

**Policy number:** 307

**Subject/Title:** Preliminary Exam (Formerly Qualifying Exam); Admission to Candidacy and Dissertation Defense

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

**Policy Statement:** UTHealth SPH doctoral students will pass a preliminary examination and dissertation proposal defense to proceed to candidacy.

**1. The Preliminary Examination** is the first part of the candidacy process. It will be taken after the student has 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, 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 exam.

Contingent upon the departmental schedule, the preliminary exam 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 exam. Each department will have a plan for students who request a delay of an exam or retake because of extenuating circumstances.

The department/degree program will administer and grade the preliminary exam. 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 exam. The exam 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 exams will be new questions and not a re-write of the failed exam. 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 exam.

**Dissertation Committees** are formed by the student upon successful completion of the departmental preliminary exam.

The Dissertation Committee must include at least 3 UTHealth SPH faculty members. These individually are generally full-time faculty. The committee members must represent the student's Major, Minor and Breadth (or second Minor) and include faculty from at least two Academic Departments. (Epidemiology and Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences count as separate Academic Departments.)

For students who have elected to pursue a Concentration, the committee must also include an UTHealth SPH faculty member who represents the Concentration. This may be a fourth UTHealth SPH faculty member or one of the three members discussed above.

- The faculty member representing the student's Major must be from the same Department as the student.
- The faculty member representing the Minor(s) must be trained in the minor field, but does not need to be in the corresponding Department. For example, a faculty member trained in Epidemiology who is in the Department of Management, Policy and Community Health may represent a student's epi minor.
- The faculty member representing the Concentration must be a member of the Concentration program.

The dissertation committee may include additional (optional) members who provide expertise that is not sufficiently covered by the required members described above. Optional committee members can be, but do not have to be, UTHealth SPH faculty.

All committee members must be trained with a terminal degree appropriate to their role on the committee and MAY NOT be a current UTHealth SPH student.

Within the committee one member must be designated as the Chair and one must be designated as the Dissertation Supervisor.

- The Chair must be an UTHealth SPH faculty member in the same Department as the student.
- The Dissertation Supervisor may be within or outside of UTHealth SPH, but must have training in the student's major area.

The same individual may serve as the Chair and Dissertation Supervisor, as long as they fulfill all of the qualifications for both positions.

Committee membership must be approved by the Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs and Student Services. To request approval, students must submit the following materials to the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services:

- a completed Doctoral Dissertation Committee Form (found under DrPH or PhD tab)
- CVs for committee members who are not affiliated with UTHealth SPH and have not previously served on a UTHealth SPH thesis or dissertation committee

**External Reviewers** The doctoral committee will select at least one individual to review the student's dissertation proposal and participate in the proposal defense. The reviewer(s) for the proposal can be from within or outside of UTHealth SPH. However, they must be external to the committee. External reviewers provide critical feedback to the student and participate in discussions related to revisions and corrections required in the proposal.

The doctoral committee will also select at least one individual to review the student's completed dissertation and participate in the dissertation defense. The reviewer(s) for the completed dissertation can be from within or outside of UTHealth SPH. Further, the reviewer(s) can be the same individual(s) who reviewed the dissertation proposal or different reviewers can be selected. However, reviewers must be external to the committee. External reviewers provide critical feedback to the student and participate in discussions related to revisions and corrections required in the dissertation.

This committee can be changed as research interest becomes more focused during the proposal development stage. However, following approval of the dissertation proposal, changes to the composition of the committee, whether initiated by the student or committee members, is discouraged and requires a formal request and review/approval by the Office of Academic Affairs

and Student Services and the Office of Research. When a faculty member leaves the school, the Department is responsible for helping the student reconstitute an appropriate committee.

**2. 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 by the dissertation committee, which includes representation of the major, minor and breadth, plus at least one additional faculty reviewer (outside of the student's committee) chosen by the dissertation committee. The reviewer(s) from outside of the committee should be able and expected to provide critical feedback and to participate actively in the communication to the student of corrections. The defense will be assessed pass/fail. Students will have two opportunities to pass. Passing will be by consensus of the committee members, including the external reviewer. If consensus is not reached, passing may be by majority vote of the committee members, including the external reviewer. If, for unforeseen circumstances, a new proposal is required, a new oral defense will also be required.

**3. 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 dissertation defense committee will comprise at least one formal reviewer who is external to the committee to be chosen by the dissertation committee. The defense will be assessed pass/fail. Students will have two opportunities to pass. Passing will be by consensus of committee members and external reviewer, and can include recommendations for corrections. If consensus cannot be reached, passing may be by majority vote of committee members plus external reviewer.

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

**Definitions:** N/A

**Scope and Audience:** All UTHealth 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:**

**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

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