



**Tulane University**  
**School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine**

**Culminating Experience Handbook**  
**For Academic and Professional Master's Degrees**

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# Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine

## Competency Framework for the Culminating Experience

### INTRODUCTION

The master's programs in Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine require student to complete a culminating experience (Integrated Learning Experience).

The culminating experience is the means by which students synthesize and integrate knowledge acquired in course work and apply theory and principles. The product of the culminating experience is a high quality written document that demonstrates achievement of the core and program competencies. The options for culminating experience reflect the focus of the degree program:

#### **Professional degrees – MPH, MSPH, MPH&TM, MHA degrees**

- Public Health Analysis – School-wide option
- Comprehensive Examination (option available only in some departments)
- Capstone course or integrated seminar (option in development in some depts.)

#### **Academic research degree – MS degrees**

- Research thesis

The culminating experience is a planned part of the master's program that integrates the student's knowledge and skills gained in the core and programmatic requirements. The student and advisor should identify the culminating experience at least 1 semester prior to the student's anticipated graduation. Students in professional degrees must register for SPHL 7950 Culminating Experience at least once. Student in academic research degrees must register in their departmental thesis course at least once. Registration does not indicate completion of the requirement. Students may register in culminating experience or research theses up to 2 times. The student is responsible for obtaining IRB approval for any project that requires it.

**Note: A separate practicum is required for the professional degrees in addition to the culminating experience.**

### PROFESSIONAL DEGREE CULMINATING EXPERIENCES

#### *Overarching Practicum Competencies*

1. Apply public health core and program knowledge and skills to a public health issue
2. Analyze public health issues using evidence-based practice, theories, and methods
3. Clearly communicate findings and results orally and in written form.

#### *Program competencies:*

The student and advisor will identify three program competencies to be demonstrated in the selected culminating experience option.

### PUBLIC HEALTH ANALYSIS

The public health analysis is a planned project that addresses a public health issue and demonstrates the application of skills, synthesis of knowledge and analysis of real world problems in public health. The public health analysis project may take several forms and all must generate a high quality written document that could be used by external partners. Examples of types of projects for the public health analysis include: an applied research project that examines a public health issue; critical review of a public health issue that include synthesis and analysis of the topic with recommendations; evaluation of a public health program or project; policy analysis with supporting research; training manual.

The advisor and student develop 3 specific objectives for the PHA that demonstrate the program competencies. The PHA report should address a public health issue and demonstrate the integration program competencies, analytic skills and the ability to communicate in writing and orally. Note: the student must do at least one oral presentation and it may be either in the culminating experience or practicum. See Page 6 for guidance on the format for the PHA document. The advisor may modify the format to fit with the PHA project, but the required elements must be included.

**Evaluation:** During development of the PHA, the advisor and student will develop an assessment rubric that will be used to assess fulfillment of the specific objectives. After completion of the PHA report, the advisor should meet with the student and use the rubric to review the strengths and areas for improvement. Programs may modify the assessment rubric to fit the PHAs conducted by students in that program.

Example of an assessment rubric for the PHA Final Report:

	<b>Needs improvement Below Expectations</b>	<b>Good Meets Expectations</b>	<b>Excellent Exceeds Expectations</b>
<b>Goals and Specific objectives Program competencies</b> Up to 5 points	Unclear goals or objectives; the paper does not list the program competencies addressed	Goals and objectives clearly stated; the paper lists the program competencies addressed.	Clearly stated goals with measurable objectives; List of the program competencies addressed.
<b>Topic Statement</b> Up to 5 points	Topic very broad and diffuse and the significance is general in nature	A topic and its significance is succinctly stated	Topic focused on a specific issue with the significance clearly elucidated
<b>Problem Definition</b> Up to 5 points	The problem is not stated clearly and/or is too broad and/or the approach to the problem is vague and not focused on the issue.	The problem is succinctly defined and the approach clearly flows from the problem statement and literature review.	The problem is clearly articulated. The methods and approach will contribute to the question
<b>Literature Review</b> Up to 5 points	The literature review is disorganized not focused on the specific problem.	Literature review is focused showing importance of topic and provides the background for the project;	The literature review is focused and uses the evidence to develop a logical approach to the project design.
<b>Summary of Project and Findings/Results:</b> Up to 20 points	The activities and findings are not organized or do not fulfill the objectives or show use of program skills.	The summary of project activities and findings are well organized and demonstrate program skills.	The summary of the project activities are well organized and show mastery of core and program skills
<b>Analysis and interpretation of results</b> Up to 20 points	The data analysis is incomplete or incorrect methods are used for data analyses.	The data is compiled and analyzed using the appropriate methods.	The analytical methods fit the data and objectives; analyses demonstrate advanced analytical skills.
<b>Discussion</b> Up to 20 points	The discussion is minimal and does not show the relationship between the project findings and objectives; interpretation is not consistent with the data presented. Does not demonstrate the achievement of core or program competencies.	The discussion shows critical thinking and problem solving using data. The interpretation of findings is based on the data and show problem solving skills. Shows achievement of the core and program competencies.	The discussion analyzes the results demonstrating the ability to use data for problem solving and complex analyses. Interpretation of findings relates to objectives. Demonstrates mastery of the core and program competencies.
<b>Conclusions and recommendations</b> Up to 10 points	Are not consistent with the findings and results.	Based on the findings and the use of data for evidence-based decision	Based on the results and show insight into the PH issues and use of data for

		making.	evidence-based decision making.
<b>Written Communication</b> Up to 5 points	The abstract is not organized or descriptive of the project. The paper is not well organized and is difficult to see the flow from the objectives to the conclusions. It has grammatical and spelling errors.	The abstract is concise and accurately describes the project. The paper is well organized and shows consistency and flow from the goals/objectives through the conclusions. It is free of grammatical and spelling errors.	The abstract is concise and succinctly describes the project. The paper is well organized, flows well from the objectives through the conclusion and makes a compelling argument for the problem. It is free of grammatical and spelling errors.
<b>Oral Communication *</b> If applicable  (Combine with written communication points)	Presentation was disorganized and visual materials not clear	Presentation organized and provided clear description of the practicum and outcomes; visual materials were clear; professionalism discussed.	Presentation was well organized and showed impact of the activities and outcomes; visual materials effective; professionalism integrated into presentation.
<b>Professionalism:</b> Up to 5 points	Did not communicate with advisor; Missed appointments; Paper is turned in late or corrections not made.	Communicated with advisor, scheduled appointments to discuss project; Paper turned in on time and corrections made.	Communicated regularly with advisor; was well prepared for meetings; Paper turned in early and corrections made quickly.

\*Oral presentation may be associated with the practicum or the culminating experience.

**Departmental Records:** Upon successful completion of the final paper, the advisor will sign the completion form and the departmental administrator will send the form to the Office of Student Affairs. Each Department will keep a copy of the PHA reports in a digital archive that will be available for program review.

### COMPREHENSIVE EXAM

A program may develop a comprehensive exam that requires the student to integrate, synthesize and analyze public health issues in the field of study, apply core knowledge and skills and demonstrate attainment of program competencies. The comprehensive exam is program specific and addresses both the core and programmatic competencies. There are two approaches to the comprehensive exam:

- 1) A comprehensive essay exam that includes at least 5 questions requires in-depth responses to each question and is equivalent to a full day exam. The program faculty will develop and administer the exam.
- 2) A case study analysis that involves a written analysis that demonstrates the integration and application of the program competencies.

**Evaluation:** The program faculty will assess each student's achievement of program competencies on the exam or in the case study based on an established grading rubric. The advisor will provide feedback to the student on strengths and areas for improvement. The grading rubric should include the core, programmatic and cross cutting competencies. The rubric should assess writing skills. Following the exam, the advisor should meet with the student and review the results of the comprehensive exam and identify the strengths and areas for improvement. If a student does not pass the exam, the student may retake it at the next available exam offering or select another option for the culminating experience.

**Departmental Records:** Upon successful completion of the exam, the advisor will sign the completion form and the departmental administrator will send the form to the Office of Student Affairs. Each department will keep a record of the exam questions or case study, the grading rubric and the completed student written exam or case analyses in a digital archive that will be available for program review.

### **CAPSTONE COURSE OR INTEGRATIVE SEMINAR**

A degree program may offer a semester long capstone course or integrative seminar that investigates public health and professional issues. The capstone course or integrative seminar is specific to each program (not department wide) and has specific objectives and outcome measures based on the program competencies. The course/seminar may include teams of students working on a major project that progress throughout the semester or series of projects/assignments that address a variety of issues. Within the course/seminar, topics should include problem identification, literature reviews, study design and evaluation, selection and appropriate use of methods, data analysis, synthesis of information/data and concepts, discussions and project recommendations. The course should include opportunities for student oral presentations. The course may include field work. The combined projects will include a literature review, data analysis, programmatic skills, critical thinking and discussion of issues that may be combined into the final document.

The course instructor(s) develop the syllabus and guides projects and assignments. At the end of the course, each student must produce a major written report that compiles the project activities and assignments with analyses and a discussion. The document should also include a section on the application of the findings to public health practice.

**Evaluation:** The instructor(s) will develop an assessment rubric that will be distributed to the students at the beginning of the course. The instructor will assess achievement of program competencies and provide feedback on strengths and areas of improvement.

**Departmental Records:** Upon successful completion of the course, the instructor will sign the completion form and the departmental administrator will send the form to the Office of Student Affairs. Each Department will keep a copy of the course syllabus, grading rubric and the final paper (and other assignments if appropriate) in a digital archive that will be available for program review.

## **ACADEMIC DEGREES – MS degrees**

### **Research Thesis**

The MS thesis describes the student's original research and is a scholarly work contributing to the knowledge and practice in the field of public health. The student develops a research project in consultation with the advisor that addresses a public health research topic. The research project will be a venue for the student developing research skills and in-depth knowledge of a research topic. See the departmental MS guidelines regarding program specific requirements and processes, the assembly of a thesis committee, and thesis guidance.

The research thesis is a scholarly document that demonstrates achievement of program competencies and ability to conduct research in the field of study. The thesis should include an abstract, development of a hypothesis, study design, data collection, analysis and interpretation, discussion of the impact of the results on public health issues and demonstrate written and oral communication skills. The format for the research thesis is on pages 7-8. The Department will develop a grading rubric for the evaluation of the thesis.

***Departmental Records:*** Each Department will keep a copy of the thesis in a digital archive that will be available for program review. The final thesis document must be sent to the SPHTM Dean's office and the final document placed in ProQuest for university archives prior to graduation.

## Appendix I

### Format of the Public Health Analysis Report Professional Degree Programs\*

\* Professional Degree Programs include MPH, MSPH, MPHTM, including Joint Degrees

The Public Health Analysis is a substantive review and discussion of the body of knowledge in a selected field of public health. The Public Health Analysis results in a formal, professionally written document. The report should thoroughly and completely address the project undertaken. The final report should be presented to the faculty advisor by the appropriate deadline. The advisor may modify the format to fit with the PHA project, but the required elements must be included.

#### **The Contents of the Public Health Analysis should include:**

**Abstract:** In 500 words or less, provide a concise summary of the project, problem addressed, approach to the project, results/finding, conclusions and recommendations.

**Core and program competencies addressed in this project;** List the core and 2-3 program competencies addressed in the PHA project

**Goals and Specific objectives:** State the specific objectives undertaken in this project/ activity and relate the objectives to fulfillment of the selected program competencies.

**Topic Statement:** Provide a concise statement of the Public Health issue addressed and the significance of the project.

**Problem Definition:** Clearly define the specific public health issue and a rationale for choosing or developing this project. Include a brief review of the pertinent literature that provides the background related to the defined the problem. (The literature review should be concise and focused on the specific aspect of the issue addressed by the project). Describe the approach to the project and fulfillment of the project objectives.

**Summary of Project Findings/ Results:** Present the results of the project and the evidence collected. The summary should show a logical flow of the data collection, results of an evaluation, or means of mitigating an issue that directly relates to the project objectives. This section also includes the selection of appropriate statistical methods and data analyses.

**Discussion:** The discussion analyses the project findings and interprets the results in relation to the stated problem. The discussion should demonstrate critical thinking and the ability to extrapolate to public health issues and policy (if appropriate). The discussion will show how the project findings relate to the project objectives and program competencies. The discussion should also address the student's achievement of the program competencies.

**Conclusions and Recommendations:** Develop 2-3 recommendations. These may address the primary issue, specific policy changes, additional research that may be needed, modifications or expansions of tested interventions or other types of recommendations. The recommendations should show the student's ability to apply use data for evidence-based decision making.

**Appendices:** As needed and may include questionnaires, data collection tools, or other materials developed for the project.



## Appendix II

### Guidelines for the Thesis for Academic Master of Science Degree Programs (MS)

The Thesis is a formal, professional written document that describes the student's original basic research that will contribute to the scope of knowledge in the field of public health. The Thesis describes the student's original applied research that will contribute to the scope of knowledge and practice in the field of public health. The thesis should thoroughly and completely address the project undertaken. The thesis should be presented to the faculty committee by the appropriate deadline.

#### **The Contents of the Thesis should include:**

**Abstract:** In 500 words or less, provide a summary of the project, including key points regarding the background and significance of the conducted research, the methods, the results and main conclusions.

**Background and Significance:** Provide a brief background description and literature relevant to the research problem. State the significance of the study and/or reasons for undertaking the research.

**Literature Review:** Thoroughly review the relevant literature published to date on the research topic including statistical data. Include the theoretical basis/framework for the proposed study. Provide definitions and explanation of terminology as needed.

**Hypothesis and/or Research Question(s):** State the research hypotheses or research questions to be explored. There may be one or more basic hypotheses with secondary hypotheses/research questions.

**Materials and Methods:** Include the basic research design, limitations of the research, sampling, testing, and data collection plan, laboratory techniques as appropriate, statistical analysis, evaluation methods, and project timeline. Indicate if the study was approved by the Tulane Biomedical IRB (if applicable).

**Results:** Describe the research findings in detail. Provide a discussion relevant to each of the specific findings. This may require one or more chapters, depending upon the hypotheses/research questions under consideration. Chapters might also include, as appropriate, additional specific methods that supplement those initially proposed in the Materials and Methods section.

**Discussion:** Provide an overall discussion of the results where main findings are highlighted as an introduction to this chapter. Limitations, validity, and bias should be addressed. The discussion should integrate the research findings from the individual hypotheses or research questions above. Implications for advancing basic knowledge in the selected area of public health should be addressed. Explain how the discipline specific research will contribute to the overall goals of public health.

**Conclusions and Recommendations:** List the critical findings derived from the study. Provide recommendations for future research and address the implications of the study for public health.

**Appendices:** All questionnaires, data collection tools, or other materials developed for the project should be included as appendices, including lists of data that might not be deemed suitable because of their length in the Results section.

(SAMPLE TITLE PAGE for Master's Thesis )

[Title of Thesis]

A Thesis

Submitted the XX day of [Month, Year]

To the Department of [Name Dept]

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

Of the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine

Of Tulane University

For the degree of

Master of Science

By

---

(signature)

[ Type Name of Candidate]

APPROVED: \_\_\_\_\_  
(type name here), Ph.D.  
Committee Chair

\_\_\_\_\_  
(type name here), Ph.D.  
Committee Member

\_\_\_\_\_  
(type name here), Ph.D.  
Committee Member

Appendix III

**Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine  
CULMINATING EXPERIENCE COMPLETION FORM**

Student name \_\_\_\_\_

Student number \_\_\_\_\_

Degree program \_\_\_\_\_

Department \_\_\_\_\_

Expected semester of graduation \_\_\_\_\_

**Option Completed:**

\_\_\_\_ MS Thesis: Title: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Public Health Analysis: Title: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Comprehensive Examination: \_\_\_\_\_ Written Exam \_\_\_\_\_ Case Study Analysis

\_\_\_\_ Capstone Course/ Integrative Seminar Course number:

Date completed: \_\_\_\_\_

**Review:**

\_\_\_\_ Presentation/Poster: Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Faculty evaluation: Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Final report submitted and is on file in the department (Electronic and Hard Copy)

**SIGNATURES**

**Student** \_\_\_\_\_

*DATE* \_\_\_\_\_

**Advisor** \_\_\_\_\_

*DATE* \_\_\_\_\_

**Department Chair** \_\_\_\_\_

*DATE* \_\_\_\_\_