

Department of Behavioral and Community Health (DBCH)
School of Public Health
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University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742
MPH Integrated Learning Experience (Capstone Project) Guidelines

I. General Information

All MPH students must complete an Integrated Learning Experience (ILE) (**HLTH 786 MPH Project, 3 credits**) during the final semester (the semester the student intends to graduate) that demonstrates synthesis of foundational and concentration-specific competencies. Ideally all core, cognate and elective courses would be completed before registering for the project; however, for some students this may not be possible. If the MPH project (HLTH 786) is not completed in the semester for which the student registered, an incomplete contract must be processed. Thereafter, the student must register for at least one credit of independent study (HLTH 688) each semester until the project is completed. If registering for independent study (HLTH 688) credits, you must complete an independent study contract and have your advisor sign the form and agree to all deadlines and deliverables.

Important Note: If a student is not making satisfactory progress while registered for independent study credits, he/she may risk being dismissed from the program regardless of whether his/her 5-year clock is close to expiring or not.

II. The Purpose and Format of the MPH Project

The purpose of the final project is to provide the student with a culminating capstone experience where s/he applies the knowledge and skills learned in the MPH program to a specific public health issue or problem. The final project illustrates the student's understanding of health behavior theory, principles, and processes, as well as her/his ability to actively apply this knowledge and demonstrate acquisition of the necessary skills and competencies of behavioral and community health professionals. Ideally the final written product is developed and delivered in a manner that is useful to external stakeholders, such as non-profit or governmental organizations. Specifically, the project must adequately demonstrate MPH degree competencies. MPH competencies are listed on our webpage under the GRADUATE section (www.sph.umd.edu/bch). Examples of projects include program planning, implementation, or evaluation; public policy statement and/or analysis; training manual; video, web page or curriculum development; and/or community health management, among others. The project may be group-based or individual. If group-based, assessment will be at the individual level. Students must clearly identify each individual's contribution across tasks. Group members will have the opportunity to assess each other's progress throughout the semester to ensure that each group member is contributing equally.

A. Designing the MPH Project

1. **Relationship of the Internship and Project:** The capstone field-based project may be completed independently or in conjunction with the internship, but either way, must be completed in the final semester. The student and the project examining committee must agree upon the project topic and scope. If a student is conducting the project at his/her

workplace, the project must be outside the framework of regular employment duties and responsibilities.

2. **Developing the Project Proposal:** After selecting a project topic, the student will prepare a written proposal that details what is to be accomplished and how it will be done. The final proposal is created in consultation with the student's advisor and with input (and then final approval) from his/her Project Examining Committee.

The sections of the project proposal are as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

- Aims of the project
- Significance of the project
- Review of relevant literature
- Relevance to behavioral and community health
- Description of MPH competencies required for the project

Chapter 2: Methods

- Description of the project and project deliverables (e.g., program plan, curriculum materials, computer software, evaluation report)
- Methods to be used in completing the project
- Project timeline

3. **Requesting Approval of the Project Proposal:** The Project Examining Committee consists of two faculty members. Normally, your faculty advisor is the default chair of your project committee; however, if it is more appropriate to have another faculty member who is a better fit, be sure to notify your advisor and the Director of Graduate Studies that you made this change. This new faculty member/chair will become your faculty advisor and you will register for project credits under his/her section number. The remaining faculty member may have his/her faculty appointment in any department within the School of Public Health; however, he/she must be a member of the UMD Graduate Faculty. The second member is chosen in consultation with the student's faculty advisor. With faculty advisor approval, the student may invite a third member (UMD faculty or non-UMD faculty, e.g., an NIH employee) to be part of the Project Examining Committee.

Once the committee approves a project proposal, the members of the committee will sign a SPH **PROPOSAL APPROVAL form** (available at www.sph.umd.edu/bch, click on the GRADUATE section). The faculty advisor will then forward the form to the DBCH Graduate Studies Director who will sign the forms and place in the student's file. The proposal must be approved no later than the last day of the **third week** of classes in the semester in which the student intends to complete the project.

NOTE: If the project involves human subjects, IRB approval must be requested **AFTER** the proposal is approved. The student is the IRB applicant and the advisor is the sponsor (or co-PI). Any student that collects data from human subjects (qualitative or quantitative) must obtain IRB approval before collecting any data. For complete details, see **POLICIES AND PROCEDURES PERTAINING TO RESEARCH/PROJECTS INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS**, available at (<http://www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB/index.html>).

If the project involves human subjects, students are strongly encouraged to obtain IRB approval the semester before they plan to register for HLTH 786. Students are also strongly encouraged to have all committee members examine the IRB application packet prior to submission as some committee members may request changes. By having all committee members approve the project scope and its methodology at this preliminary stage, the student can avoid having to submit multiple applications for IRB approval.

B. Completing the MPH Project

After the project proposal has been approved (and Human Subjects approval obtained if required), the student may begin work on the project. It is expected that the project will conform to what was approved by the Project Examining Committee. Before making any substantive changes to that proposal, approval from the examining committee is required. Students must formally present and defend their proposal to the Project Examining Committee by November 1 (if the student plans to graduate in May), by April 1 (if the student plans to graduate in December) or by February 1 (if the student plans to graduate in August). All revisions and final approval signatures must be completed no later than the end of the third week of the semester in which the student intends to graduate. At least 3 working days before the presentation: (1) a hard or electronic copy of the proposal must be provided to the project examining committee -please check with each committee member for their preference of hard or electronic and (2) an abstract of the proposal signed by the advisor (available at www.sph.umd.edu/bch, look under the GRADUATE section, for form titled, DEFENSE MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT FORM) must be sent via e-mail to the Graduate Studies Director with the exact same information on the Defense Meeting Announcement Form so that he/she may send out the announcement on the student and faculty listservs. If the student misses the proposal deadline, the student should be aware that there is no guarantee that he/she will graduate on time because the project timeline is much shorter than what is truly required.

The presentation and defense of the proposal must be in-person (typically in the department conference room – please ask YOUR ADVISOR to reserve the room for you) with the student and all project examining committee members present. The committee may approve the proposal without revision, provisionally approve the proposal contingent on revision, or fail the proposal. Revisions can be approved by written (e-mail is acceptable) or oral communication with committee members. A failed proposal means the project is not acceptable and must be revised and presented again to the project examining committee in-person. If the project is not approved the second time, the student is dismissed from the program. No proposal can be approved until all committee members grant their approval with their signature.

The student must consult with their faculty advisor to determine which changes are substantive and require committee approval.

PLEASE NOTE: NO such requirement nor expectation that students must provide refreshments during project proposal or final defense meetings. This is an unnecessary cost and stress burden at a time that students should be focused on their scholarship and not on food allergies and grocery runs.

Students are allowed a MAXIMUM of two semesters of additional independent study (HLTH 688) to finish their project if they are unable to finish during the semester they initially registered for project credits. If a student wishes to register for additional independent study credits to finish, he/she must be making better than satisfactory progress and must submit a timeline with due dates for deliverables that has been approved by all his/her committee members. If a student is not making satisfactory progress while registered for independent study credits, he/she may risk being dismissed from the program regardless of whether his/her 5-year clock is close to expiring or not.

Once the project is completed, the student will prepare will submit a written report and, where appropriate, other "deliverables" to cover all aspects of the project. This report is provided to the Project Examining Committee for final review.

C. Defending the Completed MPH Project

The final step in completing the MPH project is to present the final product/deliverable to the project examining committee following the same steps as the proposal defense.

Students must formally present and defend their project the Project Examining Committee by first day of final exams in the semester they plan to graduate. All revisions and final approval signatures must be completed no later than the last day of final exams in the semester in which the student intends to graduate. At least 3 working days before the presentation: (1) a hard or electronic copy of the project must be provided to the project examining committee -please check with each committee member for their preference of hard or electronic and (2) an abstract of the project signed by the advisor (available at www.sph.umd.edu/bch, look under the GRADUATE section, for form titled, **DEFENSE MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT FORM**) must be sent via e-mail to the Graduate Studies Director with the exact same information on the Defense Meeting Announcement Form so that he/she may send out the announcement on the student and faculty listservs. If the student misses the project defense deadline, the student should be aware that there is no guarantee that he/she will graduate that semester.

The presentation and defense of the project must be in-person (typically in the department conference room – please ask YOUR ADVISOR to reserve the room for you) with the student and all project examining committee members present. The committee may approve the project without revision, provisionally approve the project contingent on revision, or fail the project. Revisions can be approved by written (e-mail is acceptable) or oral communication with committee members. A failed project is not acceptable and must be revised and presented again to the project examining committee in-person. If the project is not approved the second time, the student is dismissed from the program. No project can be approved until all committee members grant their approval with their signature.

PLEASE NOTE: NO such requirement nor expectation that students must provide refreshments during project proposal or final defense meetings. This is an unnecessary cost and stress burden at a time that students should be focused on their scholarship and not on food allergies and grocery runs.

When final approval is granted, the project examining committee will acknowledge this in writing on the form titled **MPH-MHA PROJECT EVALUATION** (departmental form

available on BCH website). In addition, the student will complete **CAPSTONE PROJECT COMPETENCY REQUIREMENT FORM** (departmental form available on BCH website), **the U.Achieve Audit and the APPROVED PROGRAM FORM** (Graduate School documents available on Graduate School's website) and will submit to the BCH Director of Graduate Studies within two weeks of final project approval. Following final approval, the student must provide an electronic copy of the project to the DBCH Graduate Studies Director.

The student should submit the following:

Chapter 1: Introduction

- Aims of the project
- Significance of the project
- Review of relevant literature
- Relevance to behavioral and community health
- Description of MPH competencies required for the project

Chapter 2: Methods

- Description of the project and project deliverables (e.g., program plan, curriculum materials, website storyboards, evaluation report)
- Methods used in completing the project
- Actual Project time line

Chapter 3: Results/Deliverable

- Actual project results/deliverables

The oral presentation should be no more than 15-20 minutes and include the following

- (1) Brief overview of project aims, methods results/deliverable
- (2) Challenges and accomplishments, other lessons learned
- (3) Implications of this project for behavioral and community health and the agency/organization
- (4) Next steps, if applicable, to further the aims of this project

Committee members must receive the final report with deliverables at least 3 working days in advance of the final presentation to the committee.

The MPH project will be evaluated on the following criteria.

1. Organization, clarity, rigor
2. Inclusion of pertinent information (includes appendices)
3. Appropriate application of MPH competencies
4. Relevance to behavioral and community health
5. Timeliness

D. Departmental Graduation Luncheon and Meritorious Project Award

At the end of each semester, a celebratory luncheon will be scheduled for all graduates. At this luncheon, students will be announced and will come to the podium for a picture with their advisor. Although this luncheon is not mandatory, it is expected that all graduating students will attend. Also, to receive a citation for Meritorious Project, one must attend the graduation luncheon. The citation for Meritorious Project will be presented at the graduate luncheon. Students with written approval of their advisor may nominate their MPH project for selection as a Meritorious Project. Only one citation will be made at each graduation. Nominations must

include a brief statement about why the project is meritorious and a copy of the abstract, and be sent to the Director of Graduate Studies and Department Chair who will make the final selection.

BCH Graduate Student Project/Dissertation Fund Match

The Department of Behavioral and Community Health is committed to assisting students who need matching funds to complete their projects and dissertations. The departmental project/thesis/dissertation fund is typically \$5,000 per academic year; but this amount will vary year to year with lesser amounts during lean years and greater amounts during robust years.

Please Note: Not all faculty have sufficient matching funds to support students. Students should not automatically expect to receive a match. A request for funding rather than a demand for funding should be made by the student.

POLICY:

Project/dissertation (P/D) support will only be provided for graduate students who:

- Have matching funds from their advisor or another faculty member or significant merit as determined by the Graduate Program Committee (GPC); and
- Have successfully defended their project/thesis/dissertation proposal

Eligibility for P/D Support:

- All BCH graduate students currently enrolled and in good standing
- Approval of fund request by the student's faculty advisor
- Filing of a P/D fund application that includes a copy of the P/T/D's abstract, proof of matching funds, statement of why funds are requested and what specifically the funds will be spent on

P/D Maximums:

- MPH students = \$250.00
- PhD students = \$500.00

Students may apply **only once** for funds even if they receive multiple fund infusions from their advisor or another faculty member.

Examples of how P/D awards can be spent:

- Participants/subject incentives
- Travel costs related to data collection (e.g., gas to get to/from Baltimore for interviews with participants)
- Survey copying/production
- Undergraduate assistant

All funds must be approved by the faculty advisor and the department as "appropriate and reasonable."