

PhD and DrPH Preliminary Examination Guidelines for Doctoral Students in Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences

The DrPH and PhD preliminary examination in Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences (HPBS) has been designed to meet the standards and needs of faculty and students of HPBS and to be in accordance with The UTHealth Houston School of Public Health requirements for doctoral level examinations. Students must have completed key courses in behavioral sciences theory, research design, and data analysis. Doctoral students must successfully pass the preliminary exam to proceed in the doctoral program. It is the charge of the HPBS Curriculum Committee to develop, administer and oversee the evaluation of this exam.

Purpose

This preliminary examination is a written take-home exam for students pursuing their DrPH in Health Promotion & Health Education or PhD in Behavioral Sciences & Health Promotion. It is an evaluation tool designed to indicate to the Department whether the student can understand, synthesize, and apply the fundamental concepts and skills that are required to proceed in the doctoral program. The purpose of the exam, therefore, is to evaluate the student's command of key doctoral-level major competencies specific to the design, conduct and analysis of health promotion and behavioral science studies relevant to public health. According to School of Public Health policy, students who do not successfully pass this exam after two attempts will not be eligible to continue in their doctoral studies at UTHealth Houston School of Public Health.

Eligibility

Students must be registered for at least three credit hours at the time the preliminary examination is taken unless the exam is taken during the summer. In that case, the student must be registered in the term before or after the exam is offered.

To be eligible to take the preliminary exam, doctoral students must have completed and passed the following six to seven courses (approximately 19-22 hours) with a B or above. These courses are designed to be completed in one year of full-time study which includes fall, spring, and summer semesters. This may be longer for part-time students or for students who need to complete prerequisite or leveling courses before taking required courses.

Required for all DrPH students who entered fall 2018 or later:

- **PHD 1113:** Advanced Methods for Planning and Implementing Health Promotion Programs (Intervention Mapping)
- **PHD 1120:** Program Evaluation
- **PHD 1420:** Research Design for Behavioral Sciences
- **PHD 1421:** Quantitative Analysis for Behavioral Sciences
- **PHD 1122:** Health Promotion Theories for Individuals and Groups: Part I
- **PHD 1123:** Community Health Promotion Theory and Practice
- **PH 1433:** Research Seminar in Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences
- **PHM 2612:** Epidemiology I*

Required for all PhD students who entered fall 2018 or later:

- **PHD 1420:** Research Design for Behavioral Sciences
- **PHD 1421:** Quantitative Analysis for Behavioral Sciences
- **PHD 1122:** Health Promotion Theories for Individuals and Groups: Part I
- **PHD 1227:** Health Promotion Theories for Individuals and Groups: Part II
- **PHD 1113:** Advanced Methods for Planning and Implementing Health Promotion Programs (Intervention Mapping)
- **PH 1433-** Research Seminar in Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences
- **PHM 2612:** Epidemiology I*

*A masters-level epidemiology course equivalent will meet this requirement.

Example Course Plan

Semester	Required Courses
Fall	PH 1433 – 1 credit PHD 1122 – 3 credits PHD 1420 – 3 credits PHD 1120 – 3 credits- DrPH-ONLY PHM 2612- 3 credits - PhD ONLY
Spring	PHD 1421 – 3 credits PHD 1113- 3 credits PHD 1123- 3 credits- DrPH ONLY PHD 1227 - 3 credits- PhD ONLY
Summer	PHM 2612 (if needed) – 3 credits

If you are part-time or have leveling courses you need to take as part of your acceptance to the doctoral program, please consult with the Exam Coordinator or your faculty advisor.

Content and Format

The preliminary examination will test the proficiencies obtained in the required courses. In general terms, the exam questions are meant to test the ability to apply fundamental concepts and methods in behavioral sciences theory, research design and data analysis.

The preliminary examination will consist of three sections:

- behavioral science theory
- research design
- data analysis

Each question will contain multiple parts which require narrative responses. Students will be asked to write the exam in reference to one of four possible health topics. Four weeks prior to the exam, the Exam Coordinator will email students who are intending to take the exam to request four possible health topics. The health topic can be a health behavior or health outcome and should be supported by theoretical and empirical literature. Students can choose health topics that are similar to one another (e.g., healthy eating, physical activity) or the same health topic for different priority populations (e.g., condom use in adolescents, condom use in African-

American women). The Exam Coordinator will randomly choose one of the four health topics for the students to complete the exam. The student will be notified of the chosen health topic on the day of the exam.

Guidance will be provided regarding the expected length of response for the entire exam. A total of seven days will be given to complete the exam. The exam is open book and open note. Students must adhere to the UTHealth Houston School of Public Health [Honor Code](#). Soliciting help from or providing help to other students during the preliminary exam is prohibited. Additionally, students are not permitted to use ChatGPT or other AI software (with the exception of Grammarly) for any part of their preliminary exam.

Administration

The preliminary exam will be offered during the **first week in January and second week in July every year**. In January, the exam will begin the first working day after January 1. In July, the exam will begin on Monday.

In preparation for the preliminary exam, doctoral students must submit the preliminary exam intent form signed by their faculty advisor to the Exam Coordinator at least one month prior to the exam dates as well as an unofficial transcript, which can be obtained from MyUTH. If grades are not available for the courses (i.e., if the student is currently taking the course), the student should provide a signed written statement or email from the instructor indicating that the student is expected to obtain a B or higher in the course and then should submit those grades to the Exam Coordinator as soon as they are available.

Students are encouraged to meet with their faculty advisor to discuss eligibility. The preliminary exam intent form is available from the Exam Coordinator. It will also be emailed to HPBS doctoral students. The student will be notified by the Exam Coordinator that the preliminary exam intent form has been received and approved. If a student is currently enrolled in a designated prerequisite course and grades are not yet available, conditional approval to take the preliminary exam will be given.

The exam questions will be developed by the HPBS Curriculum Committee with input from the entire HPBS faculty. The exam will be made available on a UTHealth Houston Canvas site. Students will submit their completed exam on Canvas through Turnitin. Students should review their exams carefully prior to submission. Students must submit the exam at or prior to the end of the exam period at 11:59 PM central time. Late submissions will not be considered. Submission of the exam is final.

Evaluation

The exam will be graded double-blinded to both students and faculty to ensure objectivity in grading. The evaluation of the preliminary examination will be conducted by a rotating committee comprised of HPBS faculty. The number of faculty who serve on the committee will be dependent on how many students are taking the exam.

Each of the three sections of the exam are worth 100 points and will be graded independently by two faculty members. Different pairs of graders grade each section, though they receive the entire exam. Scores from both graders will be compared for consistency before finalizing into a single score for that section. In the rare circumstance that exam scores are vastly disparate and cannot be resolved by the pair of graders, the Exam Coordinator will request a third review of the exam by another grader.

Within approximately five weeks of the examination, the student will be notified by email of the outcome of the examination by the Exam Coordinator. The email will also be sent to the student's faculty advisor, Department

Chair, and Regional Dean, if located at Regional Campus. The email will include the grading sheets and comments provided by the graders. The Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs and Student Affairs will also be notified of the student's outcome.

Two exam outcomes are possible:

Pass: Student receives a score of 80% or greater on each section.

¹Fail: A student receives a score below 80% on one or more sections of the exam. The student will need to retake only the sections that they failed within one calendar year. Any student who fails the preliminary examination twice will not be allowed to continue in the doctoral program.

In the event a student receives a fail, the student will be required to complete a remediation plan, signed by their faculty advisor, which will outline steps (e.g., independent study, course enrollment) that will be taken prior to retaking the preliminary exam. The student should work with their faculty advisor and other pertinent faculty to ensure that they have completed their remediation plan and are ready to retake the exam.

Note: The Exam Coordinator will randomly choose the student's new health topic from the three remaining health topics when the student retakes any section. The student may also choose to select a new health topic(s) as part of the three topics but must inform the exam coordinator of this change at least two weeks prior to the exam date. The exam coordinator must approve any new submitted health topics.

Preliminary Exam Appeal Process

A student may appeal failure of the preliminary exam to the exam administrator within 14 days of notification of the failure. This appeal must be submitted in writing to the exam administrator with itemized issues and justifications. The exam administrator will direct the original exam graders to review the written appeal. The student will receive the final decision of the appeal within 14 days of submitting the appeal. Any further appeal the matter shall be directed to the Department Chair. Each student is allowed one appeal per exam administration.

UTHealth Houston School of Public Health Honor Code

Objective: To cultivate a culture of honesty, integrity and respect among and between students and faculty within the UTHealth Houston School of Public Health.

"The values for the UTHealth Houston School of Public Health are based upon honesty, integrity, and mutual respect between all students, faculty, and staff. These values are applied to all endeavors that are related to activities that are carried out as members & representatives of the School. This paper, project, or exam is a reflection of my individual work, and to this end, I affirm that on my honor, I have not received nor given any aid on this submitted work."

If you are unsure of how this pertains to your current assignment, please consult the Exam Coordinator regarding the situation-specific information before signing.

¹ Students who entered the program prior to fall 2023 are "grandfathered" in with the previous policy which included a conditional pass option.