Student Guide to the Doctor of Public Health (DrPH) Integrative Learning Experience (ILE)
The University of Texas School of Public Health at Houston
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Student Research
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I. WHAT ARE THE ILE REQUIREMENTS for a DrPH STUDENT?

Doctor of Public Health (DrPH) students fulfill the ILE requirement set forth by the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) through the completion of an academic research dissertation. Through the dissertation, DrPH students must generate high-quality field-based products consistent with advanced practice designed to influence programs, policies, or systems addressing public health. The dissertation must demonstrate synthesis of a minimum of two DrPH foundational competencies and two DrPH major-specific competencies. Students should work with their faculty advisor to select a dissertation topic appropriate for their academic and professional goals. Students are required to complete an oral defense of the dissertation research proposal and of the final dissertation. This guide provides an overview of the steps required to complete the ILE.

II. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE DISSERTATION COMMITTEE?

Upon successful completion of the preliminary exam, doctoral students form a dissertation committee composed of the academic advisor, a dissertation advisor (who may or may not be the academic advisor) and another member representing the student’s minor area of interest. The member of the minor area must be from a different discipline. Students who have elected a certificate requiring committee representation must include a UTHealth SPH faculty member representing the certificate on their committee if not already included. This may be a fourth UTHealth SPH faculty member or one of the three members discussed above. Additional committee members, who bring specific expertise to the committee, are optional.

For additional details about the committee composition, see the Doctoral Student DrPH Dissertation Committee Guideline

Students should also check their Departmental website for information specific to their degree program. For committee membership forms, see the DrPH Student Forms page.

What is the student’s role on the committee?

As a member of the committee, the student should coordinate committee meetings. Although students are required to meet with their committees at the end of the Fall and Spring semesters, these meetings are generally insufficient for discussing the details of the dissertation. Consequently, additional meetings, specifically for review and discussion of the dissertation, are generally required. Such meetings can save the student and other committee members time, and minimize the potential for confusion that can occur when the student must try to integrate multiple (and sometimes conflicting) opinions without the benefit of everyone talking together. The number and duration of such meetings will depend on the specific project and committee. In general, it may be helpful to have meetings:

- Prior to writing the proposal
- After all committee members have a read a final, or near-final, version of the proposal
- After all committee members have read a final, or near-final, version of the dissertation

Committee meetings are typically scheduled several weeks in advance to accommodate the committee members other professional obligations. The student should also coordinate meetings with individual committee members as needed. In general, the student should meet with a key committee member (e.g. dissertation supervisor) as often as every week. The frequency of meetings with other committee members will depend on their roles on the project.
What are the roles of the other committee members?
The committee members serve many different roles including: scientific advisor, editor, mentor and advocate. Individual members may serve in one or more of these roles. The committee or individual members of the committee work with the student to develop the proposal, obtain necessary institutional approvals (e.g. IRB, animal welfare), and assist with the execution of the proposed project and completion of the final dissertation document. In general, committee members should provide feedback on all written documents and requests within two weeks of submission by the student.

The faculty and other professional members of the committee are responsible for the approval of the scientific integrity of both the dissertation proposal and the final dissertation.

III. WHAT STEPS ARE INVOLVED?
The dissertation requires several steps:

1. Identification of an advanced field-based project that synthesizes a minimum of two DrPH foundational and two DrPH major-specific competencies
2. Preparation of a proposal
3. Review of proposal by the Dissertation Committee
4. Public defense of dissertation proposal
5. Revise proposal if necessary, and obtain Dissertation Committee approval on proposal
6. Review and approval of proposal by UTHealth IRB (if applicable), and other IRB(s), etc. as needed
7. Review and approval of proposal by Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services
8. Completion of the proposed work
9. Preparation of the final dissertation document
10. Public defense of dissertation

Each of these steps is described in this Guide. However, even before you have selected your project, it is important to ensure that you have, or have a plan to acquire, the writing skills required to complete the ILE, including basic writing skills and more advanced scientific writing skills:

UTHealth SPH Library & Graduate Communication Center: By adopting a learning commons model, UTHealth SPH is adapting to the ever-changing field of higher education and addressing the skills gap in the field of population health by producing a trained workforce.

The UTHealth SPH Library & Graduate Communication Center in Houston (713-500-9121, RAS E-109) integrates Library Services and Writing Support Services to provide a full-service learning, research, and project space. To accomplish this goal, it combines the functions of a library, a writing center, and a student lounge in a single community space. This space strives to empower students to direct their own learning by offering them a place where they can meet, talk, study, and use shared equipment and resources.

- Library and Information Services: The UTHealth SPH Library & Graduate Communication Center provides library and information services including course reserves, library instruction, and reference assistance, i.e., formal training on the use of online searching techniques and reference management software as well as one-on-one training and assistance (https://sph.uth.edu/current-
Reference assistance includes general assistance as well as in-depth, expert guidance and database search services for grants, research papers, and systematic reviews. To ensure students at regional campuses have equity of services, online research help is provided through LibGuides on various subjects and topics (http://libguides.sph.uth.tmc.edu/), and online reference assistance is readily available through LibAnswers (http://sph.uth.tmc.libanswers.com/).

- **Writing Support Services:** The UTHealth SPH Library & Graduate Communication Center houses Writing Support Services, which provides free writing education to students at all UTHealth SPH campuses (on-site at the Houston campus, and online at the regional campuses). Overall, Writing Support Services aims to help students take responsibility for their own writing by providing them with writing advice, instruction, and support. To accomplish this aim, Writing Support Services develops and delivers resources and services related to public health communication skills, with a focus on writing in the areas of academic writing, ESL, and scientific writing. All these resources and services are tailored to meet students’ needs and faculty members’ expectations related to writing at the graduate level.

To access a myriad of online writing resources designed for graduate students in the health sciences, students can visit the Writing Support Services LibGuide (https://go.uth.edu/SPHWritingSupport). To schedule a writing consultation with a Writing Support Services team member, students can visit the Writing Support Services Appointment Service (https://go.uth.edu/WSSAppts). Lastly, for general inquiries, students can e-mail Writing Support Services at SPHWritingHub@uth.tmc.edu.

**The Texas Medical Center (TMC) Library:** The TMC Library is located in the TMC campus between Baylor College of Medicine and the McGovern Medical School of The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston.

The TMC Library provides links to a selective and expanding collection of authoritative free and open-access journals, databases, and websites/web applications, as well as to resources in general sciences, education, and reference (https://library.tmc.edu/resources/). Students can also participate in classes and workshops on various topics related to library and information services provided by the TMC Library.

### III-A. Identification of a Project and DrPH Foundational and DrPH Major-specific Competencies

It is never too early to start thinking about topics for your dissertation. There are many potential sources of ideas, including: faculty, staff and students; co-workers and other colleagues; journals; classes; seminars; and professional meetings. Projects that are largely complete or that have been completed prior to writing your proposal, including work that has been submitted for publication or previously published, may not be used for your dissertation.

As you begin to think about your dissertation topic, it may help to keep a notebook or journal that includes project ideas, notes from discussions and seminars, lists of additional people to talk with, and articles on topics of interest. Once you have identified a potential project, it may be helpful to prepare a short overview, summarizing the relevant background information as well as the aims and significance of the proposed project, which can be shared and discussed with your committee members.

The School’s website offers several features that can help you to find out about the research interests of the faculty.

The online faculty directory includes brief descriptions of each faculty member’s research interests. The directory can be filtered by Department, Campus or Center and can be searched for specific keywords: https://sph.uth.edu/faculty/.
The Office of Research webpage includes lists of recent publications by the faculty as well as recently funded grants: [https://sph.uth.edu/research/office-of-research/](https://sph.uth.edu/research/office-of-research/).

The project that you select should be of interest to you and relevant to your future career goals. However, it should also be feasible to carry out given available resources and within a reasonable time period. It is very important that you pick a project that fits with your skills (e.g. statistical, qualitative, and analytic). Consequently, once you have identified a potential project, it is essential that you discuss both the scientific and practical aspects of the project with your committee members and any others who would play a significant role in the project. Do not be discouraged if your first project idea is determined to be inappropriate, for either scientific or practical reasons. It is not unusual to identify two or three potential projects before an appropriate project is identified. Working through the scientific and practical issues of each potential project provides valuable experience and perspective and is part of the learning process.

**TIMELINE:** The time required to identify a dissertation project is extremely variable. However, it can take several months to identify a suitable project.

**When should the dissertation project be started?** Although it is never too early to start thinking about ideas for your dissertation project, planning the project and writing the proposal will require the synthesis of knowledge and experiences gained in the classroom. Consequently, the bulk of the dissertation project is undertaken after sufficient public health knowledge and skills have been acquired and the student has passed the preliminary exam.

**When should competencies be chosen?** Once you begin the discussion of topics, you should also discuss which DrPH Foundational Competencies and DrPH major-specific competencies will be synthesized in your dissertation project with your faculty advisor. You will submit your competencies, along with other documentation after your proposal defense in the [DrPH Integrative Learning Experience (Dissertation) Approval](#) form. As you develop and finalize your dissertation, it is possible your competencies may change, which is ok. You will finalize your competences in the [Doctoral Dissertation Statement of Completion and Evaluation](#) form upon defense and submission of your final dissertation.

### DrPH Foundational Competencies

Choose two DrPH foundational competencies that will be synthesized in your dissertation

#### Data & Analysis:

DrPH-1. Explain qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods and policy analysis research and evaluation methods to address health issues at multiple (individual, group, organization, community and population) levels

DrPH-2. Design a qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, policy analysis or evaluation project to address a public health issue

DrPH-3. Explain the use and limitations of surveillance systems and national surveys in assessing, monitoring and evaluating policies and programs and to address a population’s health

#### Leadership, Management, & Governance:

DrPH-4. Propose strategies for health improvement and elimination of health inequities by organizing stakeholders, including researchers, practitioners, community leaders and other partners

DrPH-5. Communicate public health science to diverse stakeholders, including individuals at all levels of health literacy, for purposes of influencing behavior and policies
DrPH-6. Integrate knowledge, approaches, methods, values and potential contributions from multiple professions and systems in addressing public health problems
DrPH-7. Create a strategic plan
DrPH-8. Facilitate shared decision making through negotiation and consensus-building methods
DrPH-9. Create organizational change strategies
DrPH-10. Propose strategies to promote inclusion and equity within public health programs, policies and systems
DrPH-11. Assess one’s own strengths and weaknesses in leadership capacities including cultural proficiency
DrPH-12. Propose human, fiscal and other resources to achieve a strategic goal
DrPH-13. Cultivate new resources and revenue streams to achieve a strategic goal

Policy & Programs:
DrPH-14. Design a system-level intervention to address a public health issue
DrPH-15. Integrate knowledge of cultural values and practices in the design of public health policies and programs
DrPH-16. Integrate scientific information, legal and regulatory approaches, ethical frameworks and varied stakeholder interests in policy development and analysis
DrPH-17. Propose interprofessional team approaches to improving public health

Education & Workforce Development:
DrPH-18. Assess an audience’s knowledge and learning needs
DrPH-19. Deliver training or educational experiences that promote learning in academic, organizational or community settings
DrPH-20. Use best practice modalities in pedagogical practices

DrPH Major-specific Competencies

Choose two major-specific competencies from your respective degree program that will be synthesized in your dissertation

DrPH in Community Health Practice:
DrPH-C1. Support and defend, both orally and in writing, a public health policy issue affecting vulnerable communities.
DrPH-C2. Develop a grant or fellowship proposal with a community partner to support a community-based social justice initiative.
DrPH-C3. Investigate the role of justice and moral reasoning in the development and critique of health law and policy.
DrPH-C4. Synthesize the concepts of the public health “system”, evaluate its components and analyze the interactions among the components as they relate to health of vulnerable populations.
DrPH-C5. Utilize evidence-based decision tools and pragmatic strategies to develop a health improvement plan in collaboration with a community partner.

DrPH in Health Promotion/Health Education:
DrPH-H1. Evaluate the appropriate use of social or behavioral sciences theory in developing and evaluating community-based interventions.
DrPH-H2. Select and apply relevant theoretical change methods (e.g., coalition building; technical assistance) and community health practice-based processes (e.g., gallery walk; community-facilitated logic models) aimed at creating environmental level changes for community health promotion.
DrPH-H3. Develop a theory-guided research proposal for conducting a stakeholder-led community health improvement.
DrPH-H4. Analyze data from non-randomized research designs using advanced statistical methods.
DrPH-H5. Recognizing the role of stakeholder involvement, use at least one implementation science framework to develop an implementation and dissemination plan.

**Evaluation Rubric**

The [Doctoral Dissertation Statement of Completion and Evaluation](https://sph.uth.edu/research/student-research/#tab-4) form includes an evaluation rubric to document and ensure the quality of doctoral dissertations completed by UTHHealth School of Public Health students. This evaluation is designed to assess student performance on the final dissertation and defense. Students and committee members are encouraged to reference the evaluation rubric for the dissertation proposal and required for the defense process to ensure that students are on track to successfully complete and defend the final dissertation.

The criteria provided in the rubrics are not the only criteria by which students are assessed. The committee is encouraged to provide a comprehensive assessment of the student’s dissertation proposal and final dissertation. Students are required to submit a copy of the form after successful completion of the final dissertation defense to the Office of Student Research along with other required documentation per the student research guidelines. Completion of the form is required for accreditation purposes.

**III-B. Preparation of the Proposal**

Once you and your committee have agreed on an appropriate project, the next step is to complete a written project proposal.

**What is the purpose of the proposal?**

The proposal is a requirement for all doctoral students and serves several purposes. First, the proposal prepares you for the work that will be required to complete your dissertation project. As you write your proposal, you are gaining important background knowledge that will help to guide your project, as well as working through the logistics required to complete each step of the project. The proposal also serves as a contract between you and your committee. It is a statement of the goals that you have agreed need to be met to complete the dissertation and move forward towards graduation. Your proposal may also be required to obtain the institutional approvals (e.g., IRB) needed before the project may be initiated.

**Is there a specific format for the proposal?**

Templates are available for preparing and formatting the final dissertation, and these templates can also be used to prepare the proposal, if desired. UTHHealth SPH does not require a specific format (margins, font, etc.) for the proposal, however. In general, double-spaced text with 12-point font and 1-inch margins is appropriate for the proposal. Page numbers are also recommended. The templates provide formatting style guidance (margins, font, heading style, etc.). Templates are available on the “Templates” tab at: [https://sph.uth.edu/research/student-research/#tab-4](https://sph.uth.edu/research/student-research/#tab-4). Please check with your dissertation committee to determine their preference of style for the references and/or bibliography (e.g., APA style).

**What should the proposal include?**

The length and specific content of your proposal will be determined by your committee. There is no minimum or maximum page requirement for proposals; however, in general, dissertation proposals are typically not more than 25 double-spaced pages (1 inch margins, 12 point font) and include the following sections:
Background/Introduction and Public Health Influence and Significance

This section should provide a review of the relevant literature. The level of detail that you provide in this section will be determined by you and your committee members. You should provide the background information that a general reader would require to understand the topic of your project and the rationale for the proposed work. This section should also include a discussion of the public health significance as well as how the dissertation will influence programs, policies, or systems addressing public health.

Specific Aims/Hypotheses/Objectives

This section should include a statement of the research question, hypothesis, specific aims or objectives of your project. The best approach for setting up this section will depend on your specific project and should be discussed with your committee. This section may also include a brief discussion of the rationale for the proposed project and/or a brief description of the approach that will be used to meet the stated goals.

Methods

The content of this section will vary depending on your specific project. However, all proposals must include details of the methods that will be used to address the study aims/hypotheses or objectives. The methods section should include the following considerations, as appropriate to your proposed work:

- Study design
- Study setting, including locations and dates
- Study population
  - Inclusion and exclusion criteria
  - Recruitment strategy
  - Consent process (who, what, when, where, how?)
  - Sample size calculations and/or study power
- Data collection procedures
  - Specify the type of data that will be collected, as well as how the data will be collected (e.g. interviews, review of medical records) and recorded (e.g. paper records, computer program, videotape)
  - For research involving interaction with human participants, include a full protocol/description of study procedures, such as the number of study visits required of participants, what procedures will occur at each visit, how long each visit will take, and the total amount of time required of each subject to participate in the project. This information will be required by the Institutional Review Board that reviews Human Subjects research.
- Data Handling and Record Keeping
  - State how you will access data/source documents (e.g. electronic medical record, chart review)
  - State whether human subjects will be identifiable either directly (e.g. name) or through identifying variables (e.g. medical record number).
  - State how and where the data will be stored, and how it will be protected to maintain confidentiality.
- Data analysis
  - Include statistical, laboratory and/or other methods that you will use to address each study aim, hypothesis or objective.
Ethical considerations

Include human subjects, animal subjects, and/or other safety considerations.

The methods section tells the reader exactly “how” you are going to achieve your aims and/or answer your research questions. It is important to be as specific as possible in this section. For example, stating that you will use logistic regression to analyze your data is not sufficient. Rather, you need to state what independent and dependent variables will be used as well as what potential confounders and effect modifiers will be considered. Additional details, such as how variables will be coded, can also be helpful. Further, you should indicate how the analyses will be interpreted (e.g. p-values, odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals).

When organizing the methods section, it is often helpful to re-state each aim and follow it with the details of the specific methods that will be used to achieve that aim. It is also that you use past and present tense appropriately in this section. For example, if you will analyze previously collected data, sections on study design, setting and subject recruitment should be written in the past tense (e.g. someone collected the data in the past), whereas sections on data analysis should be written in the future tense (e.g. you will analyze the data in the future, after your proposal is approved). It is extremely important that you clearly delineate the work that you will do from the work that has already been done.

References/Bibliography

This section should include complete references for all literature, websites, books, and other materials referenced in your proposal. There is no required format for the references in your proposal. It is, however, recommended that you use reference management software such as RefWorks, which is available free of charge to UTHealth SPH students.

Information and training on RefWorks is available through the UTHealth SPH library at: http://libguides.sph.uth.tmc.edu/guides-handouts-library-resources/refworks-handouts

Other Sections

Your proposal may include other sections as appropriate to your project or as required by your committee. Examples of other sections that you might include are:

- Preliminary data: Projects that are largely complete or that have been completed prior to writing your proposal, including work that has been submitted for publication or previously published, may not be used for your dissertation. However, if you have done work in preparation for writing your proposal, for example as part of your practicum or as a graduate research assistant, you should include a summary of the work that has already been done, in past tense.
- Results: If you include this section, it should provide an outline of how your results will be presented and mock-ups of the tables and/or figures that will be used to present your data.

Preparation of your proposal is an interactive process that involves your committee members. As you begin your proposal, you should work with your committee members to establish how they will review drafts of your proposal. Often, one member of your committee will serve as a primary reviewer for your initial draft(s), while the other members will review only later drafts or specific sections of the proposal.

In general, your proposal will require several drafts and edits before it is finalized. It is reasonable to assume that, on average, it will take two weeks for committee members to provide feedback.
on each of your drafts and that two to four drafts will be required before the proposal is finalized.

III-C. Oral defense of the dissertation proposal

Specific requirements for the oral defense of the dissertation research proposal are set by the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services and each doctoral program. Upon completion of the dissertation proposal, when the dissertation committee is ready to formally approve the proposal, students will make an open oral presentation of the research proposal followed by questions from a proposal defense examination committee. The proposal defense examination committee will consist of the student’s dissertation committee plus at least one additional reviewer (but no more than two additional reviewers), who are chosen by the dissertation committee. Additional reviewers may be faculty members from within or outside of UTH Health SPH. These additional reviewers will provide more unbiased assessment of the proposal.

During the proposal defense examination, questions may be directed at the proposed research as well as contextual questions relating to the field of public health. The committee is encouraged to provide a comprehensive assessment of the student’s dissertation proposal using the rubric in the DrPH Integrative Learning Experience (Dissertation) Approval form as a guide, though the rubric does not have to be submitted at the proposal phase. The defense will be assessed pass/fail. Students will have two opportunities to pass. Passing will be by consensus. If consensus is not reached, passing may be by majority if all non-committee members approve passing. After the defense is complete, the dissertation defense committee and the department chair will then need to sign the student’s Proposal Defense form for forwarding to the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services. Download the Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Defense Form IV.

Defense presentation Format: Although there no specific format for this presentation, it is suggested that you use a standard software package (e.g. PowerPoint) to develop your talk. You should provide drafts of your slides to your dissertation committee, and practice your talk at least once with your committee members. Additional practice sessions with other students or colleagues can also be helpful. You should be able to present your work without, or with minimal reference, to written notes. It is also important that you are able to go through your entire presentation in the allotted time.

Setting up the proposal defense: The student’s advisory committee in communication with the student’s departmental faculty will decide on the most appropriate time and venue for this activity. Houston campus students can schedule a room for the proposal defense by completing and submitting a room reservation request through the Astra online reservation system. Austin, Brownsville, Dallas, El Paso, and San Antonio Campus students should contact their campus staff advisor to schedule a room. Presentations should be announced to the public, for example: distribute multiple flyers, or announce the defense in the SPH weekly newsletter by forwarding information to: sphannounce@uth.tmc.edu.

III-D. Approval of the dissertation proposal

What approvals are needed? Once you have passed your proposal defense, your committee members must approve and sign off on your written proposal. In addition, you must obtain approval for your proposal from the UTH Health SPH Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services. Some proposals may also need to be
submitted to, and approved by:

- UTHealth Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS, which is our IRB)
- Other IRB(s) (e.g., for data collection at an institution outside of UTHealth)
- UTHealth Animal Welfare Committee (AWC)
- UTHealth Biosafety, Chemical Safety, or Radiation Safety Committees

To determine whether your project requires such approvals, as well as for additional information on the approval process, please refer to the UTHealth SPH Research Compliance Guide, which is included below in the Appendix.

**When should I submit the proposal?**

After your Proposal Defense has been completed and passed, and after your dissertation committee has signed off on the written proposal, you may then submit the proposal concurrently to CPHS for approval (if you are using human subjects or human-derived data), and to the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services for approval.

**Proposal deadlines** It is required by school policy that all UTHealth SPH students completing a dissertation must submit a PROPOSAL for review and approval no later than the last day of class of the term prior to which they expect to graduate. Students must also adhere to University IRB and Research policies and guidelines, as well as Policy 401, Continuous Enrollment for Students Enrolled in Thesis and Dissertation Research once their dissertation proposal is approved. Dual degree students may be enrolled in either program to work on their research. More information on school policies can be found at: https://sph.uth.edu/academics/academic-affairs/#tab-3.

Specific semester dates and deadlines for the proposal submission and approval, along with other dates pertaining to the dissertation, are posted on the Student Research “Important Dates” page at: https://sph.uth.edu/research/student-research/important-dates-for-the-cethesisdissertation/.

Students should also refer to the SPH Graduation page for information about other graduation-related deadlines: https://sph.uth.edu/current-students/graduation/.

**Submitting your proposal to the school and IRB for approval**

Students must submit a printed proposal along with signed forms/documents to the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services for approval, as well as an electronic copy of the proposal itself (without the forms). Proposals are submitted to CPHS via the iRIS online system for UTHealth IRB approval. Detailed submission instructions and proposal forms are available on the “Submitting your Proposal” tab at: https://sph.uth.edu/research/student-research/index.htm#tab-3

Approval by the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services requires that all appropriate forms/documents have been submitted and are complete and accurate. If your project requires CPHS or other approvals, and such approvals are pending, you may submit all other documents for review as well. However, final approval by the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services will not be issued until after all pending approvals and documentation have been received.

**What are the enrollment requirements?**

You must be enrolled for at least three credit hours during the semester in which the proposal is submitted and in every semester after you submit your proposal until you graduate.
**TIMELINE:** Completion of the dissertation proposal will generally take at least one month and may require several months, depending on the number of revisions required by your advisory committee. Projects that require CPHS or other institutional approvals will generally take longer than those that do not require such approvals.

**III-E. Completion of the proposed project**

The requirements for this step vary considerably from project to project. While the dissertation proposal provides an outline of the work that needs to be accomplished, the student and committee members must work together to determine the details of how and when that work will be accomplished.

The successful and timely completion of any project requires communication, organization and time management. Hence, it is essential that you meet with your committee members to develop a work plan and timeline. Issues that should be addressed during this meeting include:

- the role of each committee member
  - often, you will work more closely with one member than the others
- meeting schedules
  - how often will you meet with the entire committee? individual members?
  - optimally, you will meet at least every other week with a least one member of the committee
- mechanism(s) for providing updates between meetings
  - e.g. emails, summary reports etc.

As you are working on your project, it is important to adjust your work plan and timeline so that they remain realistic. If your work plan changes substantially, relative to what was included in your approved proposal, it may be necessary to submit a proposal amendment memo for review by the ADR as well as protocol amendments to other relevant committees (e.g. CPHS).

**TIMELINE:** In general, it will take 1-3 years to complete a doctoral dissertation after all appropriate approvals have been received.

**III-F. Preparation of the final dissertation**

The dissertation proposal will provide the starting point for your final dissertation document. However, you may need to update the Background section to reflect any new developments in the field. In addition, you may need to expand and/or revise the Methods section to accurately reflect the procedures that were used. You will also need to write the sections that were not included in your proposal (e.g. Results and Discussion) and update your references.

**Is there a specific format for the final dissertation?**

The final dissertation document can have one of two general formats:

- Dissertation without journal article
- Dissertation with journal article(s)

Templates and a Template Checklist to be used for formatting are available on the “Templates” tab at: [https://sph.uth.edu/research/student-research/#tab-4](https://sph.uth.edu/research/student-research/#tab-4)
The templates are designed to assure that standards of style and document formatting (margins, page numbering, style, etc.) are followed. They are not intended to define the specific content of the dissertation. Use of the templates is optional for the proposal; however, they must be consulted for the appropriate formatting of the final dissertation document.

**What should the final dissertation document include?**

There is considerable flexibility in the manner in which you present your dissertation. In general, the final document will include the following sections:

- **Abstract**
  The abstract is a concise summary (~350 words) of the background, methods, primary results and conclusions of your dissertation.

- **Background/Introduction and Public Health Influence and Significance** (previously described)

- **Specific Aims/Hypotheses/Objectives** (previously described)

- **Methods** (previously described)

- **Results**
  This section should describe your findings or accomplishments, without comment or discussion. Findings may be presented in tables and figures as well as text. If the project has been, or will be submitted for publication, the journal article (conforming to the style of the journal to which it has been/will be submitted) may be included as a chapter within the results section. Any additional findings, not included in the article, should be included as a separate chapter in the results section.

- **Discussion/Conclusions/Recommendations**
  In this section, the results of your project should be discussed relative to what is already known about the topic. In addition, the conclusions and/or recommendations that can be made based on the results of the project should be stated. Finally, the strengths and limitations of the project should be described.

- **References/Bibliography** (previously described)

**II-G. Final Dissertation Defense**

Students will make a formal public (with advertisement to the UTHHealth SPH community at least two weeks prior to the defense date) presentation and defense of the completed dissertation research. Questions will be directed at the research topic. The dissertation defense committee will be composed of the student’s dissertation committee and one or two external reviewers selected by the dissertation advisor. The dissertation supervisor, in collaboration with all committee members, are required to complete the [Doctoral Dissertation Statement of Completion and Evaluation](#) form and evaluation rubric to ensure satisfactory completion and defense of the final dissertation. The final dissertation must be approved and signed by all committee members. The defense will be assessed pass/fail. Students will have two opportunities to pass. Passing will be by consensus. If consensus is not reached, passing may be by majority if all external reviewers approve passing. Although there is not a specific format for
this presentation, it is suggested that you use a standard software package (e.g. PowerPoint) to develop your talk. You should provide drafts of your slides to your dissertation committee, and practice your talk at least once with your committee members. Additional practice sessions with other students or colleagues can also be helpful. You should be able to present your work without, or with minimal reference, to written notes and be prepared to answer questions from the audience. It is also important that you are able to go through your entire presentation in the allotted time.

**Setting up the dissertation defense:** The student’s advisory committee in communication with the student’s Departmental faculty will decide on the most appropriate time and venue for this activity. Students can schedule a room for the dissertation defense by completing and submitting a room reservation request through the Astra online reservation system. Austin, Brownsville, Dallas, El Paso, and San Antonio Campus students should contact their campus staff advisor to schedule a room. Presentations should be announced to the public, for example: distribute multiple flyers, or announce the defense in the SPH weekly newsletter by forwarding information to: sphannounce@uth.tmc.edu.

More information about setting up the final defense can be found on the “Steps: Doctoral” page at: https://sph.uth.edu/current-students/graduation/deadlines-and-steps/#tab-4.

**Submitting your final Dissertation and Forms:** Detailed submission instructions and dissertation forms are available on the “Final Submission” tab on the Student Research page: https://sph.uth.edu/research/student-research/#tab-4. Please follow each step and submit each document as necessary. If you have any questions or need assistance, contact: SPHStudentResearch@uth.tmc.edu.

**IV. What is the General Timeline for Completion of the Dissertation?**

There is no set time for the completion of the dissertation. The amount of time required to complete the dissertation is determined by the specific project and the time that the student devotes to the project. In general, this process will require at least one and up to 4 years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selection of a project</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion of ideas with committee members</td>
<td>Up to a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval of concept by all committee members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparation/oral defense/committee approval of the proposal</strong></td>
<td>3-6 months</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draft proposal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review of proposal by committee members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revision of proposal (several revisions may be necessary) Oral defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>Committee approval</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other institutional approvals of proposal (if required)</strong></td>
<td>2-6 weeks *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ADR approval of proposal</strong></td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conduct of the project</strong></td>
<td>1-3 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
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<td>Data management</td>
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<td>Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparation/committee approval of the final dissertation document</td>
<td>3-6 months</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Update background, methods, bibliography as needed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Write results and discussion</td>
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<td>Prepare figures and tables Submit</td>
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<td>to committee members Review by</td>
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<tr>
<td>committee members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revisions as necessary (several may be required)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Committee approval</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>Formatting review of final dissertation document</th>
<th>≤ 1 month</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1-4 years</td>
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*Proposals requiring full IRB review may take longer.*
APPENDIX

RESEARCH COMPLIANCE
The University of Texas School of Public Health at Houston

All research conducted by the faculty, students and staff of UTHealth SPH including research projects and analyses of research data that are conducted as part of UTHealth SPH courses, must be reviewed and approved or exempted by the appropriate Institutional committees before the research is initiated. At the University of Texas Health Science Center (UTHealth), these committees, which fall under the UTHealth Office of Research, monitor research compliance related to: Human Subjects Protection, Care and Use of Animals, and Environmental Health and Safety.

UTHealth Office of Research: https://www.uth.edu/research/index.htm

It is the responsibility of the investigator (or course instructor) to ensure that a research project has received all necessary approvals prior to initiating a study, and to require all project staff and/or students to receive appropriate training before initiating any research related activities. It is also the investigator’s responsibility to obtain approval for any additions or changes to the study, before they are implemented, as well as to maintain all necessary approvals through completion of the study.

This document provides UTHealth SPH investigators with general information regarding the Institutional training that is available, and the oversight that is required for different types of research. In addition, general questions regarding training and oversight may be directed to SPHStudentResearch@uth.tmc.edu. However, investigators should visit the appropriate UTHealth website for the most up-to-date and complete information, and/or contact the appropriate programmatic official in the UTHealth Office of Research, to ensure that they have obtained all necessary training and approvals before initiating any research project.

Student Research: The information included in this document relates to students as well as faculty and staff. Additional information related specifically to student research is provided at the end of the document.
Human Subjects Protection

Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS)

CPHS is the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for UTHealth. CPHS reviews proposed research as it applies to the individuals being asked to participate as research subjects in order to determine if adequate measures are in place to protect autonomy, safety, emotional health, and financial considerations.

Human subjects research is defined as research involving human subjects, human-derived materials, or human-derived data. All human subjects research, funded and unfunded, must be reviewed and approved by CPHS before it is initiated if it falls in one of the following categories:

1. Human subjects research conducted by any UTHealth employee (faculty, staff, administrative and professional), student, or resident in any facility/location (e.g. MHHS, HCPC, Thomas Street Clinic or LBJ General Hospital);

2. Human subjects research conducted by non-UTHealth investigators that involves subjects/patients from any UTHealth-facility.

CPHS: [https://www.uth.edu/cphs/](https://www.uth.edu/cphs/)

Most of the research conducted by UTHealth SPH investigators will require review by CPHS. Examples of research that does not require CPHS review include:

- **Research Using Simulated Data**: Research based solely on data obtained through computer simulations does not require CPHS review.

- **Research Using Published Literature**: Research that is based entirely on published literature (e.g. systematic literature reviews) does not require CPHS review.

**Exempt Status**: Many research projects are exempt from CPHS review. However, the investigator cannot make the decision regarding exempt status. Studies that may be exempt must be submitted for review and determination of exempt status by CPHS. Examples of types of research that may qualify for exemption include:

- **Research Using Publicly Available Data**: Research involving publicly available data (e.g. census data, labor statistics, data available online) must be submitted to CPHS in iRIS for determination of Exemption. Investigators should contact the CPHS at 713-500-7943 if they are not sure whether their data qualifies as “publicly available.”

- **Research Using Existing, De-identified Data**: Research involving the use of existing, de-identified data sets must submit an application to CPHS in iRIS for determination of Exemption.

**Expedited Review**: Research involving existing data sets with the use of personal identifiers must be submitted for review by CPHS in iRIS. These studies may qualify for Expedited Review by CPHS.

**Human Subjects training**: All individuals participating in research that involves human subjects must receive appropriate training before initiating any research activities, and must receive updated training as necessary.

Courses that satisfy the UTHealth requirement for education on the protection of human subjects are offered online by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI).

Information about CITI: [https://www.uth.edu/cphs/for-researchers/training.htm](https://www.uth.edu/cphs/for-researchers/training.htm)
In addition to the above requirement, all principal investigators of sponsored projects must complete an online Investigator Briefing in the Responsible Conduct of Research. Further details on this requirement can be found at: https://www.uth.edu/evpara/investigator-briefing.htm

**Applications:** UT CPHS uses an online application called iRIS (Integrated Research Information System). All applications, including those for studies that may be exempt from CPHS review, must be submitted through iRIS.

Register for iRIS training: https://www.uth.edu/cphs/for-researchers/basic-iris.htm
Log in to iRIS: https://iris.uth.tmc.edu/
Care and Use of Animals

Center for Laboratory Animal Medicine and Care (CLAMC)

The CLAMC provides training related to the oversight, care and use of experimental animals, to ensure that the individuals involved in these activities are qualified to accomplish these tasks in a humane and scientifically acceptable manner.

Animal Welfare Committee (AWC)

All research using animal subjects or animal derived materials must be submitted to the AWC, the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, for the UTHealth. Faculty with approved animal use protocols must assure the AWC that personnel will be or are adequately trained. Training is provided through CLAMC.

https://www.uth.edu/animal-research/
Environmental Health and Safety

Safety, Health, Environment and Risk Management (SHERM)

Training in basic laboratory safety as well as radiation, chemical and biosafety is provided by SHERM.

SHERM: http://www.uth.edu/safety/

Radiation Safety Committee

This Committee formulates and recommends policy for the use of radioactive materials and other sources of radiation. Research involving use of radioactive materials in humans must be reviewed by the Radiation Safety Committee.

Chemical Safety Committee

This Committee recommends policy for the use of chemicals that may be hazardous in the research, clinical and educational activities at UTHealth. Chemical Safety Committee approval must be obtained prior to using acutely toxic chemical agents, including those listed by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) or the National Toxicology Program (NTP) as suspected or confirmed carcinogens, or for which toxicological/epidemiological studies have indicated that the chemical has reproduction, acute, and or reactive hazard(s). In addition, any hazardous chemical that is used in such a way as to present the potential for an exposure above the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's Permissible Exposure Limits (PEL) or the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienist's Threshold Limit Values (TLV), requires committee review.

Institutional Biosafety Committee

This Committee addresses ethical, scientific and regulatory issues related to infectious diseases and biological agents. Institutional Biosafety Committee approval must be obtained prior to using microbiological/infectious agents and/or recombinant DNA molecules in research.

Additional information about these Committees as well as application materials can be obtained at: https://www.uth.edu/safety/manuals-and-forms.htm.
Student Research

Students as Personnel on UTHealth Faculty Research Projects: Many UTHealth SPH students participate as personnel in research being conducted by UTHealth SPH or UTHealth SPH faculty members. A student’s involvement in such projects must be approved by all appropriate committees (CPHS, AWC, IBC, etc.). In general, students can be added as personnel to an existing approved protocol by submitting a change request to the appropriate committee.

Classroom Projects: Instructors who wish to include a research project or analysis of existing data as part of a course (e.g. to explore statistical methods or other methodological issues, etc.) should obtain CPHS approval for the class project. In general, applications for class projects involving contact with or analysis of data from human subjects should be submitted to CPHS (through iRIS) by the course instructor. Briefly, the application should include: the class objectives; the types of research activities that will be included in the course; a description of faculty oversight for the project; and an acknowledgement that any student activities that exceed the boundaries of the class would need to be submitted as individual projects (e.g. if a student wants to expand upon a classroom project, for instance, for use as a culminating experience). Students who wish to expand on a class project should contact CPHS to determine whether additional approvals will be required for their project. Questions regarding classroom projects should be directed to the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS), at: https://www.uth.edu/cphs/contact-cphs.htm.

Student Research: Many UTHealth SPH students will engage in an independent research project as part of their academic program. As with all UTHealth SPH research projects, student projects must be reviewed by the appropriate Institutional committees before the research is initiated.

The IRB approval process for student projects is generally identical to that of faculty projects. However, for students who plan to undertake a project that falls within the scope of, or is closely-related to, an existing UTHealth faculty member’s CPHS-approved protocol, it may be possible for the study PI to obtain IRB approval of the student’s project by submitting a personnel change request/protocol amendment to the existing, approved protocol in iRIS. Similarly, students may already be listed as personnel on the UTHealth faculty member’s study in question. In this case, the approval letter for the existing protocol or approval of an amendment to the existing protocol, can serve as the student’s CPHS approval for the dissertation project, as long as all of the work to be undertaken for the dissertation is covered within the approved protocol.

Alternately, students needing IRB approval for their dissertation who have not been added to a UTHealth faculty member’s approved protocol in iRIS must obtain CPHS approval by submitting their own application to CPHS in iRIS. All student dissertation projects needing IRB approval must always receive approval through the UTHealth CPHS, either by being added to an existing protocol with CPHS approval (as above), or by submitting an application for the student’s own project in iRIS. When necessary, approval through another institution’s IRB (i.e., Baylor, MDACC, etc.), should be obtained as well. Outside IRB approval may be required in addition to, but never in place of, the UTHealth CPHS approval/exemption.

Students undertaking a dissertation project must complete all required training and obtain all necessary committee approvals before their project will be approved by the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services. It is the responsibility of the student and his/her research committee to determine which approvals are required, and to apply for, obtain and maintain all such approvals. Students should visit the appropriate UTHealth website for the most current and complete information (see above), and/or contact the appropriate program official at UTHealth to ensure they have obtained the appropriate training and approvals needed before initiating their project.

Students should visit the UTHealth SPH Student Research pages at: https://sph.uth.edu/research/student-research/ for detailed instructions on submitting the student dissertation proposal to the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services, and to the UTHealth CPHS in iRIS. For assistance, please send an email to SPHStudentResearch@uth.tmc.edu.