D5. MPH Applied Practice Experiences

MPH students demonstrate competency attainment through applied practice experiences.

The applied practice experiences allow each student to demonstrate attainment of at least five competencies, of which at least three must be foundational competencies (as defined in Criterion D2). The competencies need not be identical from student to student, but the applied experiences must be structured to ensure that all students complete experiences addressing at least five competencies, as specified above. The applied experiences may also address additional foundational or concentration-specific competencies, if appropriate.

The school assesses each student's competency attainment in practical and applied settings through a portfolio approach, which reviews practical, applied work products that were produced for the site's use and benefit. Review of the student's performance in the APE must be based on at least two practical, non-academic work products AND on validating that the work products demonstrate the student's attainment of the designated competencies.

Examples of suitable work products include project plans, grant proposals, training manuals or lesson plans, surveys, memos, videos, podcasts, presentations, spreadsheets, websites, photos (with accompanying explanatory text), or other digital artifacts of learning. Reflection papers, contact hour logs, scholarly papers prepared to allow faculty to assess the experience, poster presentations and other documents required for academic purposes may not be counted toward the minimum of two work products.

1) *Briefly describe how the school identifies competencies attained in applied practice experiences for each MPH student, including a description of any relevant policies.*

MPH students in all concentrations and programs at GWSPH complete an Applied Practice Experience (APEx), generally either through an internship (e.g., practicum) or a professional portfolio (i.e., expedited portfolio review). All GWSPH students enroll in an APEx course based on their matriculation term, which are called cohorts. There currently exist three cohorts based on matriculation term. Students enrolled prior to fall 2019 enroll in a two-credit course, Cohort 6014; students who matriculated between fall 2019 and fall 2021 enrolled in a one-credit Public Health Leadership course, Cohort 6022; and all students who matriculated in fall 2021 or later enroll in a zero-credit APEx course, Cohort 6000.

The Office of Applied Public Health coordinates the APEx process across the school and curates its own webpage, populated with resources such as APEx site search strategies, international funding tips and APEx handbooks. In addition to the Office of Applied Public Health, students receive departmental support from practice teams, consisting of practicum directors and practicum managers/associates. Housed within each department, these teams guide students through APEx expectations, identify internship sites that align with students' interests and career goals as much as possible and share relevant resources and handbooks. Practice teams are the GWSPH point of contact for practicum preceptors. Practice teams share relevant preceptor resources such as the preceptor handbook and work closely with preceptors before, during and at the completion of the practicum to ensure students are performing well and any concerns are addressed.

Practicum
Students on the practicum pathway complete a minimum of 120 hours of a mentored internship experience with an outside agency and preceptor, submit two work products that align with their five selected competencies and submit a final evaluation.

During the practicum approval process, students develop a practicum plan in collaboration with the student's preceptor. The practicum plan identifies specific competencies and nonacademic work products and describes how, through the development of the work products, the student will attain the selected competencies. Also included in the practicum plan are the experience's expected activities and a description of the preceptor's professional background and experience mentoring other students. Using GWSPH's tracking system, preceptors and practice teams approve the practicum plan. Once approved, students proceed through a mini-ethics review led by the GWSPH Office of Research Excellence (ORE) to determine if an official Institutional Review Board (IRB) review is required to proceed with the experience. If ORE determines that no IRB review is required, students receive a determination email stating that they are allowed to proceed with the experience. The date of the determination email is the official date of approval of the practicum plan and the date in which students are allowed to count hours toward the practicum.

During the practicum, students log their hours in the GWSPH tracking system. At the midpoint of their experience (around 60 hours), students submit an attestation that declares any significant deviations from the practicum plan, highlighting any revisions to the competencies and/or work products. If changes were made, a full review of the updated practicum plan is undertaken and a second mini-ethics review is conducted.

At the end of the 120-hour experience, students upload their two work products and complete a final evaluation to the GWSPH tracking system. For the evaluation, students reflect on the status of their practicum plan activities and competencies, their overall experience and their preceptor. Their departmental practicum director assesses the submitted work products for quality and alignment with competencies. Students are given "credit" for the course, based on the quality of the work products, their alignment with the selected competencies and the preceptor's feedback. If a student's submissions do not appropriately align with the competencies, the practicum director provides feedback to the student and requests a resubmit.

Most students complete a practicum. There are a few specialized practicum experiences, such as the Peace Corps Coverdell Fellowship, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Public Health Scholars Program (PHSP) and the COVID-19 Alternative Pathway. These are discussed in greater detail in the ERF (see ERF > Criterion D > Criterion D5 > D5.2: MPH APEx_reqs).

Expedited Portfolio Review
Students who have a minimum of five years of full-time public health experience post-undergraduate degree or three years of full-time public health experience[72] post-graduate degree (non-MPH), may opt for an expedited portfolio review (EPR). Only 1% of MPH students follow the EPR pathway in a given year.

Students complete a centralized work history assessment, which is reviewed by the Office of Applied Public Health to determine the relevance of the professional experiences and if the experiences align with appropriate public health professional work, consistent with a practicum. If approved by the Office of Applied Public Health, departmental practice teams support the student through the proposal process.

Students complete a proposal, similar to practicum plan, that describes past public health activities, identifies five competencies attained during those activities and proposes two work

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[72] The years of experience must have taken place within the five years immediately prior to matriculation into GWSPH.

products showcasing mastery of the selected competencies. Practice teams assess the submitted proposal and work products for quality and alignment with competencies. Students are given "credit" in PUBH 6000, based on the quality of the work products and their alignment with the selected competencies. If a student's submissions do not meet expectations, the practice team either provides feedback to the student and requests a resubmit or directs the student to complete a practicum.

MSN/MPH
Students in the MSN/MPH program enroll in NURS 6258 Leadership Capstone Practicum 1 (3 credits) and NURS 6259 Leadership Capstone Practicum 2 (3 credits) as part of their nursing school curriculum. While these credits don't transfer into the MPH program, the practicum experience may be used to meet the MPH APEx requirements, pending approval from the departmental practice team. Under the guidance of their MSN Clinical Coordinator and MPH practice team, students identify and participate in a public health nursing practicum. All requirements related to the student's practicum are similar to what all other MPH students complete except that the site must be within a clinical setting that integrates public health. MSN/MPH students enroll in PUBH 6000 toward the end of their experience and the practice team will apply "credit" once all items are submitted. As of fall 2023, there have not yet been any MSN/MPH students who have completed the applied practice experience.

PA/MPH
Most PA/MPH students complete a practicum as described above, except for students in the Environmental Health Science Policy or Global Environmental Health programs, who have the option to use their PA clinical practicums as their APEx. Aside from a clinical setting, all other practicum requirements are the same as other MPH students. Few PA/MPH students choose this option. These students have an MPH advisor during these activities.

MD/MPH
MD/MPH students may choose to do a traditional practicum, as described above, though most use a course-based approach in Population Health Summit #4, which addresses a student-identified public health issue. MD students complete a total of four Clinical Public Health Summits during medical school. During the spring of MS4, MD/MPH students participate in their final summit, Population Health Summit #4, which is a longitudinal project addressing both MD and MPH competencies and runs the majority of MS4. Students who choose to use the Population Health Summit #4 for their APEx, design a practicum plan based on their work in the Summit and identify five MPH competencies they will attain through this extended experience, and it is reviewed by their MPH practice team. MD/MPH students do not have an identified preceptor for their experience, though they operate under the guidance of a GW faculty member with input from external stakeholder(s). Students also do not integrate their practicum plan into or track hours in GWSPH's tracking system, however, the Summit has defined expectations and students' experiences last upwards of a year following the Summit, so the experience far exceeds the 120-hour minimum. Generally, MD/MPH students work on their Summit deliverables during their year of MPH coursework and enroll in PUBH 6000 toward the end of the experience. Students submit an implementation plan and a communication strategy as APEx work products which are reviewed by their departmental practice team. Depending on the project topic, students may work on behalf of an organization or may make their final project available to an organization. All students are required to engage with stakeholder(s) during the Summit. Students consult with their stakeholder(s), public health practitioner faculty and the MPH practice team during the development process for their plans, incorporating feedback and advice. The resulting implementation plan and communication strategy are shaped by these consultations and meet the needs of the stakeholder(s) involved.

NOTE: MD/MPH students also use their Population Health Summit #4 experience to meet the requirements of the ILE. One of the CE deliverables, the Clinical Public Health Action Plan, is the culmination of the student's year-long Summit activities. The deliverables produced for both the APEx and CE are distinct, though related. See Criterion D7.2.

JD/MPH and LLM/MPH
All JD/MPH and LLM/MPH students complete a practicum as described above. To date, there have not been any LLM/MPH students who have completed a practicum.

2) *Provide documentation, including syllabi and handbooks, of the official requirements through which students complete the applied practice experience.*

See ERF > Criterion D > Criterion D5 > D5.2: MPH APEx_reqs.

3) *Provide samples of practice-related materials for individual students from each concentration or generalist degree. The samples must also include materials from students completing combined degree schools, if applicable. The school must provide samples of complete sets of materials (i.e., Template D5-1 and the work products/documents that demonstrate at least five competencies) from at least five students in the last three years for each concentration or generalist degree. If the school has not produced five students for which complete samples are available, note this and provide all available samples.*

Proposed work products identified in a student's proposal may vary from final submitted work products. GWSPH understands that practicums can change depending on funding, organizational needs and current events. As a result, students work closely with their practice team to confirm that submitted items meet competency requirements.

Each department/program has its own practice team. Given the size of the GWSPH MPH student population, it is inevitable that there will be slight deviations in how individual practice team members evaluate students' APEx deliverables and evaluation practice may also change from year to year. To maintain overall quality control and ensure that there is a measure of consistency across departmental practice teams, all teams meet monthly during the GWSPH Practice Committee. During this meeting, practice teams discuss APEx changes and address questions or concerns that arise. The MPH Advisory Committee also meets monthly and addresses APEx issues as they arise.

Each departmental practice team is responsible for ensuring students submit their required deliverables on the electronic tracking system. However, practice team-produced notes, checklists or evaluations cannot be stored on the same system. As a result, some evaluation forms were identified and included in the ERF, but not all. We opted to provide what we could rather than remaining consistent and leaving such documents out of the ERF.

Fewer than five samples were provided for the MD/MPH, PA/MPH, BS/MPH and JD/MPH joint degrees for two main reasons:
- These joint degrees have fewer students.
- Students in these joint degrees engage in nearly identical practicums as non-joint degree students in the same MPH program. They work for similar organizations, identify similar competencies, are supervised by competent preceptors and departmental practice teams and produce quality deliverables.

The following programs have yet to have a student complete an APEx:
- LLM/MPH
- MSN/MPH

- MPH@GW, Global Health
- MPH@GW, Health Informatics and Analytics
- MPH@GW, Climate and Health
- MPH@GW, Women, Youth and Child Health

See ERF > Criterion D > Criterion D5 > D5.3: MPH APEx_samples.

4) *If applicable, assess strengths and weaknesses related to this criterion and plans for improvement in this area.*

Strengths
- GWSPH has long been committed to applied public health as an integral part of the educational experience, and all departments are strongly supportive. Feedback from students and from GWSPH partners has been enthusiastically positive.
- The EPR pathway is well-received by students who have existing professional work experience. It has relieved a burden for some who are managing families, full-time positions and their education.
- Practicum experiences are conducted at a range of public health organizations, with over 2,100 practice partners who have supported GWSPH students over the school's 25-year history, in all 50 states and 40 countries. With such a range of offerings, students generally can identify a practicum that aligns with their professional and academic interests.
- The COVID Alt pathway established during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed students to both successfully complete their APEx requirements and support in COVID-19 response work as well without delay to their planned graduation date.
- The GWSPH ORE developed and implemented a streamlined process to review and approve APEx projects (thousands per academic year) to ensure they meet human subjects research requirements. Project approvals and waivers are processed much more quickly enabling students to engage in their work in a timely manner.

Challenges
- With so many students, program administration is a challenge. In May 2020, GWSPH phased out Symplicity and transitioned to a new tracking system, Exxat. In May 2023, the Office of Applied Public Health transitioned from Exxat to Handshake, the same system used by GWSPH for career advising and events. This final system appears to meet the needs of students, practicum preceptors and advisors, even though these transitions have been difficult.
- A robust team of 25 practice team members across GWSPH assists students through the APEx process, ensuring students receive the support and mentorship they need to meet their professional goals. However, each departmental practice team implements the APEx in a unique manner. The Office of Applied Public Health has taken steps to streamline the overall process and is in the final phases of ensuring more consistent implementation.
- While the Office of Applied Public Health has strong connections and partnerships with DC metro area organizations, students searching for APEx opportunities beyond the GWSPH network may find it difficult to secure an attractive APEx site in their area of interest. This is particularly true for MPH@GW students.

Future Plans
- The Office of Applied Public Health will be monitoring and evaluating the implementation of Handshake and supporting and guiding students, practice teams and practicum preceptors.

- The Office of Applied Public Health will continue to develop a database of organizations that have supported (or can support) students on their APEx across broader areas of the world.
- To ensure more consistent evaluation of APEx deliverables across programs and departments, the GWSPH Practice Committee is considering developing an evaluation tool. The aim of the tool is to confirm demonstration of competency attainment.