changes between what is presented in the Dissertation Proposal/Overview Presentation and the Dissertation Defense.

Doctoral dissertation research must have appropriate clearance from the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board (IRB). This clearance must be in place before research commences but may not be required prior to the Dissertation Overview.

Other helpful hints for navigating the Dissertation Overview Milestone:

(And for more see this article (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/demystifying-the-dissertation-proposal/>):

- The period during which the student develops the Dissertation Overview is often one of the most stressful, frustrating, and seemingly inefficient times in a doctoral student's course of study.
- There are many sources of stress during this period. The student is transitioning from the coursework phase which is highly structured and filled with externally imposed deadlines to the dissertation phase which requires more self-motivation and self-imposed order. This is challenging even for the most organized students.
- Structure helps. Deadlines impose structure. Dissertation Advisors can help set deadlines. Students should meet regularly during the period of Dissertation Proposal development with her or his potential Dissertation Advisor. Students should set clear agendas for these meetings and identify follow-up tasks to complete before the next meeting.
- The Dissertation Overview period is characterized by lots of dead ends – ideas that start off with a bang and end with a whimper after encountering one of several potential roadblocks. Students may discover that someone has already written the brilliant paper they were going to write or may realize that no data source exists to answer the question they are posing. Students will often cycle through several research ideas before landing on the three papers that form the basis of the Dissertation Overview. This is normal and to be expected. It is an inherent part of the research process.
- Writing helps. If you have an idea for a dissertation paper write it down. Start with a bullet point, then write a paragraph, then a one-pager, then a two- pager. Ask someone (or many) to read it and give you feedback. Then repeat.

Dissertation Defense

The doctoral dissertation defense presents the background and significance of the research, a synthesis of the appropriate literature, the research design and the results of the research. The dissertation research should represent an original study that makes a significant contribution or advancement in the area of investigation.

Process

During the preparation of the dissertation, the student should be in frequent contact with the committee chair. The student is expected to meet regularly with each of the committee members although the frequency is nearly always less than with the committee chair and will often vary by committee member and by paper based on the expertise and feedback needed by the student to complete the work. The student is responsible for regularly communicating updates to his or her committee members on the progress of the dissertation.

The dissertation defense shall be scheduled through the Pitt Public Health Office of Student Affairs. The scheduling of the defense should occur only with the approval of the committee chair.

The dissertation is in the form of three thematically linked manuscripts with an introduction

that provides an overview to the body of work. Each component must be clearly written with careful documentation. It involves a substantive piece of original and independent research grounded in an appropriate body of literature and theory. The written work must conform to the University of Pittsburgh style manual. All dissertations must be submitted electronically using the Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETD).

Students may use a professional editor in the preparation of the dissertation. This assistance must be limited to the use of language and not to subject matter or interpretation. Students must describe and acknowledge all editorial assistance in the text of the document.

Students must send several drafts of their dissertation to their committee members throughout this process. A final draft of the dissertation must be given to each committee member at least two weeks prior to the scheduled defense.

Defense

The dissertation defense is a public, oral presentation and examination of the student's research and is conducted by the doctoral dissertation committee. The student should provide an overview of the three manuscripts that form the text of the dissertation and, importantly, provide thematic linkage between them.

All members of the committee must attend the examination. Other individuals may participate in the examination, however only members of the committee may be present during the final deliberations and vote on the passage of the candidate. A Report on Requirements for a Doctoral Degree form must be completed and signed by the committee. This form must be submitted to the department chair then to the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs. The dissertation chair has the responsibility to ensure that all modifications and revisions to the dissertation requested by the committee are adequately completed as well as ensuring that the dissertation meets all University formatting requirements before requesting signatures of the members of the committee.

Unsatisfactory Performance

If the written text of the dissertation or performance at the defense does not meet the expectations of the committee, the student will have one additional opportunity to submit and defend a revised document.

A student may appeal the decision of the committee through discussion with the doctoral program director(s), who may discuss the issue with the department chair. (If the doctoral program director is on the committee, the appeal may go directly to the department chair.) The program director(s) may uphold the committee decision, attempt to mediate the differences, or recommend that a new committee be constituted. Further consideration or resolution may be referred to the Dean or their designee.

Governance

The Doctoral Program has a Program Director and a full time Program Coordinator. The Doctoral Program Committee has responsibility for the curriculum, admissions, and overseeing student progress. Membership on the committee is open to faculty at any rank with primary or secondary appointments in the Department and who are members of the Graduate Faculty. Persons outside the Department may be invited to participate as needed.

To the extent feasible, the Doctoral Program Committee will work with the existing Admissions and Curriculum committees in the Department to execute Committee functions. Subcommittees may be formed as needed to execute Committee functions.

Curriculum. The Doctoral Program Committee will have responsibility for approving changes to the Doctoral Degree. Proposed changes to the curriculum will be presented to the Departmental curriculum committee for discussion and resolution of any conflict with other degree programs. Changes to the Doctoral Degree curriculum may also originate in the Departmental Curriculum Committee for approval by the Doctoral Program Committee.

Admissions. The Doctoral Program Committee will set the standards for admission and will review all applications in conformance with Pitt Public Health policy. Eligible applicant files will be reviewed by the Doctoral Program Committee, which will make recommendations on admission decisions.

Student Progress. The Doctoral Program director(s) will oversee all aspects of student progress, including advising, preliminary and comprehensive examinations, and the dissertation overview/dissertation defense. The director(s) will conduct an annual review of all doctoral students

Checklists and Forms

The following documents are available on the Program website or Teams folder:

- a. Application Instructions
- b. Program of Study
- c. Elective Courses
- d. Eligibility for Preliminary Examination
- e. Eligibility for Comprehensive Examination
- f. Area of Focus form
- g. Certification of Teaching Requirement
- h. Graduation Checklist

From the Office of Disability Resources:

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and Disability Resources and Services (address below) as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course:

140 William Pitt Union

drsrecept@pitt.edu

412/648-7890 or

412/228-5347 (TTY)



PhD in Health Services Research and Policy

Department of Health Policy and Management

A631 Public Health

130 DeSoto Street

Pittsburgh, PA 15261

<https://www.sph.pitt.edu/>

hpm