



**DISSERTATION GUIDE – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**  
*for the Milken Institute School of Public Health (SPH) PhD Program*

*Fall 2020*

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**Table of Contents**

<b>OVERVIEW</b>	4
1. When does the candidacy phase of my dissertation begin?	4
2. When should I select a dissertation topic?	4
<b>DISSERTATION COMMITTEE</b>	4
3. When should I select a Dissertation Research Committee Chair?	4
4. How do I select the Chair of my Dissertation Research Committee?	5
5. What is a Dissertation Chair?	5
6. How many members should there be on my Dissertation Committee?	5
7. When should I select Dissertation Research Committee Members?	5
8. Who qualifies as my Dissertation Chair and Committee Members?	6
9. What is the role of the Dissertation Research Committee Chair?.	6
10. How often should a student in the candidacy phase communicate with the Dissertation Chair or Committee Members?	7
11. When should the Dissertation Committee Approval form be completed?	8
<b>READERS</b>	8
12. What is the role of the Dissertation "Readers?"	8
13. Who can serve as a Reader and how are they selected?	8
14. Can Readers attend the dissertation defense remotely?	8
15. When should Readers be identified and invited to participate in the dissertation defense process?	9
<b>PREPARATION PHASE/REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS</b>	9
16. Do students need to get IRB approval or other data related approvals to conduct their dissertation research?	9
17. How long should it take to complete the dissertation?	9
18. What is the maximum time allowed to complete the PhD program?	9
19. How long does it take to get through the different phases of the program?	9
20. What do you mean by 'steady progress'?	10
21. What should students expect to accomplish while enrolled in Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences?	10
22. How many dissertation research credits are required for graduation?	10
23. Can I register for dissertation credits while preparing for my proposal?	11
<b>THE PROPOSAL</b>	11
24. What is expected in the dissertation proposal?	11
25. Does the full Dissertation Committee review the entire dissertation	12

proposal or just chapters/sections?	
26. How much time do students need to give Dissertation Committee Members to review the final version of the proposal before the dissertation proposal defense?	12
27. Do Dissertation Committees meet as a group prior to the dissertation proposal? defense?	13
28. Who decides when the student is ready to defend the dissertation proposal or the dissertation?	13
29. What is expected in the dissertation proposal defense?	13
30. What are the potential outcomes of the proposal defense?	14
<b>THE DISSERTATION</b>	15
31. After a student has defended the dissertation proposal, what are the requirements in regard to registering for credits?	15
32. What is the format for the dissertation?	15
33. Publication and authorship	16
<b>THE DISSERTATION DEFENSE</b>	16
34. When is the student ready to move to the oral defense?	16
35. How much time should students give Committee Members and Readers to review the dissertation?	17
36. How long is the oral dissertation defense?	17
37. Who generally attends the dissertation defense?	17
38. What happens during the defense?	17
39. Who are the voting members of the oral defense?	18
40. What is the role of the Dissertation Chair during the defense?	18
41. What are the requirements to be registered as a student while revising my dissertation?	18
<b>GRADUATION</b>	19
42. What is the process to submit the final, approved dissertation for graduation?	19
43. When do students officially graduate from the Milken Institute SPH at the George Washington University?	19
44. What forms must be submitted to the Office of Student Records to graduate?	20
<b>REFERENCES</b>	21
<b>WHERE TO SUBMIT REQUIRED DOCUMENTS</b>	21

It is the expectation that doctoral candidates will work independently, under the guidance of their Dissertation Committee, to prepare an oral and written dissertation demonstrating the ability to analyze and solve a complex public health research question. A candidate's interpretation of the research results is expected to make a substantive, original contribution to the field of public health research and practice.

Below are some questions students and faculty may have about the candidacy phase of the PhD program and the dissertation. We recommend that you review the PhD Handbook (<https://publichealth.gwu.edu/content/services-students#PhD>) for additional information on the program.

## OVERVIEW

### 1. When does the candidacy phase of my dissertation begin?

The student moves to the candidacy phase after passing the comprehensive exam.

### 2. When should I select a dissertation topic?

Most students do not have a well-formulated dissertation topic prior to beginning the program. Students generally begin shaping a dissertation topic during their first and second years in the program, using opportunities in classes as a way to learn more about a potential research topic. Students should also meet with faculty to discuss active research opportunities and relevant data availability. By the time you enter the candidacy phase, you should be well on your way to identifying a topic and a set of research questions.

## DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

### 3. When should I select a Dissertation Research Committee Chair?

There isn't a hard and fast rule about when to select a Dissertation Research Committee Chair. Students work closely with a faculty member throughout their coursework and begin discussing possible dissertation topics early in the PhD program with that faculty member in mind as the Chair. In other cases, students "shop around" for a Dissertation Chair through meetings with many different faculty, learning about the broad range of research interests and capabilities of faculty in the home department and other departments in the school. Notably, it is common for students to keep their comprehensive exam committee as their dissertation committee. But, this is not a requirement.

As a matter of practical advice, we suggest that you identify a faculty mentor or

potential Chair as your dissertation topic evolves to make sure you identify a piece of work that is feasible given the time and resource constraints and has public health relevance for your particular field. It is also important to identify a research mentor (whether that person becomes your Chair, a committee member, or an informal advisor) to discuss the data sources that will be necessary for you to conduct your research project. Sometimes, identifying the data sources you will use to complete your research will clarify the question of who would be a helpful and appropriate Dissertation Committee Chair.

Students are required to have a potential Chair identified, as well as a dissertation topic, prior to enrolling in *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences*.

#### **4. How do I select the Chair of my Dissertation Research Committee?**

Selecting the Dissertation Research Committee Chair is an important decision. Students should select faculty who bring some combination of content knowledge, methodological expertise, prior experience mentoring students, and a willingness to work closely with the student as an advisor throughout the dissertation research phase. Students should meet with faculty throughout the pre-candidacy phase to learn about faculty research interests and strengths and to identify faculty who might serve as a Dissertation Research Committee Chair. Students should also consult with their program directors to identify faculty to meet with to discuss potential dissertation topics or common research interests. As students sharpen their research interests and get to know faculty across their departments and the school, they will identify an individual to ask to serve as their Chair. Often, the student will seek guidance from the Chair about other members who might serve on the Dissertation Research Committee.

#### **5. What is a Dissertation Chair?**

This is a member of your dissertation committee who will be elected to run the proposal and dissertation defense(s).

#### **6. How many members should there be on my Dissertation Committee?**

Dissertation Research Committees consist of 3-5 members, including the chair. It is most common to have a Chair plus two additional members, for a total of 3 members.

#### **7. When should I select the Committee Members?**

Students generally select a full Research Committee as they begin working on the dissertation proposal. Dissertation proposals must be reviewed in full by all Committee Members, with most proposals requiring at least two rounds of full review. Students should have a Chair in mind (meaning that the student and faculty member have had several discussions about the proposed topic, data sources, methodological approach

and key challenges) prior to beginning *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Committee members may be identified prior to enrollment in *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences* as well, although members are often selected during this proposal preparation phase.

#### **8. Who qualifies as my Dissertation Chair and Committee Members?**

Dissertation Chairs and Committee Members have doctoral level training and commonly hold a PhD, DrPH, ScD, MD, or other related degree. All members of the Dissertation Committee must have doctoral level training, although exceptions to this rule can be made on a case by case basis by the PhD program director. The Chair and members have some combination of training, expertise, and mentoring experience to provide the necessary guidance and support during the student's dissertation research phase. Some members of the committee may be chosen because of their depth of knowledge about the student's topic, while others may participate on the committee primarily because of their expertise in relevant research methods.

The Dissertation Chair must be a GW faculty member; the Chair does not have to be a member of the student's home department. The Dissertation Committee must include at least one full-time regular or research Milken Institute School of Public Health faculty member and at least one faculty member from the student's home department (these may be the same person). Dissertation Committees can include members from outside of GW as well, although many Committees consist of Milken Institute SPH faculty only.

#### **9. What is the role of the Dissertation Research Committee Chair?**

The initial role of a Chairperson is to help students develop a focused, rigorous and manageable research project that will meet the resource, data and time constraints of the program. While the student is responsible for the formulation of the project, including specific aims, research design, hypotheses and technical approach, the Chair is expected to provide constructive input and timely feedback to help the student develop his or her dissertation proposal.

The advisor should have the expertise to guide the student through the candidacy phase. The Chair may take on varying roles during the process, depending on the student, the topic, the research approach, or other factors. For example, Chairs often serve as:

1. Advisor – This is the principal advisor who works with the student on all or most chapters and likely will completely examine and approve the proposal draft chapters/materials prior to submitting it to the rest of the committee for review and comment. In this case, the Chair is an expert in the field of study who can provide advice and mentoring on methodologies and analyses and has significant expertise in the dissertation topic. The Chair may be a senior or junior level faculty member.

2. Coordinator – In this scenario, the Chair serves more of a leader/administrator of the committee to ensure that the student meets all requirements, conditions and timelines. The Chair may not necessarily have the expertise to review all chapters/sections of the dissertation and consequently the student will also rely on the other Committee Members and other advisors as necessary for the initial review of specific areas/chapters. The Chair will provide guidance on his or her areas of specific expertise, whether it is the topic, the methods used, the analysis, etc. Chairs who serve in a “coordinator” role are often more senior faculty members.
3. Director – This Chair will lead the student through each part of the dissertation as the dissertation is likely a piece of a larger body of research that he/she is currently working on. Here the Chair is intimately involved with the student in the selection of the methods, direction of the analysis and the ultimate outcome of the research. Other Committee Members serve as more of a review board or provide targeted advice on components of the research. This Chair may be a senior or junior faculty member.
4. Some combination of above – Chair roles and responsibilities vary based on expertise and preferred mentoring style, prior working relationships with the students, time constraints and availability, and many other factors.

Regardless of the specific role, the Chair is expected to regularly review student progress and serve as a mentor, assuring that the dissertation process moves forward smoothly in accordance with Milken Institute SPH guidelines. The Chair will carefully review the dissertation proposal and provide detailed written comments to the student, be available to discuss these comments, and review a revised proposal prior to determining that the student is ready to defend the proposal before the full committee and outside readers.

#### **10. How often should a student in the candidacy phase communicate with the Dissertation Chair or Committee Members?**

Students who are working on dissertation proposals or research are responsible for maintaining ongoing and regular communication with the Dissertation Chair and Committee Members. Students are encouraged to discuss expectations about communication with the Chair and Committee Members early in the process to facilitate progress and keep the research project on track. The dissertation process works best when the student and dissertation committee have agreed upon a style and frequency of communication (for example, monthly memoranda from the student providing updates on the student’s progress, or explicit deadlines for Committee Members to review chapters or related materials) and when submission of research products and timelines for review of chapters or other materials are clarified and respected.

#### **11. When should the Dissertation Committee Approval form be completed?**

The Doctoral Dissertation Committee Approval Form identifies the Chair and committee members and is signed by the Department Program Director. The signed form is submitted to PhD Student Records ([PhDSBS\\_Admin@gwu.edu](mailto:PhDSBS_Admin@gwu.edu)) as soon as the Committee is constituted. This form does not include the names of potential Readers. All dissertation forms can be accessed from the PhD section of the website (<https://publichealth.gwu.edu/content/services-students#PhD>).

### **READERS**

#### **12. What is the role of the dissertation "Readers?"**

Two "Readers" serve as outside examiners or external reviewers. Readers attend the dissertation defense and actively participate as examiners along with Dissertation Committee Members. Readers are not members of the dissertation committee and do not review draft chapters of the dissertation. Readers do not provide written or oral feedback on the dissertation to the student or Committee Members prior to the dissertation defense. Readers receive the full dissertation draft for review prior to the dissertation defense along with the members of the dissertation committee, generally about 4-5 weeks prior to the dissertation defense date (minimum of 2 weeks with approval of committee). Readers are voting members at the dissertation defense.

#### **13. Who can serve as a Reader and how are they selected?**

Readers should have relevant expertise to provide a critical review of the dissertation and may be selected because of their research, content, or practice-related skills and experience. Readers may come from GW, local organizations, government agencies, other universities, or other settings. Readers are required to have doctoral-level credentials or the equivalent, although exceptions can be made depending on the relevance to the student’s topic.

Readers are selected in consultation with the Dissertation Chair. Often, students suggest individuals as Readers to the Chair after consultation with other faculty or outside expert researchers or practitioners. Readers must be approved by the Dissertation Chair and must agree to participate in the dissertation defense. Readers must be available to attend the dissertation defense.

#### **14. Can Readers attend the dissertation defense remotely?**

Yes, Readers can attend the dissertation defense remotely, if not available to attend in-person. This is a decision made by the student, the Dissertation Chair, and the reader and may require logistical support to make sure that technical issues do not delay the defense. We recommend selecting readers who will be able to attend the defense in person, although this is not a requirement.

### **15. When should Readers be identified and invited to participate in the dissertation defense process?**

Students and the Committee Chair may discuss the selection of readers when first developing a dissertation proposal; at other times, Readers are not identified until a student is closer to finishing a draft dissertation. But remember, Readers must have an opportunity to review the dissertation draft at least 4-5 weeks prior to scheduling the oral defense.

## **PREPARATION PHASE/REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS**

### **16. Do students need to get IRB approval or other data related approvals to conduct their dissertation research?**

In most cases, the answer is yes. Students should discuss the IRB approval process with their Dissertation Chair. Research involving human subjects must be submitted through the GW Institutional Review Board (IRB) via the Office of Health Research (OHR). Students are required to comply with all IRB regulations related to their work. This may include getting prior approval for use of data, development of a data use agreement, inclusion on an approved researcher's list, or other data-related requirements. It is the student's responsibility to complete, and keep current, the necessary CITI training certifications.

### **17. How long should it take to complete the dissertation?**

The time necessary to complete and defend a dissertation can vary by student, depending on the complexity of the topic, challenges obtaining required data, competing demands on the student's schedule, or other considerations. Students should select a dissertation topic and research approach that can be completed within a 12-18 month period.

### **18. What is the maximum time allowed to complete the PhD program?**

The maximum time allowed to complete the PhD Program is 7 years.

### **19. How long does it take to get through the different phases of the program?**

Students must make steady progress toward completion of the PhD degree through the pre-candidacy and candidacy phases. We encourage students to maintain a schedule of classes and achievements to enable them to complete the program in 4-5 years.

### **20. What do you mean by 'steady progress'?**

Students must make steady progress throughout the program. This means they must be actively engaged in coursework, comprehensive exam preparation, dissertation proposal development, or dissertation research throughout their time in the program, depending on the phase of their training. Students may require more than two years to complete coursework, or may need additional time to prepare for comprehensive exams or the dissertation proposal defense, but these are considerations that must be discussed and agreed to by the department program director, the PhD Program Director and other faculty as appropriate. Students who are not making adequate progress in different phases of the program will be required to meet explicit deadlines that are deemed reasonable by the program director and, if applicable, Dissertation Chair. Students may be withdrawn from the program if their progress is stalled and they are unable to successfully progress through the stages of training.

### **21. What should students expect to accomplish while enrolled in *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences*?**

Typically, students enroll in *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences* in the fall semester after completing all required coursework and successfully passing the comprehensive exams. The purpose of the course is to help the student develop the dissertation proposal. Students should have identified a dissertation topic and relevant data sources, as well as a general research approach, prior to enrolling in the class. Students are required to meet with the course instructor before the class begins to discuss the proposed topic and are required to submit a one-page abstract of the dissertation proposal before the first class session. The student should have identified a Dissertation Committee Chair before the class begins. The class is very interactive; students are expected to move through dissertation proposal components and refine their research aims and methods through presentations in the class and in-depth discussions and critiques of sections of the proposal. Students prepare an oral dissertation proposal defense along with the written proposal and practice their presentation skills with their fellow classmates and the instructor.

### **22. How many dissertation research credits are required for graduation?**

The dissertation research requires 7 credits for graduation.

### 23. Can I register for dissertation credits while preparing for my proposal?

No. Students may register for dissertation research credits after they successfully defend the dissertation proposal. Students generally enroll in *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences* the semester after passing the comprehensive exam or during the next semester when the class is available. For example, if comprehensive exams are given in June, a student who has developed a dissertation topic would take *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences* in the fall semester after comps. Students who need additional time to formulate their topic would work on developing their topic during the Fall semester (in addition to taking additional coursework to satisfy elective requirements) and would enroll for *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences* in the Spring semester. Students should plan ahead to make certain that *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences* will be offered in their preferred semester.

Students prepare the dissertation proposal during *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences*. If a student is not ready to defend the proposal immediately following *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences*, he or she may enroll in an elective course. If students have already satisfied their other requirements and do not wish to take course for credit, they will be required to register for one credit of continuous research.

Note: *Continuous research (PUBH 0940)* does not count toward the dissertation research credit requirement or any other curricular requirements for completion of the PhD degree.

Information on registration requirements can be found in the PhD Student Handbook – <https://publichealth.gwu.edu/content/services-students#PhD>.

## THE PROPOSAL

### 24. What is expected in the dissertation proposal?

The dissertation proposal should provide a clear and thorough plan of the proposed research. The proposal includes the first several chapters of what will become the dissertation (everything but the results and discussion). The dissertation proposal is sometimes referred to as the first three chapters of the dissertation, although this may vary by department and by the scope of work. The three chapters are often referred to as 1) background; 2) literature review; 3) methods. Generally, the dissertation proposal includes:

- The statement of the problem, which describes the nature and history of the problem or issue being studied and the potential significance of the proposed

research and the relevance to public health. The statement should answer the question: How is this topic and approach to the research significant and/or original?

- A literature review, which details prior research in this area and provides a historical and conceptual framework. The review includes relevant literature published to date on the research topic.
- Research methods, with clear, concise and specific details explaining the research question and/or hypotheses, methods and design, human subjects review, and limitations of the dissertation research. The methods section of the proposal describes the tools that will be used in the research, the data sources and analytical plan. The data analysis plan provides a detailed discussion about how the data collected will be managed and analyzed to address the research question(s). This should include an overview of the timetable for the project.
- A statement of the expected contributions and a discussion of the limitations of the research.
- An anticipated timetable that accounts for all phases of the dissertation research, a discussion of potential challenges to meeting that timetable and ways to address the challenges.

### 25. Does the full Dissertation Committee review the entire dissertation proposal or just chapters/sections?

All Committee Members must review the entire dissertation proposal and provide written feedback prior to the decision to move forward with the student's dissertation proposal defense. The version of the proposal that is sent to the Committee members prior to the proposal defense should reflect at least one full round of review by the full Committee and revision by the candidate.

### 26. How much time do students need to give Dissertation Committee Members to review the final version of the proposal before the dissertation proposal defense?

The revised version of the proposal that will be discussed at the dissertation proposal defense must be sent to the dissertation committee for review *at least four calendar weeks prior to the scheduled proposal defense*. The review period prior to the defense should be agreed upon by all Committee Members to take into account vacation periods or other considerations that could necessitate a longer review period.

### **27. Do Dissertation Committees meet as a group prior to the dissertation proposal defense?**

Dissertation Proposal Committees may meet as a group prior to the dissertation proposal defense, although this is not required. Some Committees may schedule a call to address issues that arise during the proposal development or dissertation stage. It is common, however, for committees not to meet as a group outside of the dissertation proposal defense or the dissertation defense. The student should discuss the meeting schedule or style with the Chair and Committee Members.

### **28. Who decides when the student is ready to defend the dissertation proposal or the dissertation?**

The Chair and Committee Members must determine that the candidate is ready to move to the proposal defense phase before the defense can be scheduled. The department program director also reviews the proposal prior to setting the date for the proposal defense. The same process is used later to determine that a student is ready to defend the dissertation. Should any committee member deem that the student is not ready to proceed to the defense, they must notify the Dissertation Committee Chair one week prior to the date of the scheduled defense. The *Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Defense Request Form* should be completed and submitted to [PhDSBS\\_Admin@gwu.edu](mailto:PhDSBS_Admin@gwu.edu).

### **29. What is expected in the dissertation proposal defense?**

Students prepare a formal oral presentation as part of their dissertation proposal defense. Presentations should include sufficient detail to give the Committee Members confidence that the candidate can accomplish what is proposed, that the study is methodologically rigorous and that the topic and approach will make a valuable contribution to the field of study.

The proposal defense is scheduled for two hours. During the first 20 minutes the candidate presents an overview of the research proposal. This requires that the candidate be prepared to present the entire proposal (with the use of a PowerPoint slide presentation and handouts, if appropriate) in sufficient detail to provide an overview of the project and identify key research objectives and approach.

The Members of the Committee will then have the opportunity to question the student on any aspect of the proposal. The student must be prepared to explain the details of the proposed research and defend key decisions made in the design of the research project. The student may also be asked to consider challenges to completing the research, the potential contribution of the work to the field, various assumptions included in the approach, or other aspects of the research.

All members of the Dissertation Committee must attend the proposal meeting. The PhD department program director may attend the proposal defense or may designate another representative to attend in his/her stead.

### **30. What are the potential outcomes of the proposal defense?**

There are three possible outcomes of the proposal defense: *accept without modifications*, *accept with modifications*, or *reject (re-defense required)*. If the Dissertation Committee accepts the proposal, either no changes are required, or the changes are so minor as to not warrant additional review. If the committee accepts the proposal with modifications, the student will be required to make moderate to substantial modifications to the proposal and perhaps to respond to a series of questions or suggestions from the Committee. The terms of the revisions should be agreed upon immediately following the defense with the candidate and the Committee present. In cases when the proposal is accepted with modifications, the Dissertation Chair provides a written memo to the student describing the required changes and specifying the review process required to approve the proposal. For example, the Committee may decide that the Chair can be the sole reviewer for purposes of the revised proposal or may prefer that Committee Members also review all or part of the proposal revisions. In most cases, the Committee does not meet as a group but goes through the revision approval process electronically. If substantial changes are required, however, the Committee may determine that it is necessary to meet by phone or in person to discuss the revisions.

If the Committee rejects the proposal, the candidate has one additional opportunity to re-define the proposed research after the candidate has addressed all of the outstanding issues raised by the Committee. This re-defense follows the same processes used in the initial defense.

Once the dissertation proposal has been accepted by the Committee and any required changes have been addressed and accepted by the Chair and Committee Members, the candidate moves to the final dissertation research phase.

The signed *Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Defense Report Form* must be signed by all Dissertation Committee Members, indicating whether the student's proposal was accepted, accepted with modifications, or rejected. The form can be found on the website at (<https://publichealth.gwu.edu/content/services-students#PhD>). The signed form must be submitted to [PhDSBS\\_Admin@gwu.edu](mailto:PhDSBS_Admin@gwu.edu).

## THE DISSERTATION

### 31. After a student has defended the dissertation proposal, what are the requirements with regard to registering for credits?

All PhD students must be registered for at least one credit of coursework or dissertation research to maintain active status in the PhD program each fall and spring semester. Students who have completed all credit requirements of the program but need additional time to work on their dissertation research may register for Continuous Enrollment at a nominal registration fee. Continuous Enrollment is available only to students who have completed all coursework, including dissertation research credits.

*NOTE: Continuing Research and Continuous Enrollment have different purposes and different fees. See PhD Handbook for further explanation.*

### 32. What is the format for the dissertation?

The dissertation process involves students completing an original investigation to make a contribution to the field of social and behavioral sciences. Through this process, the student will demonstrate a substantive command of a subject area and develop research questions that fill a necessary scholarly gap. This educational will provide a forum for students to demonstrate their mastery of the PhD program competencies, skills, and knowledge.

The *dissertation requires at least two manuscripts* that should be of publishable quality as agreed upon by all members of the student's committee. The manuscripts do not need to be submitted for publication prior to the student's defense. The dissertation must include additional components with the following overall structure:

- **Introduction:** This chapter should include an overview of the research questions addressed in the dissertation, the rationale for these questions, the scholarly gap being addressed, and a conceptual or theoretical model. The chapter should include a literature review that is more extensive than what would be included in published manuscripts.
- **Manuscripts:** One chapter for each of at least two publishable manuscripts. These chapters should be formatted for submission to a peer-reviewed journal with only minor style changes
- **Discussion:** This chapter should integrate findings from all of the manuscript chapters, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the overall dissertation project, and suggest directions for future research
- **Appendices:** This should include supplemental material (text, graphical or analytic) that, due to space limitations, could not be included in the journal articles but are essential for demonstrating mastery of key concepts, methods, or public health contributions. These may include questionnaires or other instruments or supplementary tables or other materials related to the manuscript chapters. Within the "Methods" Appendix, please include details about Study Procedures

and Sampling and Measures, including details on the construction of variables as well as evidence for each construct's validity and reliability when applicable.

### 33. Publication and Authorship

Students who wish to submit manuscripts that are part of their dissertation to peer-reviewed journals prior to the dissertation defense may do so only with the permission of all of their dissertation committee members. The committee chair and the student must allow for adequate time for committee member review of the materials.

Consistent with authorship guidelines in the field and the collaborative nature of the dissertation project, the committee chair is usually included as a co-author if the manuscripts in the student's dissertation are submitted for publication. Other committee members may also be included as co-authors depending on their contributions. Students are encouraged to begin discussing authorship guidelines with their committee chair at the start of the dissertation writing process. Committee chairs are encouraged to help the student negotiate authorship roles with the committee members and other contributors.

## THE DISSERTATION DEFENSE

### 34. When is the student ready to move to the oral defense?

The candidate should work closely with his or her Dissertation Chair as he or she conducts the research and prepares manuscripts. Students may submit the full dissertation draft to the Dissertation Committee for review and written comments a minimum of 13 weeks prior to the anticipated defense date allowing enough time for the student to respond to comments and make revisions for additional review by the Dissertation Committee.

As the time approaches to defend the dissertation, the candidate should work with the Committee, outside Readers and the program director to set a date and time for the dissertation defense and reserve a location and the necessary equipment for presenting the dissertation slides or other materials. (Note that different locations may have different capabilities in terms of technology or technical support.) A final FULL copy of the dissertation document must be sent to all committee members at least four to eight weeks prior to this scheduled date. Should any committee member deem that the student is not ready to proceed to the defense, they must notify the Dissertation Committee Chair one week prior to the date of the scheduled defense. The candidate may work with the department program director or assigned department administrative resources to coordinate logistics. It is highly recommended to test, in advance, any technology planned to be used, particularly if any Committee Members or Readers will be participating via remote access.

### 35. How much time should students give Committee Members and Readers to review the dissertation?

Students must submit the final dissertation draft, to Readers and Committee Members by **a minimum of four to eight weeks before the dissertation defense date.**

Should students and the Dissertation Chair opt to receive feedback from committee members, a 3-4 week review period is required for feedback from Dissertation Committee Members on chapters or sections of the proposal or dissertation prior to the review of the full dissertation. Students should take review periods into consideration when developing their research plan and timetable. During this review period, it is a good time to complete and submit the *Doctoral Final Dissertation Defense Request Form* to [PhDSBS\\_Admin@gwu.edu](mailto:PhDSBS_Admin@gwu.edu).

### 36. How long is the oral dissertation defense?

The oral dissertation defense is generally scheduled for two hours.

### 37. Who generally attends the dissertation defense?

The Dissertation Committee and Readers attend the dissertation defense. The department PhD director or other representative from the program presides over the meeting. The person who presides over the dissertation does not serve as an examiner.

Often, other students and faculty, or guests from outside of the department or university, also attend. Family and friends are often in attendance for the dissertation defense.

The following procedures must be completed in the weeks leading up to the scheduled defense:

- In conjunction with Dissertation Committee Chair, the department PhD Director provides approval to proceed the defense **five weeks prior to the date of the scheduled defense** (i.e., the Doctoral Final Dissertation Defense Request Form must be signed and submitted).
- The candidate must provide the program Graduate Student Assistant (GSA) with the date, time, location, headshot, and dissertation title **two weeks prior to the scheduled defense date** to ensure the defense is adequately publicized to the department and/or school.

### 38. What happens during the defense?

The student will deliver a 20-minute presentation (with handouts and/or slides) followed by questions from the committee members and readers on any aspect of the candidate's research. The examiners engage the student in a rigorous and collegial fashion about the research. The candidate is expected to respond to these questions in a thoughtful and thorough manner. The oral defense provides the candidate with the opportunity to expand upon the salient characteristics of the dissertation research, to identify areas for additional research, to evaluate the research methods and their strengths and limitations, and to place the work in a larger public health context.

Each member/reader will ask one question per round. Rounds of questions will continue until all committee members are satisfied (typically no more than 4 rounds). After committee members are complete with questions, the dissertation chair will invite questions from the audience. The entire process will typically take 1-1.5 hours. When questions are complete, the chair will ask the audience and student to leave the room for committee deliberation. The Dissertation Committee and Readers discuss the candidate's defense, vote on whether the candidate passed, and identify any required revisions to the dissertation.

After the deliberation is complete, the student will be invited back into the room to receive the committee's decision. It is anticipated that the entire process will take no more than 2 hours.

### 39. Who are the voting members of the oral defense?

The oral examination includes no fewer than five voting members—a minimum of three members of the Dissertation Committee and two outside Readers. The voting members will determine whether the dissertation is approved in its current form, approved with modifications, or not approved. All members of the Committee must participate in the oral examination. The person who presides over the dissertation defense is not a voting member.

If applicable, the student and the Dissertation Committee will identify a timetable and process for revisions as soon as deliberations are complete when the student is informed of the decision.

The *Doctoral Dissertation Defense Report Form* must be signed by all voting members of the Committee and the Readers. It should be submitted to PhD Student Records ([PhDSBS\\_Admin@gwu.edu](mailto:PhDSBS_Admin@gwu.edu)).

### 40. What is the role of the Dissertation Chair during the defense?

The Dissertation Chair typically plays the role of advocate for the student; while Chairs may participate in questioning the candidate, it is often the case that the Chair abstains from the rounds of questioning.

### 41. What are the requirements to be registered as a student while revising my dissertation?

Students must be registered throughout the time they are working on the dissertation, its defense, or the revision process prior to official submission as a requirement for graduation. Students cannot be cleared for graduation if they are not currently registered. Students who have satisfied all required credits may enroll for Continuous Enrollment (nominal fee) through the semester in which they will graduate.

## GRADUATION

### 42. What is the process to submit the final, approved dissertation for graduation?

The candidate must complete any revisions and receive final approval from the Dissertation Committee before submitting the dissertation electronically to ProQuest/UMI. The Electronic Thesis/Dissertation (ETD) replaces the bound dissertation, which is no longer accepted at GWU. At the time of approval, the PhD Director concurrently will issue credit for the student's dissertation research credits, by completing and submitting grade change forms for all enrolled dissertation credits to Student Records.

All doctoral candidates are required to submit the final dissertation (with all the approved changes) to <http://library.gwu.edu/etds/> in the semester they apply for graduation. The deadline for submission in ETD for fall, spring, and summer graduations change with each academic year, typically between 2 to 4 weeks prior to degree conferral dates. The submission deadlines can be found at <https://library.gwu.edu/etd/submission-deadlines>. (NOTE: To ensure you meet the deadline, it is recommended that you upload the final document **at least 5 business days prior** to the ETD submission deadline.)

*Doctoral candidates should review formatting guidelines prior to submitting the final dissertation to the Dissertation Committee.* ETD has specific formatting requirements that are the responsibility of the doctoral candidate. The final dissertation cannot be submitted to ETD unless it conforms to these requirements.

After submission, the library will check the format before forwarding the ETD to the Office of Student Affairs - Student Records. Student Records will review the ETD and confirm that all doctoral requirements have been met and submit the ETD to Proquest/UMI.

### 43. When do students officially graduate from the Milken Institute SPH at the George Washington University?

Students may have their degrees conferred in January, May and August of each year; however, commencement is held only once -- in May of each year. Students may participate in the doctoral hooding and commencement exercises in May following completion of all of their program requirements. It is common for students who have their degrees conferred in January or August to return to campus the following May to participate in commencement ceremonies, including the doctoral hooding.

### 44. What forms must be submitted to the Office of Student Records to graduate?

Notice to the Office of Student Records must be received according to its deadlines to be eligible to participate in commencement in May.

The application for Graduation must be completed and submitted to the SPH Office of Student Records in the semester in which you will graduate in accordance with the established deadlines. For Spring graduates, please make note of the specific deadlines to be eligible to participate in commencement in May. The Application for Graduation form should be submitted to the Office of Student Affairs - Student Records or email [gwsphrecords@gwu.edu](mailto:gwsphrecords@gwu.edu) and can be found via the website- <http://publichealth.gwu.edu/academics/forms>.

Upon receipt of the Application for Graduation, Student Records will email a checklist of graduation requirements directly to the student to prepare for the audit of student records. Students should review graduation requirements carefully with the department program director before applying for graduation to be aware of what items may be missing **before** submitting the graduation application.

## REFERENCES

A. Website (forms, handbook, program guides, etc.)

<http://publichealth.gwu.edu/academics>

B. Himmelfarb APA Citation Services: <http://libguides.gwumc.edu/APA>

C. Himmelfarb Health Sciences Research Commons – GWSPH:

<https://hsrc.himmelfarb.gwu.edu/sphhs/>

D. GW Writing Center: <http://www.gwu.edu/~gwriter/>

E. IRB website: <http://humanresearch.gwu.edu/>

F. GW Policies:

<http://my.gwu.edu/mod/upolicy/?CFID=31321731&CFTOKEN=f6b4e3c40de95ca4-01CCFCF1-D782-8FD3-763184E0FC6EBDC2>

G. To find completed dissertations:

<http://search.proquest.com/pqdtft/advanced?ip?accountid=11243>

## WHERE TO SUBMIT REQUIRED DOCUMENTS

All completed and signed petitions, registration, and graduation forms should be submitted to the Milken Institute SPH Office of Student Affairs - Student Records (email [gwsphrefords@gwu.edu](mailto:gwsphrefords@gwu.edu)).

All other required PhD program forms should be submitted to PhD Student Records ([PhDSBS\\_Admin@gwu.edu](mailto:PhDSBS_Admin@gwu.edu)) Students are advised to keep a copy of all forms for their records. Required Dissertation Forms include:

- Doctoral Dissertation Committee Approval Form
- Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Defense Request Form
- Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Defense Report Form
- Doctoral Final Dissertation Defense Request Form
- Doctoral Dissertation Defense Report Form