

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

I. General Information

All Master of Public Health students are required to complete an internship (**HLTH 785, 3 credits**), AND either a field-based project (**HLTH 786 MPH Project, 3 credits**) or a thesis (**HLTH 799, 6 credits**). The MPH project option provides for one 3-credit hour elective during the course of the program. The thesis option replaces the HLTH 786 project and the elective with 6 credit hours of HLTH 799.

Both the internship and project/thesis are capstone experiences. The internship may be completed in the semester prior to the semester in which the student intends to graduate or during the final semester. The project/thesis can only be completed during the final semester (the semester the student intends to graduate). All core and cognate courses must be completed before registering for the project/thesis. Elective coursework may be taken concurrently with the internship and project/thesis. The student may register for all credits of the thesis during the semester in which it is to be finished or may register for portions of the total credit hours in each semester while working on it. An incomplete is submitted for any HLTH 799 credit(s) taken until the thesis is completed. The student must be registered for at least one thesis credit (HLTH 799) the semester he/she defends the thesis. 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. Students enroll for HLTH 786 or HLTH 799 under the section number of their faculty advisor.

The purpose of this document is to describe the requirements for both the MPH Project and the MPH Thesis. The requirements for the MPH Internship are described elsewhere.

II. The MPH with Project Option

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. 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 analysis; applied research; video, web page or curriculum development; and/or community health management, among others.

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. Any student who wants to complete his/her internship and project at the same location or on a similar topic must clearly state in their project proposal how the two experiences are distinctly different.
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)
- A statement on the relationship of the project to the internship experience
- 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.

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 posted publicly on the department's graduate bulletin board. You must also send an 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.

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). In addition, the chair of the committee will complete the **BCH PROJECT ORAL PROPOSAL DEFENSE MEETING ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FORM**. The faculty advisor will then forward these forms 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. The student's faculty advisor is the actual IRB applicant on behalf of the student. 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. The student must consult with their faculty advisor to determine which changes are substantive and require committee approval.

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 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 pass an oral defense conducted by the Project Examining Committee. In addition to committee members, any member of the faculty or any student may attend this meeting.

Completed MPH Project reports must be defended in a face-to-face meeting with the committee members. The reports must include 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, computer software, evaluation report)
- A statement on the relationship of the project to the internship experience
- Methods used in completing the project
- Actual Project time line

Chapter 3: Results

- Challenges and accomplishments
- What was learned in relationship to the MPH competencies
- Other lessons learned

Chapter 4: Discussion

- Implications of this project for behavioral and community health
- Next steps required to further the aims of this project

Committee members must receive the final report with deliverables at least 5 working days in advance of the final presentation to the committee. An announcement, signed by the advisor, stating the place and time of the oral defense and including the project abstract must be posted (also 5 working days in advance) on the departmental graduate bulletin board outside the main office. Please fill out the DEFENSE MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT form (available at www.sph.umd.edu/bch, look under the GRADUATE section) and e-mail it to the Graduate Studies Director. Failure to meet these timelines will result in a delay in scheduling the project defense.

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

The committee may approve the project without revision, provisionally approve the project contingent on revision, or fail the project. Revisions can be approved by e-mail communications without the need for a formal committee meeting. A failed project means that the project is not acceptable and must be redone and presented again in-person to the committee in a formal meeting. This may require that the student return the next semester to repeat the project. If the student again fails the project, he/she is dismissed from the program. The project is not approved until all committee members grant their approval with their signature. When final approval is granted, the project examining committee will acknowledge this in writing on the form titled **MPH-MHA PROJECT EVALUATION** (available at www.sph.umd.edu/bch, look under the GRADUATE section). In addition, the chair of the committee will complete the **BCH PROJECT ORAL FINAL DEFENSE MEETING ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FORM** and the **CAPSTONE COMPETENCY EVALUATION FOR FACULTY FORM**. All of these forms will be submitted to the DBCH Director of Graduate Studies. Following final approval, the student must provide an electronic copy of the project to the DBCH Graduate Studies Director. **VERY IMPORTANT** -- the final oral defense and any changes that need to be made must be completed by the first week in May or December. You do NOT have until the last day of class or until finals week. This policy is in place because the graduate school requires that you turn in your **CERTIFICATION OF MASTERS DEGREE WITHOUT THESIS FORM** (available at www.gradschool.umd.edu) the first week of May or December (the month you intend to graduate). The **CERTIFICATION OF MASTERS DEGREE WITHOUT THESIS FORM** states that you have completed all degree requirements. Therefore, your project must be completed by the time the form is due to the graduate school.

D. Departmental Graduation Luncheon and Meritorious Project/Thesis Award

At the end of each semester, a luncheon will be scheduled for all graduates. At this luncheon, students may be asked to make a 2-minute presentation about their project. The presentation should address the major aims of the project, the status of meeting the aims at the end of the project, and what was learned from the project. Although this luncheon is not mandatory, it is expected that all graduating students will attend. Also, to receive a citation for Meritorious Project/Thesis, one must attend the graduation luncheon. The citation for Meritorious Project/Thesis will be presented at the graduation luncheon. Students with written approval of their advisor may nominate their MPH projects/theses for selection as a Meritorious Project/Thesis.

Only one citation will be made at each graduation unless two or more nominations for projects are received and two or more nominations for theses are received. If that is the case, an award for a project and an award for a thesis will be awarded. Nominations must include a brief statement about why the project/thesis 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.

III. The MPH with Thesis Option

The MPH thesis is a capstone experience and must be completed after all other required coursework is completed. Electives may be taken concurrently with completion of the thesis. MPH students considering a research-oriented career are encouraged to do a master's thesis. The 6 credit-hour thesis (HLTH 799) **replaces** the HLTH 786 MPH project (3 credits) the 1 elective (3 credits) that are needed to meet the 42-credit MPH degree. The student must still complete the 3-credit internship (HLTH 785) in addition to the thesis. **University of Maryland Thesis and Dissertation Style Guides and Templates can be found online at www.gradschool.umd.edu.**

A. Designing the Thesis Research Project

1. **Selecting a Thesis Topic:** The research thesis begins with a research question about some (any) aspect of health, health behavior, or community health to which you want an answer. The purpose of the thesis is to attempt to answer the selected research question. The thesis must adequately demonstrate MPH degree competencies. MPH competencies are listed on our webpage under the GRADUATE section (www.sph.umd.edu/dbch).
2. **Developing the Thesis Proposal:** After selecting a thesis topic, the student, in consultation with his/her faculty advisor, prepares a written proposal that details what is to be accomplished and how it will be done. 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 thesis credits under his/her section number.

The final structure of this proposal is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

- Statement of the research problem
- Research questions and/or hypotheses
- Definition of terms
- Significance of the project

Chapter 2: Background

- Theoretical model and/or conceptual framework
- Review of relevant literature

Chapter 3: Methods

- Study sample, design, and measurement
- Operational definitions of variables
- Analysis plan

3. Requesting Approval of the Thesis Proposal: A Thesis Examining Committee comprised of three faculty members must approve the thesis proposal. The Graduate School requires:

“The Committee must consist of a minimum of three members, at least two of whom must be Regular Members of the UMCP Graduate Faculty, who are on tenured or tenure-track appointments. The Chair of the Committee is the student’s advisor, who must be a Regular or Adjunct Member of the Graduate Faculty, or, by special permission, has been appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School. Each member of the Committee must be a member of the Graduate Faculty of UMCP. Upon nomination by the Director of the Graduate Program and approval by the Dean of Graduate School, individuals who have been approved for Special membership in the Graduate Faculty may serve on Thesis Examining Committees. These individuals serve in addition to the two required Regular Members. To nominate a Special Member to serve, submit the nominee’s curriculum vitae, a nomination form, and a letter of support from the Director of the Graduate Program. Graduate faculty who terminate employment at UMCP (and who do not have emeritus status) retain their status as members of the Graduate Faculty for twelve months, and during that time may serve as members and chairs of Thesis Examining Committees. If granted Special Member status, however, they may serve as co-chair. Professors Emeriti and Emeritae may serve on Thesis Examining Committees if they have retained their membership in the Graduate Faculty.”

Over and above the Graduate School requirements for examining committee membership, the DBCH requires that two of the three members of the Thesis Examining Committee must be current Graduate Faculty within the BCH department.

When the proposal is ready for final review, the student will schedule a meeting with the Thesis Examining Committee. 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 5 working days before the presentation: (1) a hard copy of the proposal must be provided to the project examining committee, and (2) a 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 posted publicly on the department’s graduate bulletin board. You must also send an e-mail to the Graduate Studies Director with the exact same information that is included in 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 conference room for you) with the student and all Thesis 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 redone and presented again to the project examining committee in-person. This second proposal meeting must take place within the next two weeks of the semester or, no later than the end of the third week of the following semester. If the proposal 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.

Once the proposal is approved, committee members will sign a **SPH PROPOSAL APPROVAL form** and the **BCH THESIS ORAL PROPOSAL DEFENSE MEETING ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FORM** (both available at www.sph.umd.edu/bch, look under the GRADUATE section). The thesis advisor forwards these forms to the DBCH Graduate Studies Director, who will sign the form and place it in the student's file.

NOTE: If the research thesis involves human subjects, university human subjects approval must be obtained only after the proposal has been approved by the Thesis Examining Committee and before data collection can begin. The student's faculty advisor is the actual IRB applicant on behalf of the student. 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 799. 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 Research

After the thesis proposal has been approved (and Human Subjects approval obtained if required), the student may begin work on the thesis. It is expected that the project will conform to what was approved by the Thesis Examining Committee. Before making any substantive changes to that proposal, approval from the examining committee is required. The student must consult with their faculty advisor to determine which changes are substantive and require committee approval.

Students are allowed a **MAXIMUM** of two semesters of additional independent study (HLTH 688) to finish their thesis if they are unable to finish during the semester they initially registered for thesis credits. If a student wishes to register for independent study credits to finish, he/she must be making satisfactory progress and he/she must fill out an **INDEPENDENT STUDY CONTRACT** and meet all deadlines/deliverables in contract. 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 thesis is completed, the student will prepare a written report and, where appropriate, other "deliverables" to cover all aspects of the thesis. This report is provided to the Thesis Examining Committee for final review.

C. Defending the Thesis

The final step in completing a Masters thesis is to successfully pass an oral defense conducted by the Thesis Examining Committee, ideally the same committee that approved the thesis proposal. Again, the chairperson and at least one member of the Thesis Examining Committee must be from the Department of Behavioral and Community Health.

This committee must first be approved by the Graduate School, using the form **NOMINATION OF THESIS OR DISSERTATION COMMITTEE** (available at www.gradschool.umd.edu). Note the deadline for submitting this form is 60 days prior to the final defense. Once the Graduate School has approved the Thesis Examining Committee, the Graduate School will issue and send to the Department the "Report of Examining Committee" form. The oral defense meeting must be scheduled at least 5 working days in advance of the meeting with examining committee members. Again, 5 working days prior to the meeting, the student must give each member of the examining committee a hard or electronic copy of the completed thesis manuscript to review and post the signed study abstract (Please fill out the DEFENSE MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT FORM (available at www.sph.umd.edu/bch, look under the GRADUATE section) and post on bulleting board. In addition, e-mail the Graduate Studies Director with the exact same information on the Defense Meeting Form so he/she can post your announcement on the faculty and graduate student listservs. Any member of the faculty or any graduate student may attend the oral defense meeting, which is typically held in the department conference room.

The final structure of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

- Statement of the research problem
- Research questions and/or hypotheses
- Definition of terms
- Significance of the project

Chapter 2: Background

- Theoretical model and/or conceptual framework
- Review of relevant literature

Chapter 3: Methods

- Study sample, design, and measurement
- Operational definitions of variables
- Analysis plan

Chapter 4: Results

Chapter 5: Discussion

- Summary of central findings
- Implication of findings
- Limitations
- Directions for future research and intervention
- Conclusions

Chapter 6: Appendices

The MPH thesis 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

The committee may approve the thesis without revision, provisionally approve the thesis contingent on revision, or fail the thesis. Revisions can be approved by e-mail communications without the need for a formal committee meeting. A failed thesis means that the thesis is not acceptable and must be revised and presented again in-person to the committee in a formal

meeting. This may require that the student return the next semester to repeat the thesis. If the student again fails the thesis, he/she is dismissed from the program. The thesis is not approved until all committee members grant their approval with their signature. When final approval is granted, the thesis examining committee will acknowledge this in writing on the form titled **REPORT OF EXAMINING COMMITTEE**, which will have been sent from the Graduate School to the chairperson of your thesis committee well in advance of your defense date. In addition, the chair of the committee will complete the **BCH THESIS ORAL FINAL DEFENSE MEETING ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FORM** and the **CAPSTONE COMPETENCY EVALUATION FOR FACULTY FORM** (both forms are available at www.sph.umd.edu/bch). Once completed, these forms should be submitted to the DBCH Graduate Studies Director for his/her signature. In addition to submitting the Report of Examining Committee form you must also submit the **ELECTRONIC THESIS AND DISSERTATION PUBLICATION FORM** (available at www.gradschool.umd.edu) to the Graduate School.

D. Departmental Graduation Meeting and Meritorious Project/Thesis Award

At the end of each semester, a luncheon will be scheduled for all graduates. At this luncheon, students may be asked to make a 2-minute presentation about their thesis. The presentation should address the major aims of the thesis, the status of meeting the aims at the end of the thesis, and what was learned from the thesis. Although this luncheon is not mandatory, it is expected that all graduating students will attend. Also, to receive a citation for Meritorious Project/Thesis, one must attend the graduation luncheon. The citation for Meritorious Project/Thesis will be presented at the graduate luncheon. Students with written approval of their advisor may nominate their MPH projects/theses for selection as a Meritorious Project/Thesis. Only one citation will be made at each graduation unless two or more nominations for projects are received and two or more nominations for theses are received. If that is the case, an award for a project and an award for a thesis will be awarded. Nominations must include a brief statement about why the project/thesis 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.