



**Doctor of Philosophy in Social and Behavioral Sciences in Public Health  
Handbook  
Policies and Procedures\***

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\*University and School policies and procedures as outlined in the George Washington University Bulletin and the Milken Institute SPH website apply to PhD students.

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## **PhD in Social Behavioral Sciences Program Director**

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### **Overview**

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree offered by the Milken Institute School of Public Health (SPH) at the George Washington University prepares professionals to assume roles as practitioners or academics, with a strong background in the theory of social and behavior change, study design and evaluation, and statistical methods. The PhD in SBS is designed to develop public health scholars who are skilled in the development, implementation, evaluation and communication of theory and evidence-based programs that encourage healthy behaviors (or reduce risky ones) conducive to optimal health and development in individuals, communities and populations. It enables professionals to address public health issues by marshalling research and analytic skills to develop innovative approaches to understand health and to promote and advocate for improved health outcomes.

The PhD degree is the terminal degree in the professional discipline of public health. Consistent with this advanced professional orientation, the PhD degree prepares future public health researchers to apply critical thinking and rigorous research methods to the complex practical problems facing practitioners and policy-makers in public health practice.

The PhD degree is designed to both follow and promote the principles of academic public health practice. As noted in a publication of the Association of Schools of Public Health, public health practice is "...the strategic, organized, and interdisciplinary application of knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to perform essential public health services and other activities to improve the population's health." Academic public health practice is "...the applied, interdisciplinary pursuit of scholarship in the field of public health." Current events consistently illustrate the need for public health professionals who can provide the research to expand and strengthen the US and global public health systems. The PhD degree is designed to prepare professionals with the necessary skills to provide this research.

### **Admissions Requirements**

The Department of Prevention and Community Health in the Milken Institute SPH offers a PhD degree in social and behavioral sciences in public health. For all prospective applicants to the PhD degree, it is suggested that you review the "Before you apply FAQ," program website, and faculty pages to ensure that your interests and goals are an appropriate fit for the program and department.

The PhD degree is currently open for admission fall semester of even-numbered years (e.g., 2020, 2022). The PhD degree is designed for students or professionals who are seeking training to become public health experts. The PhD is a full-time program.

Completed applications must be received on or before December 1<sup>st</sup> in the year prior to matriculation admitting years (e.g., 2019, 2021) to be considered for admission for the Fall cohort.

Only completed applications, with all supporting materials, will be considered for admission. All applicants complete one application through SOPHAS, the on-line, national application for Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) accredited schools of public health ([www.sophas.org](http://www.sophas.org)). *All applicants, without exception, must submit Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores (no older than 5 years) to SOPHAS.*

For International students, entry into the PhD program will follow the general GW policies regarding English language proficiency for graduate admissions. They can be found here:

<https://graduate.admissions.gwu.edu/international-student-application-requirements>.

Applicants are required to include a personal statement. The personal statement must be specific to the applicant's reasons for application and particular interest in attending the Milken Institute SPH and studying SBS. Applicants must include their academic and career interests and professional and volunteer experiences as they relate to the specialty field. Applicants are encouraged to detail how their experience and interests align with those of faculty in the department of Prevention and Community Health. The statement should also include a description of current skills and future goals related to research and problem-solving in public health.

Applicants must identify the specific specialty field to which they are applying and address the reasons for their interest in the program. All completed applications will be reviewed by the respective program director who oversees the program at the departmental level; competitive applicants will be interviewed in-person or by telephone. Applicants will receive an admission decision by mid-March. Once the Declaration of Intent has been signed and returned to our Admissions Department, accepted students will receive an email confirmation including "Next Steps for Enrolling Students." This email provides instructions for how to secure a GW email address and GW ID card (called GWorld), register for classes, and other important details to be completed before registration and orientation.

### **Registration Procedures**

It is necessary to remain an active student in the PhD program.

- PhD students must register every Fall and Spring semester until they have successfully completed all PhD program requirements, including defense, final approval and submission of their dissertation. Registration must be consecutive, or the student will be considered out of status. Students may register for additional classes during summer sessions but are not required to do so to remain in status.
- PhD students who fall out of status by not registering for each Fall and Spring semester will be withdrawn from the program and required to petition for re-admission through the Milken Institute SPH Office of Admissions.
- PhD students are expected to be actively engaged in fulfilling the requirements for the PhD degree. Students must register for 9 credit hours during the first two years in the program. Special permission from the Program Director must be obtained in order to enroll in more than 9 credit hours. In year 3, students may drop to 1 credit (of continuing research or dissertation hours) with permission of the program director and the major advisor. This minimum can be met through course enrollment, or through registration in Dissertation Research, Continuous Enrollment, or Continuing Research. The type of registration depends on the student's progress in the program:
  - Dissertation Research: Only PhD students who have successfully completed the dissertation proposal phase may register for PUBH 8999-Dissertation Research. Students may register for one or more dissertation research credits per semester. 7 Dissertation Research credits is required to complete the PhD program.
  - Continuing Research: PhD students who have met the coursework requirements, but have not yet successfully defended their dissertation proposal, must register for one credit of Continuing Research (PUBH 0940), which requires a tuition payment of one full credit hour. Continuing Research credits cannot be used to satisfy any of the credit requirements for the

PhD; they do not substitute for the 7 Dissertation Research credits that are required for graduation.

- **Continuous Enrollment:** PhD students who have completed their Dissertation Research credit requirements may register for UNIV 0982-Continuous Enrollment with approval from the PhD Program Director. The University charges a nominal fee for Continuous Enrollment. Once approved, students may continue to register for Continuous Enrollment throughout the remainder of their PhD program, consistent with overall program requirements related to the 7-year time limit for the degree. Continuous Enrollment is most commonly used by students in their last semester or two of the program, as they complete the dissertation and prepare for the dissertation defense.
- Students have the option of taking a Leave of Absence for up to 2 semesters while enrolled in the PhD program. Students must apply for a Leave of Absence by completing a petition during the Fall or Spring registration period; the petition must be approved by the PhD Program Director and major advisor. Each Leave of Absence must be separately approved and can be taken sequentially or at different times while in the program. Students must officially register for Leave of Absence to stay in status. The University charges a nominal registration fee to remain enrolled during a Leave of Absence.
- Students are responsible for completing and submitting all required registration materials. Students are advised to periodically review their registration actions to make certain they are accurate and current. Students should always retain copies of all registration materials and paperwork submitted to the University or the Milken Institute SPH.

### **Professional Enhancement Activities**

Doctoral degree students in the Milken Institute School of Public Health are *required* to attend eight hours of professional enhancement activities in research ethics during their program. Professional enhancement activities supplement the academic curriculum and help prepare students to participate actively in the research community. Students can fulfill this requirement by attending workshops, seminars, or other relevant professional meetings, by our GWU IRB. The Professional Enhancement form is available at <http://publichealth.gwu.edu/academics/forms>.

In addition, PhD students funded by a GTA are required to take the GTAP Online Orientation and Graduate Assistant Certification Course (UNIV 0250.DE).

### **Timeline for Completion of the Program**

PhD students must complete all requirements of the degree program within seven years. Students are expected to be actively engaged in their course of study throughout their time in the PhD program.

The program is designed to enable full-time students to complete all requirements and graduate within four years. Students complete most coursework over a two-year period. Most students take the comprehensive exams in the summer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the program. Students use an additional 18-24 months to develop dissertation proposals, conduct doctoral research and defend their dissertation.

The following excerpt is from the PhD Dissertation Guide – Frequently Asked Questions available on the source and the student resources website (<https://publichealth.gwu.edu/content/services-students>).

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.

The following provides an example of a reasonable timetable for completion of the program for a student who begins the PhD program in Fall 2020:

- Complete most required coursework by the end of Year 2
- Take comprehensive exam at the end of Year 2
- Enroll in Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences and other elective courses – Fall Year 3
- Defend dissertation proposal – Year 3
- Conduct dissertation research – Years 3 and 4
- Defend dissertation – Year 4 or 5

Students who require additional time beyond this example should consider the following in planning their course of study:

- Comprehensive exams must be successfully completed within three years of entering the program. (Students generally complete most coursework within two years and take the comprehensive exam soon after).
- Students must successfully defend their dissertation proposal within four years of entering the program. (Most students will defend their proposal by the end of their third year in the program.)
- Students must successfully defend their dissertation and complete all requirements of the degree within seven years of entering the program.

### PhD Core Competencies

Doctoral study is a multifaceted and complex challenge that begins with thoughtful planning and deliberate execution with the guidance of faculty members. The experience culminates with the awarding of the PhD degree to candidates who successfully complete these requirements as outlined in this document and the program guides. Progression through the PhD degree requires dedication, commitment, and persistence.

Upon completion of the PhD degree, students will demonstrate ability in the following core competencies:

- Synthesize the research literature in public health social and behavioral sciences as well as be able to compare and contrast prominent social and behavioral science theories.

Relevant Courses and Experiences	
PUBH 8408	Topics in Health Behavior Research and Practice Application- Doctoral Seminar
PUBH 8409	Health Communication Research- Doctoral Seminar
PUBH 8434	Behavioral Medicine and Public Health

- Critically examine and employ distinct theories, or combinations of theories, at multiple levels to study health outcomes.

Relevant Courses and Experiences

Experiences	
PUBH 8434	Behavioral Medicine and Public Health
Comprehensive Exams	

- Demonstrate advanced knowledge in the principles of evaluation and study design and data analysis as well as develop evidence-based questions and predictions, and gather, synthesize, and interpret empirical evidence.

Relevant Courses and Experiences	
PUBH 8416	Study Design and Evaluation Methods
PUBH 8417	Qualitative Research Methods and Analysis
PUBH 8418	Applied Statistical Applications
PUBH 8419	Measurement in Public Health and Health Services Research – Doctoral Seminar

- Exhibit the ability to apply scientific knowledge to develop new conceptual models and/or research predictions, including justifying new questions with existing literature, selecting appropriate research methods to study those questions, and indicating the potential contributions of the proposed research.

Relevant Courses and Experiences	
PUBH 8435	Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences
Research with advisor	

- Report research objectively, insightfully, and in the context of theory and prior research.

Relevant Courses and Experiences	
PUBH 8999	Dissertation Research
Research with advisor	

- Have an awareness of, and adhere to, the ethical standards of the discipline for the conduct of scientific research.

Relevant Courses and Experiences	
Professional Enhancement (PE) hours in research ethics	

- Gain competency in classroom instruction and practices in substantive issues in public health social and behavioral sciences.

Relevant Courses and Experiences
Instructional time

**Role of PhD Program Director and Faculty Advisor**

Doctoral students are assigned to a faculty advisor (Advisor) following admission. The role of the Advisor is to guide the students in their professional development, coursework, and area of study. The Doctoral Program Director (Program Director) will help students successfully matriculate and schedule their courses for the first fall semester only. Subsequently, the Advisor will be responsible for recommending classes based on the student’s research interests, approving Professional Enhancement opportunities, and supporting the student’s research plan (PhD).

The Program Director provides overall cohort advising and will meet with doctoral students by cohort in the fall and spring semesters of the first two years. The Program Director will approve all final course decisions and petitions.

The Advisor guides their student(s) in the selection of his or her coursework plan, research opportunities, professional/leadership development, dissertation research topics, and selection of the dissertation committee. The Advisor may become the dissertation chair or a member of the committee, but it is not required. Finally, the Advisor provides the Program Director with an update on the student’s progress at the end of each academic year.

The roles of the Program Director and Advisor are pivotal to the student’s progression through the pre-candidacy phase. They support the Milken Institute SPH’s commitment to student development by:

- Guiding the student in the development of a program of study that sequences courses, including the selection of elective courses, and selection of professional research development work that enhances the dissertation research experience during the candidacy phase. The program of study is based upon the student’s entry knowledge, skills, and experiences; his or her career objectives; and the expectations of the applicable field for scholarly professionals. Any variation from the program of study requires the approval of the department program director.
- Mentoring the student in his or her development as a scholar and professional, including addressing interpersonal skills as necessary.
- Guiding the student in later semesters to consider the focus of the dissertation research, exploring various potential topics and questions, and weighing the feasibility, advantages, and disadvantages of each.
- Guiding the student’s development in the core competencies for doctoral students: knowledge of foundations, critical literature reviews, inquiry and research methods, clarity of written and oral thought, professional development, technological skills, and knowledge of the specialty area.
- Setting clear expectations and guiding the student toward achieving a high level of quality in all written work.
- Guiding the student’s preparation for the comprehensive examination.
- Serving as a resource as the student selects a dissertation committee chair and committee members.

**PhD Phases:**

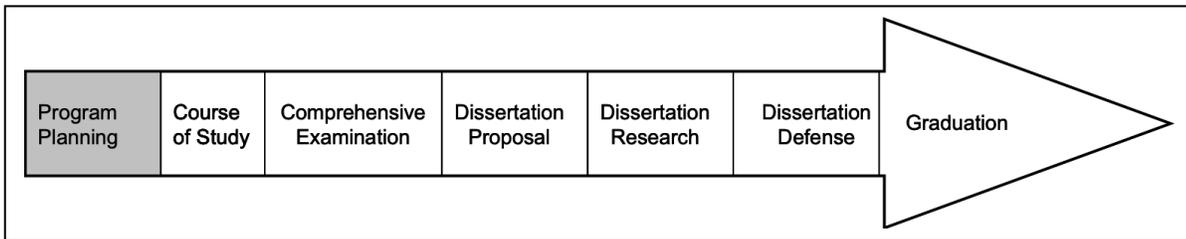
The Doctor of Philosophy Degree is divided into two phases: pre-candidacy and candidacy. During pre-candidacy a student completes the requirements through the comprehensive examination. Upon satisfactory completion of the requirements associated with pre-candidacy, including successfully completing the comprehensive exam, the student moves to the candidacy phase.

**The PhD Program is designed as a four-year program. Students must be full time (i.e., 9 credits/semester) for the first two years. Students must complete all requirements of the doctoral program within seven (7) years. Students are expected to make meaningful progress toward completion of the degree requirements throughout their time in the program.**

PhD students are expected to pursue opportunities to contribute knowledge to their field of study through peer-reviewed publications. PhD students routinely collaborate with faculty as co-authors on publications and also sometimes use class assignments to conduct research and analysis for a publishable research report. These opportunities are available throughout all phases of the student’s doctoral experience.

**PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE:**

**1. Program Planning: The Program of Study**



Careful planning with the department program director is the important first step. The student and program director will discuss the student’s interests, goals and experiences, and prepare a Program of Study. All courses must be listed on the Program of Study Form and any variation from this original plan requires the department program director’s approval and signature. A timeline for completion of coursework will also be discussed and agreed upon.

**This PhD program requires a minimum of 48 credits. No transfer credits are accepted.**

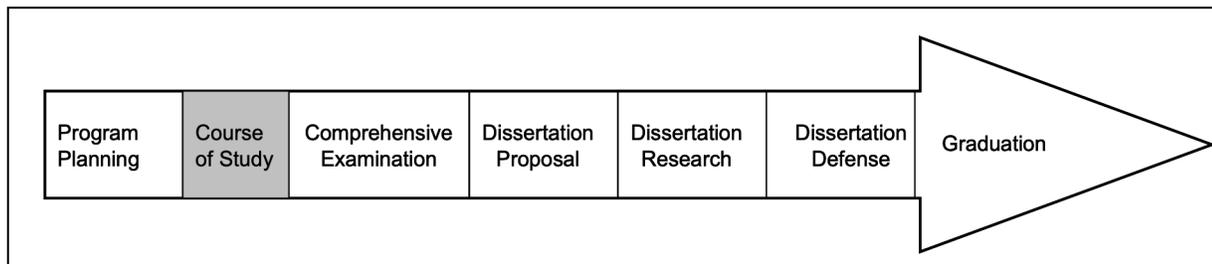
There are four categories of doctoral, didactic courses associated with the pre-candidacy phase:

1. Required foundational and research courses (12 credits)
2. Required statistics courses (9 credits)
3. Required methods courses (9 credits)
4. Elective courses (9 credits required, depending on specialty field)

Note: Additional elective coursework may be completed pre- or post-candidacy with approval of the Advisor. For further information, please consult with the department program director.

**\*See program guide for detailed course requirements\***

## 2. Course Enrollment

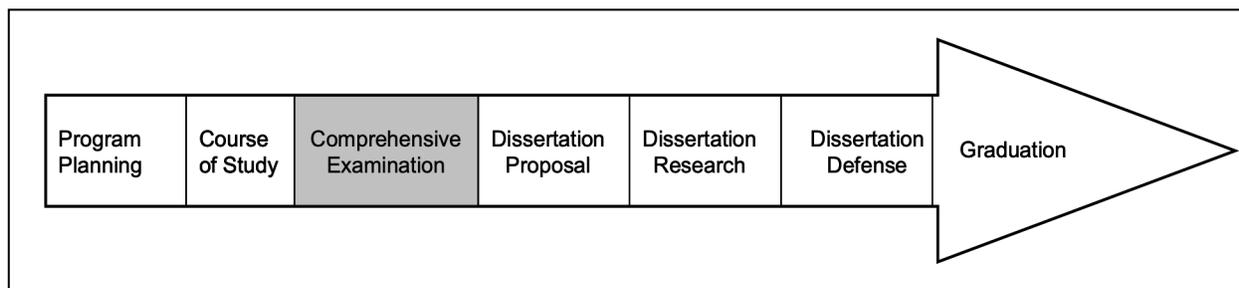


Once the Program of Study has been developed and approved/signed by the department program director, PhD students must register for classes according to the procedures received from the Office of Admissions.

Students should review their approved program of study each semester with the department program director for accuracy and relevance. Any changes to the Program of Study must be approved by the department program director. The signed Program of Study should be submitted to The SBS Program Director for retention.

PhD students must maintain a 3.0 GPA to remain in good standing.

## 3. Comprehensive Examination



The comprehensive exam assesses the knowledge of general public health concepts and the student's specialty area. The exam challenges students to synthesize theory, concepts, research, and practice in the student's specialty area. Students take comprehensive exams once all core and specialty field required courses are completed. The exact date of the comprehensive exam is determined in consultation with the department program director.

Once students pass the comprehensive exam, they are officially admitted into the candidacy phase. Students who fail to complete or pass comprehensive exams will be offered the opportunity to retake the exam one additional time. The second exam must be taken within one year of the initial exam. Failure to complete or pass the comprehensive exams will be grounds for termination from the PhD program.

### CANDIDACY PHASE\*:

*\*Please see the Dissertation Guide-Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) available on our student resources website for comprehensive information about the Candidacy phase. Below is just summary information.*

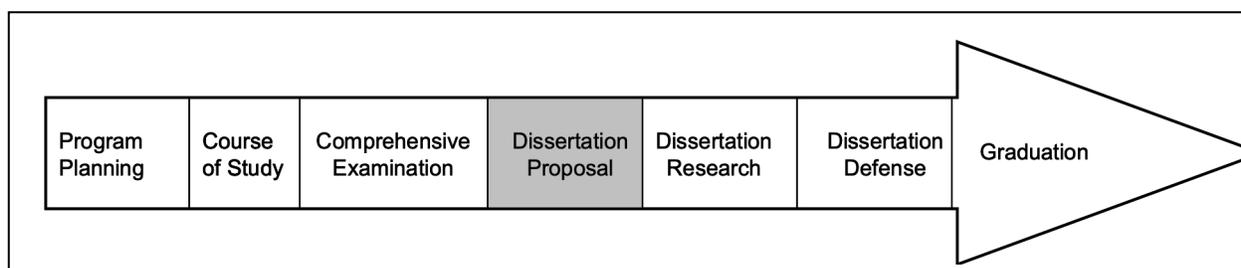
The objective of the dissertation is to demonstrate that the candidate has synthesized the knowledge gained during the pre-candidacy phase and is able to apply this knowledge to the resolution of a concrete and substantial applied research problem. The dissertation also demonstrates that the candidate has mastered research methods to successfully conduct scientific research.

The dissertation should uniquely contribute to the student’s specialty area. Dissertation research will:

- Be guided by relevant and current theories or conceptual frameworks.
- Use appropriate and scientifically rigorous methods.
- Propose new research.
- Contribute to public health policy and practice either domestically or internationally.

The research should result in the identification or assessment of feasible solutions or recommendations to the selected problem or issue, appropriate to the context in which they occur. Candidates are expected to demonstrate competencies in structured scientific inquiry, research design and analysis, and the primary methods of social research including qualitative methods and/or quantitative methods. The Dissertation Guide FAQ is available for students in the candidacy phase of the program.

### 1. Dissertation Proposal



After passing the comprehensive exam all doctoral candidates register for and complete *Dissertation Proposal Development for Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Prior to registering for this course, students must:

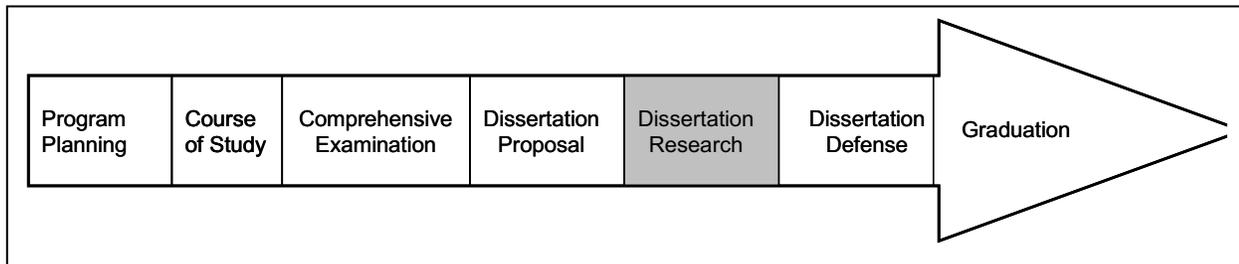
- Identify a dissertation topic;
- Select a chair for the Dissertation Research Committee;
- Develop a one-page abstract on the research topic; and
- Receive approval from the course Instructor.

Course	Title	Credits
PUBH 8435	<i>Dissertation Proposal Development for the Social and Behavioral Sciences</i>  Prerequisites: Passing Comprehensive Exams, Approval of Program Director, one-page abstract.	2

A draft of the dissertation proposal is developed during the dissertation proposal should provide a clear, concise, and thorough plan of proposed research. While enrolled in *Dissertation Proposal Development for the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, students must identify and confirm their Dissertation Research Committee members and submit the Doctoral Dissertation Committee Approval Form to PhD Student Records ([PhDSBS\\_Admin@gwu.edu](mailto:PhDSBS_Admin@gwu.edu)). The Doctoral Dissertation Committee Approval Form can be accessed at: <https://publichealth.gwu.edu/content/services-students#PhD>.

For more information on each part of the candidacy phase, dissertation formats, development of a dissertation committee and required forms, please see the Dissertation Guide FAQ on the website.

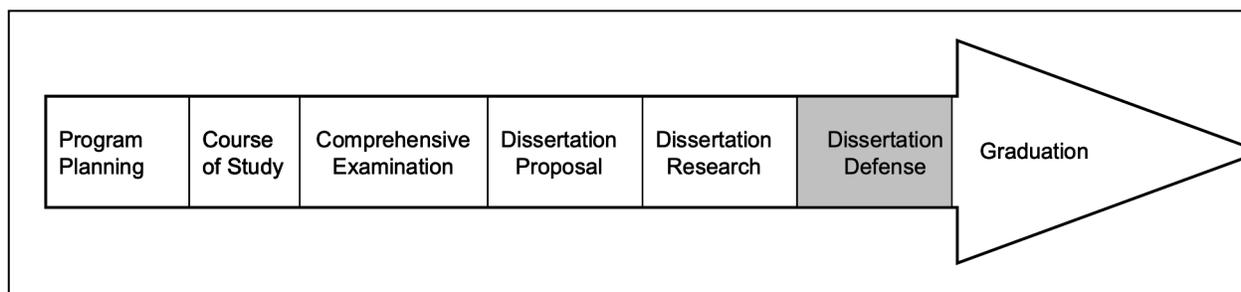
## 2. Dissertation Research



Once the proposal has been successfully defended, students enroll in PUBH 8999 Dissertation Research each semester. Candidates must take 7 dissertation research credits. Once all coursework and dissertation research credit requirements are met, students may register for Continuous Enrollment (nominal fee/semester) each fall and spring semester until they complete and defend their dissertation. Registering for Continuous Enrollment requires the PhD Program Director approval. Students may not enroll in Continuous Enrollment until they have satisfied all their requirements, including dissertation research credits.

Students may not enroll in PUBH 8999 Dissertation Research until they have successfully defended their dissertation proposal. Students who are not eligible to enroll in PUBH 8999 must register for other course offerings or enroll in one credit of Continuing Research (PUBH 0940).

## 3. Dissertation Defense

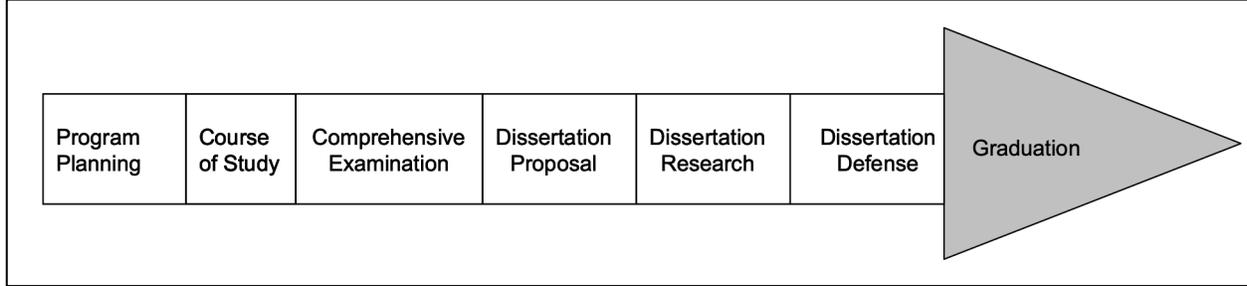


Students preparing for the official oral defense of their dissertation should be thinking ahead to the formatting requirements for the final document and the graduation clearance requirements for the Milken Institute SPH. The Dissertation Research Committee must be provided ample time to review (at least two weeks) the complete draft prior to scheduling the defense date. Refer to the Dissertation Guide FAQs on the website for additional information about the dissertation defense.

### Disposition of the Dissertation

All doctoral candidates are required to submit the FINAL dissertation (with all the approved changes) electronically to ProQuest/UMI in accordance with all requirements: <http://library.gwu.edu/etds/>. Please see the Dissertation Guide FAQs on the website for additional information.

## PhD Degree Certification and Graduation



Requirements, policies, and procedures to apply for graduation are detailed in the University Bulletin and the Milken Institute SPH website.

Students must submit an Application for Graduation:

<http://www.gwu.edu/~regweb/web-content/onlineforms/applicationforgraduation.pdf>

The completed Application for Graduation is submitted to the Milken Institute SPH in-person to the Office of Student Affairs - Student Records or email [gwsphrecords@gwu.edu](mailto:gwsphrecords@gwu.edu). Students are advised to keep a copy of the form for their records.

- Deadlines for submission are noted on the Application for Graduation.
- Students planning to submit an Application for Graduation should contact their advisor/department program director well in advance (at the latest during the prior semester) to review transcripts ensuring that all graduation requirements have been met. This includes confirming program requirements have been completed and all grades have been submitted.
- Once the Application for Graduation has been submitted, students will be contacted by Milken Institute SPH Student Records department with a checklist of items that need to be completed.

### Graduation Events

Graduation ceremonies for GW students occur in May of each calendar year. Students completing degree requirements in August, January or May are invited to participate in the May graduation events, which include the University Hooding Ceremony (specifically for doctoral graduates on campus), the Milken Institute School of Public Health Celebration (on campus), and the University Commencement (on the National Mall). Students who wish to participate in the May graduation events must notify the Office of Student Records, in accordance with their deadlines, to receive tickets/notifications of these events if you choose to participate.

***University and School policies and procedures as outlined in the George Washington University Bulletin and the Milken Institute SPH website apply to PhD-SBS students.***