

PhD in Public Health Sciences

Qualifying Exam

Qualifying Exam Overview

The Qualifying Exam extends, elaborates, and formalizes the student's preliminary formulation of interests. It assesses the student's in-depth ability to synthesize the existing literature and apply professional, theoretical, and research competencies to their specific area of interest. It also serves as an indication of the student's emphasis and readiness for more independent scholarly activities, including the proposal and dissertation.

To help plan an individualized program of study, the following are recommended:

- Students should start shaping their area of research interest starting with their first-year coursework and practicum experiences. The initial outline will help guide future course planning and subsequent theoretical and methodological learning experiences in the program. Of course, it is natural for the area of focus to shift, and it should be reviewed and updated as necessary to accurately represent the student's evolving preferences and intellectual growth.
- By the fourth semester (or earlier), students work with their faculty advisor to assemble a three-member Qualifying Exam Committee. To finalize this committee, the student should submit the Qualifying Exam Committee Approval Form.
- Students work with their Committee to define the scope of the Qualifying Exam and select 25 to 50 papers that cover the theoretical foundations, methods, and key debates in the field. Students are expected to read these works in depth and to understand both their significance and methodological approaches.
- From this larger set, the student and committee identify three to five core papers for detailed discussion.
- The student then creates and delivers a 45-minute, conference-style presentation that synthesizes the literature, highlights the core papers, critiques methods and findings, and outlines implications for their emerging dissertation direction. Following the presentation, the committee engages the student in a question-and-answer session, probing both their depth and breadth of understanding. The entire exam is scheduled for two hours during the summer after the second year.

- The Committee then deliberates on the outcome of the exam. Outcomes include Pass, Conditional Pass, and Fail. Students who fail the exam are allowed one retake before the end of the fall semester of their third year. The exam is designed not only to assess readiness for candidacy but also to provide a direct springboard to the dissertation proposal, ensuring students move more efficiently into independent research.

Qualifying Exam Committee

The Chair of the Qualifying Exam Committee is required to be a full-time Washington University faculty member authorized by the program to mentor PhD students. The Committee includes two additional full-time Washington University faculty members with doctorates who are authorized to supervise PhD students. Most Primary and Secondary SPH faculty are eligible. Research Faculty and/or Professors of Practice with doctorates may serve as members of the Area Statement Committee, but Teaching Faculty may not. Students work with the Chair to identify the most appropriate faculty members who meet the above criteria and provide expertise in the student's core area of specialization. Typically, the additional members continue to serve as members of the Dissertation Committee. The committee composition will be reviewed by the Program Director as part of the Qualifying Exam Committee Approval Form.

Qualifying Exam Deadlines

PhD students must meet the following deadlines around the Qualifying Exam:

- Assemble a three-person Qualifying Exam Committee and submit the approval form by the end of the fourth semester.
- Successfully pass the Qualifying Exam by the end of the summer after year two. If the student takes the exam during the summer but does not successfully pass, the student is granted a single retake. This retake must be completed by the end of the fifth semester.
- A student who fails to pass their Qualifying Exam after the second attempt must withdraw from the program.

Qualifying Exam Privileges

Third-year students are *not* permitted to do Mentored Teaching Experiences or to engage in paid part-time research assistantships until the Qualifying Exam requirements have been met.

- Students in year three may not teach or TA in the fall semester unless they have passed the Qualifying Exam by August 1 before the fall semester.
- Similarly, students in year three may not teach or TA in the spring semester unless they have passed the Area Statement and Qualifying Exam by December 15 before the spring semester.



A petition for an exemption for teaching or part-time research privileges can be made by the Qualifying Exam Chair. The Chair submits to the Program Director a rationale for an extension, a plan to support timely work, and a reasonable timeline for completion. *Extensions made by the Program Director are based on the progress that the student has made, the quality of their previous work, and their committee's recommendation.*