
Policy Number: 307

Subject/Title: Preliminary Examination; Admission to Candidacy and Dissertation Defense

Effective Date: Fall 2011; Revised Fall 2013, Spring 2014, Spring 2015, Fall 2015, Spring 2022

Policy Statement:

UTHealth Houston School of Public Health (SPH) doctoral students will pass a preliminary examination and dissertation proposal defense to proceed to candidacy.

The Preliminary Examination

The preliminary examination is the first part of the candidacy process. It will be taken after the student has successfully completed 6 to 9 courses specified by the department (approximately 18 credit hours - equivalent to one full-time year of study or no later than 27 credit hours or the first scheduled administration after they reach 27 credit hours maximum) of work with a grade of 'B' or better, defined by the degree program. Under extenuating circumstances, the advisor can request an extension with the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services. This examination has been developed by each department/program to assess their doctoral students' aptitude and readiness to initiate the independent research process, including assessment of theoretical and analytic skills and critical integration skills. Each department/degree program (department curriculum committee) has identified the courses doctoral students must take in their first year of study to prepare them for the preliminary examination.

Contingent upon the departmental schedule, the preliminary examination will be offered at least once per year at the end of fall semester and/or at the end of spring semester/summer semester. At each offering, all eligible students within a specific degree program will take the same examination. Each department will have a plan for students who request a delay of an examination or retake because of extenuating circumstances.

The department/degree program will administer and grade the preliminary examination. The examination will be graded by a degree-program-specific committee with graders blinded to the student's name. Students may have two attempts to pass the examination. The examination will be graded pass/fail. If the student fails, the student and advisor will develop a remediation plan that lists the remediation steps as well as a timeline for completion (six months to one year). Additional course work or tutoring might be recommended before a retake. Subsequent examinations will be new questions and not a re-write of the failed examination. Two unsuccessful attempts results in the student's dismissal from the doctoral program. Each individual department will have a written policy that describes what constitutes a pass for the preliminary examination and a written rubric for grading and feedback to the student. If a department includes a conditional pass category it must include at least a partial retake and failure of a partial retake must count as failure of the examination.

Dissertation committees are formed by the student upon successful completion of the departmental preliminary examination. More information on doctoral committees can be found in [Policy 102, Doctoral Dissertation Committee Structure](#).

The Defense of the Dissertation Proposal

The defense of the dissertation proposal is the second part of the student's candidacy process. It will be conducted after the Dissertation Committee has preliminarily approved the dissertation proposal and has approved the date for the defense. The student will have completed the majority of the Minor and Breadth courses prior to the defense. The formal, open defense will include an oral presentation and defense of the proposal plus questions related to the dissertation and to the student's studies in the field of public health.

Passing the dissertation proposal defense signifies acceptance to doctoral candidacy. The defense will be evaluated and assessed as a pass/fail by the Dissertation Committee. Students will have two (2) opportunities to pass. Passing will be by consensus of the Dissertation Committee. If consensus is not reached, passing may be by majority vote of the Dissertation Committee. If, for unforeseen circumstances, a new proposal is required, a new oral defense will also be required.

The Dissertation Defense

The dissertation defense is the student's formal, open oral presentation and defense of the completed dissertation research. Questions will be directed at the research topic. The defense will be assessed pass/fail. Students will have two (2) opportunities to pass. Passing will be by consensus of the Dissertation Committee and can include recommendations for corrections. If consensus cannot be reached, passing may be by majority vote of the Dissertation Committee.

Reason for Policy: The proposed change was developed to increase the quality of doctoral students graduating from UTHealth Houston SPH and to help students focus on research earlier.

Definitions: N/A

Scope and Audience: All UTHealth Houston SPH doctoral students entering in fall 2011. However, doctoral students entering prior to fall 2011 could elect to adhere to the new procedure if preferred.

Responsibilities and Procedures: Described above.

Related Policies, Forms and Information:

- Additional forms and procedures can be found on the [mySPH Student Research](#) webpage.

History:

- Approved by Academic Council: February 16, 2010
- Endorsed by Executive Council: February 25, 2010
- Revised: Fall 2013, Spring 2014, Spring 2015
- Revised for clarification: Fall 2015
- Updated by Academic Council: March 21, 2022
- Updated by Academic Affairs: December 2023 with the updated publication of Policy 102

Responsible Office/Contact Information:

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