

D6. DrPH Applied Practice Experience

The work product may be a single project or a set of related projects that demonstrate a depth of competence. It may be completed as a discrete experience (such as a practicum or internship) or integrated into school coursework. In either case, the deliverable must contain a reflective component that includes the student's expression of personal and/or professional reactions to the applied practice experience. This may take the form of a journal or other written product, a professional portfolio, or another deliverable as appropriate for the school.

The school identifies a minimum of five foundational and/or concentration-specific competencies (as defined in Criteria D3 and D4) that are reinforced and/or assessed through application. The school may either choose at least one competency from the leadership, management and governance domain in Criterion D3 or choose a concentration-specific competency identified in Criterion D4 if it relates to leadership skills. Competencies may differ from student to student.

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

The DrPH Applied Practice Experience (DAPEX) is a required leadership experience in a public health setting for doctoral public health students. The goal of the DAPEX is to advance students' development of higher-level applied competencies and critical thinking skills. Through the DAPEX, students apply principles of leadership and management, public health theories and research methodologies demonstrating mastery of evidence-based public health decision-making and strong leadership skills in practice, the integration of multiple disciplines and the ability to translate empirical knowledge into effective public health practice.

Through the practice opportunity, students must be directly exposed to a leadership experience in a public health practice setting. The DAPEX plan must identify a minimum of five DrPH competencies that will be addressed in the project. At least one competency must come from the Leadership, Management and Governance category. The DAPEX must be structured with explicit learning objectives, concrete activities and work product-related outcomes identified in advance. These are summarized in the practice plan. Starting in fall 2023, all opportunities are approved by practice and dissertation committee members and program leadership before the start of the experience and prior to uploading required materials into our online tracking platform for DAPEX.⁷³ This review ensures that five competencies are selected, that they align with the academic and practice-based interests of each student and that the activities and deliverables all align appropriately.

To achieve these competencies, DrPH students are responsible for identifying an appropriate practice setting and securing a commitment from the site preceptor. This negotiation is a critical component of a student's applied leadership skills. Typically, students choose sites external to where they work, but students may complete their DAPEX project within their own work setting if the scope of the work is distinct from their current role and allows them to fulfill the identified competencies and engage in advanced-level practice. Most residential DrPH students choose a DAPEX site in the Washington, DC, metro area, though national and international sites are also acceptable. To date, there have not yet been any DrPH@GW students, so there are no data on online students' DAPEX sites. During the DAPEX, a qualified site preceptor supervises and supports students, ultimately evaluating the student's project and professional competence.

⁷³ Prior to fall 2023, practice plans were approved by academic advisors.

While the primary goal for this experience is to further the student’s mastery of identified competencies through applied practice in real-world settings, a secondary intent is for students to contribute to the sponsoring organization and further its public health mission. The practice plan should include work product deliverable(s) that contributes in this capacity and also addresses all identified competencies. This experience should be mutually beneficial and strengthen our collective public health impact.

The expectation is that students’ proposed work products contribute to the sponsoring organization (DAPEx site) and further its public health mission. Ideally, the experience is mutually beneficial for both the student and organization and strengthens the collective public health impact. The DAPEx and dissertation are developed from the same project/work. While there is no minimum number of hours required for the DAPEx, students generally spend 160–240 hours completing the activities outlined in their DAPEx plan.

Like MPH APEx students, DrPH DAPEx students use GWSPH’s tracking system. Once the site preceptor and DrPH program leadership approve the practicum plan in the system, students proceed through a mini-ethics review led by the ORE to determine if official 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 registering for PUBH 8711 DAPEx and beginning their DAPEx. Generally, the experience takes one to two semesters, depending on the scope of work, and finishes before the student sits for the comprehensive exam.

Below are examples of recent DAPEx sites and topics addressed during the experience:

Site	Topics Addressed
Guidehouse (Health Sector)	UM analytics Predictive analytics to identify CM/DM Care coordination model Payment policy
Montgomery County Department of Health	COVID-19 vaccination Flu campaign
National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO)	Health equity Behavioral health Health policy
Prince George’s County Department of Health	Social justice and racism Maternal and child health Homelessness COVID-19
Trust for America’s Health	Climate-related adaptation interventions COVID survey Racial and social justice
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO)	Strategic planning Policy-based recommendations Public health workforce challenges
2020 Mom	Survey development Physical activity promotion
Faegre Drinker Consulting	Patient-focused drug development Mental health
Children’s National	Strategic planning Monitoring and evaluation

- 2) *Explain, with references to specific deliverables or other requirements, the manner through which the school ensures that the applied practice experience requires students to demonstrate leadership competencies.*

First, the DAPEX plan that is approved by the program must identify a minimum of five DrPH competencies that will be addressed in the project, and at least one of those competencies must come from the Leadership, Management and Governance category. A thorough review by an advisor, committee member and/or program leadership will ensure that their approved plan includes at least one leadership competency.

To ensure that these competencies are addressed and met, the program requires a midpoint check and a final evaluation. At the midpoint, students provide information on any midpoint changes to their practice and, if so, a review as to whether all competencies will still be met. During the midpoint review, the student and site preceptor hold a meeting to discuss the student's progress and then complete evaluation surveys through GWSPH's online tracking system. For the final review, the site preceptor evaluates the student's performance (including leadership capabilities) and provides constructive feedback. The student also completes a final evaluation, but this one is confidential about the site and site preceptor, and it is only reviewed by DrPH program leadership. A program director then reviews the final evaluation and the deliverables to make sure all identified activities were completed and all deliverables submitted. The reviewer ensures all competencies were addressed.

At the conclusion of the DAPEX, students submit the following final products:

- a. A reflective report outlining accomplishments achieved and personal and/or professional reactions to the DAPEX. In particular, students reflect on how they achieved the preselected DrPH competencies and how the DAPEX allowed them to apply principles of leadership and management.
 - b. A public presentation summarizing the DAPEX. During the 15- to 20-minute presentation, students discuss their approach, performed activities, work products, achievements and how they met their learning objectives and DrPH competencies.
 - c. A work product. Generally, this is the product described in the DAPEX plan.
- 3) *Provide documentation, including syllabi and handbooks, of the official requirements through which students complete the applied practice experience.*

See ERF > Criterion D > Criterion D6 > D6.3: DrPH APEX_reqs.

- 4) *Provide samples of practice-related materials for individual students from each concentration or generalist degree. The school must provide samples of complete sets of materials (i.e., Template D6-1 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.*

Samples of DAPEXs are from students in previous cohorts. Under the new curriculum, the DAPEX work products and overarching themes remain unchanged. The key difference is that, under the new curriculum, students complete a dissertation that is related to and based on their DAPEX work. The dissertation is therefore also reviewed by the community preceptor. No samples are available from students in the DrPH@GW program, though the process and deliverables are identical to those from residential DrPH students. The first dissertation samples from the DrPH@GW are expected in fall 2026, though DAPEX samples and dissertation proposal will likely start being produced in 2024.

The planning of the DAPEX is a particularly important component of the DrPH program. Starting in fall 2023, students develop a Dissertation Portfolio that includes a strategic sequencing of courses to guide students from the planning stages of their practice experience to the defense of their project and dissertation. These two courses—PUBH 8703 Independent Study 1 for DAPEX Proposal Development and PUBH 8705 Independent Study 2 for DAPEX Proposal Development—are critical components of this portfolio that focus on the planning of the practice project. These courses are structured to allow for independent study while also incorporating guidelines and planned check-ins to ensure students put ample and continuous effort into the planning of their DAPEX. Both courses are led by instructors who advise and provide students with personalized attention and support. Each course also has instructor-facilitated sessions at the beginning, middle and end of the semester. These sessions provide opportunities for the instructor to assess student progress and provide opportunities for students to hear from their peers about their progress to date in planning. During the peer-facilitated sessions, students provide support and accountability to one another. At the end of each course, students submit roadmaps of their plans and a reflective report discussing the progress to date and ideas for moving forward. Given all this, the new dissertation portfolio and planning courses provide robust support for students to develop strong practice projects.

See ERF > Criterion D > Criterion D6 > D6.3: DrPH APEX_samples.

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

Strengths

- Our students have participated in local, national and international DAPEX opportunities, applying a multitude of DrPH competencies. Students consistently rate their experiences very highly in their endpoint reviews and during their final presentations.
- ORE has streamlined process for reviewing and approving DAPEX projects, modeling adherence to ethical principles for DrPH students. Project approvals are now processed quickly enabling students to start working.
- GWSPH accommodates students' need for virtual DAPEX opportunities. This will become more important with the online DrPH students.

Challenges

- The DrPH curriculum has changed several times over the last five years, with the most recent curricular modification going into effect in fall 2023. As a result, each cohort of students has a unique curricular plan. While the overarching themes and required DAPEX products remain unchanged, the 2023-2024 curriculum, as described in this self-study, has a more streamlined DAPEX to dissertation approach. In the future, students will produce related DAPEX and dissertation products based on the same work experience. Products will be distinct in that they will still meet the separate DAPEX and dissertation requirements.
- During the last accreditation review cycle, the site visit team identified the DrPH DAPEX as an area for improvement to make sure there was a concerted emphasis on applied experiences. GWSPH immediately implemented a process to develop and launch a more robust DAPEX, and through recent curricular revisions, the DrPH program ensured adherence to CEPH criteria. A fully developed DAPEX is now embedded in the new curriculum.

Future Plans

- With the launch of the online DrPH@GW program and the increase in matriculation in the residential DrPH, the hiring of a dedicated staff or faculty member for additional DAPEX and dissertation support will likely be a priority in the next few years.

- GWSPH plans to closely monitor the implementation of the new DAPEX model as well as student experience to ensure it fully meets CEPH requirements and the needs of our students.