

PhD in Public Health Sciences

Dissertation Process

School of Public Health doctoral students must complete a dissertation to demonstrate the mastery of a specific field of knowledge and the capacity for original scholarly work. Students must complete a series of steps and milestones in order leading toward the completion of their degree.

- Finish all coursework and practicum requirements in years one and two.
- Work with their faculty advisor to create their three-person Qualifying Exam Committee by the end of year two, and submit their Qualifying Exam Committee Approval Form.
- Take their Qualifying Exam by the end of the summer after year two. Students who do not pass the first exam may retake it once before the end of the fall semester of year three.
- Add additional members to their committee, including one external member, and begin the dissertation proposal.
- Finalize and submit their Dissertation Committee Approval Form.
- Finish their proposal and have it approved by their committee.
- Submit the Notice of Title, Scope, & Procedure of Dissertation Form at least 6 months before they schedule their dissertation defense. At this point, students are officially PhD candidates.
- Submit the Application for Program Completion in Workday.
- Submit the Dissertation Defense Notification Form at least two weeks prior to the defense date. Email the Program Manager to discuss any logistics related to the defense, and to provide the Program Manager with an updated copy of their CV.
- Defend their dissertation, ideally by the end of year four. WashU students have a maximum of 7 years (14 semesters) to complete a PhD.

The steps in the dissertation process are detailed below, along with other considerations and special situations.

Step 1: Form the Dissertation Committee

Students form a Dissertation Committee (authorized by the program) that meets the Doctoral Education Sub-Committee oversight requirements. The Dissertation Committee, which approves the subject and approach of the dissertation, consists of at least four full-time Washington University faculty members authorized to supervise PhD students in the PHS PhD program and who have appropriate expertise in the proposed field of study. One of the faculty members must be the student's faculty advisor who chairs the Dissertation Committee. One of the four may be a member of the emeritus faculty. The Dissertation Defense Committee must include a fifth committee member external to the student's doctoral program of study. The external member could be inside or outside of Washington University

but must have a doctoral degree and an active research program at another university, in government, or in industry. Additional faculty member(s) may be added for cases in which additional expertise is required.

Faculty service on a Dissertation Defense Committee is approved by the Program Director. As soon as the membership of the committee is determined, the student submits the Dissertation Committee Approval Form. Committee members agree to serve, and the external member provides their CV to demonstrate their active research agenda. The Program Director reviews and approves the committees. Approval of the Dissertation Committee may take place any time after the completion of the Qualifying Exam but no later than the completion of the Dissertation Proposal.

Any changes made to the Dissertation Committee (including adding or replacing members) after the approval will necessitate the submission of a new Dissertation Committee Approval Form. (Consult the Faculty Departures section below.)

Step 2: Choice of Dissertation Model

At the School of Public Health, doctoral students are allowed to develop and submit dissertations in one of two approved models. The student may pursue either model, with the approval of the Chair and Program Director.

Traditional Model

The traditional model is a thesis-style dissertation that is composed of multiple chapters that describe a coherent dissertation research project. Typically, the traditional model will have **at least five chapters**:

- an introduction,
- a theoretical and conceptual overview of the problem area,
- a chapter that presents the methods,
- one or more chapters that present the results, and
- a conclusion that summarizes the research, interprets the findings, discusses limitations, and presents the implications for the field.

The actual structure of the dissertation will correspond to the particular characteristics and goals of the dissertation project.

Three-Paper Model

The three-paper model is a format that is designed to encourage doctoral students to submit parts or all of their dissertation work as peer-reviewed scholarly papers while they are working to complete their dissertation requirements. The three-paper model dissertation will also have at least five chapters:

- An introduction that lays out the dissertation goals and research questions and provides a conceptual overview;
- Three chapters that correspond to three publishable or published scholarly papers; and
- A conclusion chapter that summarizes the research, interprets the findings, discusses limitations, and presents the implications for the field.

The dissertation may also include additional chapters or appendices that present methods or results that were not included in the scholarly papers but that are part of the dissertation work that led to the papers.

The three-paper model has the following additional requirements:

1. The three papers must represent a cohesive scientific inquiry by being thematically linked, either by their theories, methods, or problem area.
2. The general expectation is that the papers are being produced for high-visibility scientific journals in the disciplines relevant to the research and the student's career goals. Other dissemination vehicles and venues (e.g., conference proceedings, book chapters, white papers) are allowed with approval of the Dissertation Chair.
3. The student must be the first author on all three papers, unless data-use agreements preclude this. Authorship decisions on the papers should be driven by established professional and ethical guidelines.
4. Although not required, it is highly encouraged to have some connection between the Dissertation Committee, the authors, and the collaborators on the three papers.
5. The timing of the submission of the dissertation papers to peer-reviewed outlets should be discussed with the Dissertation Chair. Typically, dissertation papers will not be submitted prior to the Dissertation Proposal to allow for thorough feedback from the Dissertation Committee.
6. If during the preparation of a three-paper model dissertation the student feels that a traditional thesis-style format would be more feasible and appropriate, the student may switch models with approval from their Dissertation Chair and the Program Director.

Step 3: Submit the Dissertation Proposal

After the Qualifying Exam is passed, the student is authorized to proceed with submitting their Dissertation Proposal. This proposal, which must be submitted to the members of the projected Dissertation Committee, must contain the following:

1. A description of the research problem and its rationale;
2. A conceptualization of the literature pertinent to the problem, followed by a concise statement of the research question(s) and hypotheses; and
3. A detailed description of the methods to be used in the investigation of the problem, including consideration of the population to be studied, sampling, and plans for data analyses.

- Investigations of an inductive nature, which do not lend themselves to the above format, are also permitted when this approach is the most appropriate to add to the evidence base in the substantive area of interest.
- In all cases, however, there must be sufficient information to evaluate the merit of the study and the feasibility of the research methodology.

Length is not an indication of merit for dissertation proposals.

Excellent examples of proposals ranging in length from 40 to 100 pages can be found in the SPH PhD Student Resources Box folder.

A hearing must be scheduled for the proposal with a minimum of four committee members present. Ideally, the student's fifth external committee member should also be present at the proposal hearing, but the hearing can proceed with a minimum of four members.

The Notice of Title, Scope, and Procedure of Dissertation Form is used to gather signatures of the Chair and committee members. The completed Form must be submitted at least six months before the final oral defense of the dissertation. Submission of the Title, Scope, and Procedure Form after approval of the Dissertation Proposal shifts the individual from PhD Student to PhD Candidate. This form is located on our SPH Student Resources internal site.

Step 4: Abide by the Framework of Dissertation Requirements & Human Subjects

The Doctoral Council has established a framework of requirements for all Washington University dissertations. *Please refer to the minimal requirements for dissertations in the Doctoral Dissertation Guide.* Within a dissertation, the framework grants individual programs the latitude to permit the use of copies of papers authored or co-authored by the degree candidate but insists that the dissertation must contain elements unifying the entire body of work. Also, the contributions of the candidate must be made clear in each instance of collaborative work, and a significant part of the dissertation must rest on independent research conducted by the candidate. In particular, each dissertation must contain a review of background material placing in context the problem or problems under investigation, and it also must contain language that summarizes and discusses the principal contributions. Exceptions to the requirements may be granted under special circumstances upon approval by committee.

Prior to writing the dissertation, the candidate should obtain and become familiar with the regulations and schedule concerning the presentation and format of the doctoral dissertation found in the Doctoral Dissertation Guide.

All students planning funded or non-funded research that involves the use of individuals as research subjects must obtain approval from the Washington University Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) before beginning the research. When applying for external funding to support training or research activities, it is important to note sponsor guidelines

pertaining to human subjects to identify the specific information that must be provided throughout the application process. Information about the university's human subject policies — including links to a resource guide, the SWAT phone number, and the ability to schedule an IRB consultation — are all available on the HRPO website. Students may also contact the School of Public Health Office of Research Affairs for additional links and resources.

Please note that, before a Human Subjects Application can be submitted to the IRB/HRPO for approval, the materials must receive the approval of the student's faculty advisor and the Office of Research Affairs.

Step 5: Apply for Program Completion in Workday

All Washington University in St. Louis students are required to Apply for Program Completion online in Workday in order to graduate. (Please consult the instructions on the Apply for Program Completion page of the Workday@WashU website.) The deadlines for filing an Intent to Graduate and for dissertation submission are listed on the Office of the University Registrar Academic Calendar. If a student misses the deadline for filing their application for program completion, they will be unable to graduate until the following graduation date.

If the student has filed the application for program completion and decides to delay graduation, the student must email the School of Public Health's Registrar's Office, the Program Manager, and the Program Director to have the program completion on file removed from their record. The student must also file a new application for the new graduation date.

Step 6: Defend the Dissertation

The terminal dates for scheduling the final oral examination in time to receive fall, spring, or summer degrees are indicated on the Office of the University Registrar Academic Calendar. At least two weeks prior to the defense date, the student should submit the Dissertation Defense Notification Form. This form collects the student's CV and the necessary approvals for the Registrar. The Registrar will document the dissertation defense notification as a milestone in the student's record.

The student assumes responsibility for making the full text of the dissertation accessible to all members of the final examination panel for their review at least two weeks in advance of the examination. The final oral examination focuses on the subject matter of the candidate's dissertation.

The defense consists of an oral presentation of the study, its results, and its implications, followed by a discussion/question-and-answer period with the committee members. Once this is completed, the student exits the room while the committee deliberates about the success of the defense and comes to a consensus on one of these four decisions:

1. Pass with no recommended changes;
2. Pass with changes that are to be made in concert with the chair's approval;
3. Pass with changes that individual committee member(s) want to view before submission of the document; or
4. Did not pass as the student has not met sufficient standards and must do further work and attempt a second defense.

Once the student has passed the dissertation defense, the student must complete the Dissertation Defense Exam Approval Form. This form must be signed by all of the Dissertation Defense Committee members and the Program Director.

Note: The oral defense of the dissertation is an oral examination of the student (i.e., an oral presentation) and as such is treated as a confidential assessment of the student's achievement. Open defense is permitted and highly encouraged by the School of Public Health, but it is not required. In consultation with the Chair, students can choose to allow any or specific audience members to attend. The audience members are not allowed to speak during the presentation and must exit the room with the student after the presentation while the committee members deliberate following the presentation and discussion. Accommodations should be coordinated with the Program Manager.

Dissertation Dissenting Votes

For the rare cases in which faculty members raise concerns that cannot be resolved through subsequent revisions and which therefore result in dissenting (negative) vote(s), the Committee Chair will refer the case to the Program Director. If the Program Director is on the committee, they will designate an outside faculty member to mediate. In the case of one or more dissenting votes, the Committee Chair and the dissenting voter(s) will be asked to explain the reasons for the dissent in a letter to the Program Director or their designee. After consulting with these and other members of the committee, the Program Director or their designee may accept the majority opinion and approve the dissertation or seek the opinion of an additional reader. After considering this additional evidence, the Program Director or their designee must approve or decline the dissertation. Failure to enlist a designee will be tantamount to a rejection of the dissertation.

Step 7: After the Defense

After making any requested changes and submitting the Dissertation Defense Exam Approval Form, the student must create an online account at ProQuest and submit the final text. Search for "Washington University in St. Louis School of Public Health" in the Find Your School section. The submission website requires students to choose among publishing and copyrighting services offered by ProQuest ETD Administrator, but the university permits students to make whichever choices they prefer. The final text submitted in ProQuest must follow WashU dissertation guidelines, including font type and size, page number styles, table and image styles, and table of contents formatting. *Students are highly encouraged to read the "Dissertation*

Guide” on the Vice Provost for Graduate Education website. Once the dissertation has been delivered, the student may be charged a fee by ProQuest to make changes, so the dissertation should be in its final form upon submission.

Students who defend their dissertations successfully have not completed their PhD requirements; they finish earning their degree only when their dissertation submission has been accepted in ProQuest. The dissertation submission deadlines can be found on the Office of the University Registrar Academic Calendar.

In order to leave time to make any necessary revisions following the oral defense and to upload the final document to ProQuest, students are advised to plan for a minimum of two weeks between their oral defense and the official filing deadline.

Additional Steps Prior to Graduation

Survey of Earned Doctorates

The student must complete their Survey of Earned Doctorates prior to the dissertation deadline. They should do this as soon as possible to ensure that their response is received ahead of the degree date and the dissertation submission deadline. The electronic submission of the dissertation will not be processed or approved until this email arrives. The student will need to complete the Survey of Earned Doctorates and provide email proof of completion to their Program Manager.

Doctoral Exit Survey

The survey administered by the Office of Institutional Research gives graduating students an opportunity to evaluate WashU, their doctoral program, faculty advising, and professional development and to report on their plans for the future. The survey is sent via email from the Office of Institutional Research to PhD graduates each season (May, August, and December). If the student does not plan to graduate and received this in error, they should email institutionalresearch@wustl.edu to remove their name from the list.

Final Records Review

The student should work with the Program Manager to ensure that all PhD forms are completed and that there are no I, IP, or N grades on their transcript.

Step 8: Commencement

The May commencement ceremony is an annual event designed to publicly confer the earned doctorate to graduates from the recently completed spring semester as well as from the previous December. August and December graduates may return to campus the *following* May for the graduation ceremony. In limited situations, students who will be graduating in August may walk at the May ceremony in the

year of their graduation only if they have defended successfully by May 1. Students should ensure that they submit all required forms and complete required steps on the Commencement website if they would like to participate in the May graduation ceremony.

Participation in graduation ceremonies is reserved exclusively for those who have successfully completed all aspects of the dissertation process. After review and approval by the program, the Office of the University Registrar will post the student's degree and conferral dates to their record. If the student fails to complete their degree requirements, they must refile the Application for Program Completion for a subsequent degree period.

Faculty Departures

Committee Chairs and members who go on sabbaticals or leaves of absence and who are temporarily non-residents at Washington University may continue their roles as Chairs with approval of the Program Director. If a Committee Chair ceases to be employed by the university, the student may request that the faculty member continue to serve as Co-Chair of the committee. Another member of the committee must agree to serve as the Co-Chair, with the consent of the original Chair, the student, and the Program Director. Then, the new Co-Chair should take the responsibility of providing the day-to-day guidance and decision making for the student's research and writing process. The Co-Chair structure is reserved for exceptional cases; the normative structure continues to be a sole Chair. A Co-Chair who is not able to commit sufficient time to the role should step down and allow a different committee member to take their place. A Co-Chair arrangement must always benefit the student, who has the freedom to choose their advisor, as well as the faculty members involved. If an authorized committee member ceases to be employed by the university, the student may request that the faculty member continue to sit on the committee. Consent from the faculty member and approval by the Program Director will include a decision about whether the departing faculty member should be one of the four authorized members or an external member.