Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine

Culminating Experience Handbook
Competency Framework for the Culminating Experience

Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine
Approved by Executive Committee – May 2008

Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine allows three options for satisfying the requirements for a culminating experience. The choice of available options is made at the department level:

1. Research Thesis
2. Public Health Analysis Manuscript
3. Master’s Comprehensive Examination

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 demonstrates the application of knowledge and skills in the investigation, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of real world problems in public health. The culminating experience also demonstrates the student’s fulfillment of the overarching core competencies and the competencies of their program of study.

The choice of options for the culminating experience should be a planned part of the master’s program and integrated into the advising process. The student and advisor should select the option for the culminating experience at least 1 semester prior to the student’s anticipated graduation. Students must register for culminating experience at least once. Registration does not indicate completion of the requirement, but enrollment during a semester. Students may register in culminating experience up to 4 times. The section will indicate the option selected:

   SPHL 7950-01 Culminating Experience – Thesis
   SPHL 7950-02 Culminating Experience – Public Health Analysis
   SPHL 7950-03 Culminating Experience – Culminating Exam

A Practicum is also required in addition to the culminating experience. It is used to demonstrate the ability to apply this knowledge. The Practicum is a separate requirement in addition to the culminating experience.

Overarching Competencies

1. Demonstrate general knowledge and understanding of the core discipline areas of public health.
2. Apply general knowledge of the core discipline areas of public health to identify and solve public health problems.
3. Investigate public health issues using evidence-based practice.
4. Analyze public health issues using contemporary, theories, and research techniques.
5. Evaluate the outcomes of public health related interventions.
6. Clearly communicate public health concepts orally and in written form.

Although the three culminating experiences differ somewhat, they are all intended to demonstrate the student’s achievement of these overarching competencies.

The Research Thesis and Public Health Analysis require carrying out a project or evaluation that is reported in a manuscript (see Guidelines) that demonstrates an understanding of use of the core disciplines in public health (Overarching competencies 1 and 2). The manuscript should describe the tools of investigation, problem and data analysis, and synthesis and evaluation of a problem.
(Overarching competencies 3, 4, and 5). These papers will also reflect the specific knowledge, skills and abilities relevant to the student’s area of concentration. Faculty evaluation of this culminating experience will be based on the student’s demonstration of the achievement of these overarching competencies. As a major writing activity, these two culminating experiences will show written communication competency (Overarching competency 6). The presentation of their papers at a poster session, department seminar, or other venue will provide the opportunity to demonstrate oral communication competency (Overarching competency 6).

The master’s comprehensive examination must also show that the student has achieved a desired level in these six overarching competencies. The exam consists of two parts:

Part A: Focuses on the school-wide core courses and is geared to assess competency in the core knowledge and application of knowledge and tools in public health (Overarching competencies 1 and 2).

Part B: Assesses the student’s achievement from a discipline specific perspective and is administered separately by each department in the School. Individual departments will develop questions (in written form) to examine the other four overarching competencies. Thus, department examinations will place emphasis on the student’s ability to investigate, analyze, evaluate and communicate a public health problem, activity or issue. Faculty will evaluate the student’s level of successful achievement in each of these six overarching competencies.

For each culminating experience option and practicum, specific competencies that support the overarching competencies are listed below.

**Thesis Option Competencies**
1. Formulate relevant research hypotheses and develop a study design to conduct appropriate research to address the hypotheses.
2. Prepare an appropriate literature review of the research topic.
3. Analyze relevant outcomes and draw appropriate conclusions.
4. Produce a formal professional document that describes the original applied research and contributes to the scope of knowledge in the field of public health.

**Public Health Analysis Option Competencies**
1. Formulate relevant goals and objectives to be explored in a public health analysis.
2. Prepare an appropriate literature review of the analysis topic.
3. Analyze and evaluate the body of knowledge in a selected field of public health.
4. Produce a formal professional document that completely describes the analytical methodologies and results.

**Master's Comprehensive Examination Option Competencies**
Acquisition of discipline specific competencies established by ASPH and listed at [www.asph.org/competency](http://www.asph.org/competency) (Version 2.3 Biostatistics, Environmental Health Sciences, Epidemiology, Health Policy and Management, and Social and Behavioral Sciences) are tested in Part A of the Master’s Comprehensive Examination. Part B of the examination tests acquisition of competencies in the specialized field of study.
Guidelines for the Thesis or Public Health Analysis – Professional Degree Programs*

Approved by Executive Committee: February 6, 2007

* Professional Degree Programs include MPH, MSPH, MPHTM, MD/MPH, MHA, MMM, Joint Degree/MPH, Joint Degree/MSPH.

The Thesis or Public Health Analysis is a formal, professional written document.

- 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 Public Health Analysis is a substantive review and discussion of the body of knowledge in a selected field of public health.

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 Contents of the Thesis or Public Health Analysis 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.

Rationale: This section includes all of the relevant literature published to date on the research topic including statistics. Include the theoretical basis or framework for the propose study, if applicable. Provide definitions and explanation of terminology when needed.

Hypothesis, Research Question(s) and/or Goals and Objectives: State the research hypotheses or research questions (for the Thesis), and/or Goals and Objectives to be explored (for the Public Health Analysis). Generally, one main hypothesis is sufficient; there may be one or more secondary hypotheses/research questions.

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

For the Public Health Analysis, the Materials and Methods section should include information about data sources accessed, key words used in the search, years of review included, and the approach to and criteria for abstracting the data.

Results: Describe in detail the research findings or results. 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**: A general discussion of the results highlighting the main findings should introduce this chapter. Limitations, validity, bias should be addressed. The discussion should integrate the research findings from the individual hypotheses or research questions above and relate the findings to the practice of public health. Further, it should address the public health implications of the study in the wider context of all of the core public health disciplines.

**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 policy and/or practice.

**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.
Guidelines for the Thesis  
Academic Degree Programs (MS)  
Approved by Executive Committee: February 6, 2007

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 report should thoroughly and completely address the project undertaken. The final report should be presented to the faculty advisor 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.
Culminating Examination Process—Part A

The culminating exam is one of the three options for fulfilling the culminating experience requirement for demonstrating the student’s achievement of the overarching core and programmatic competencies. The culminating exam consists of two parts: Part A covers the public health core courses. Part B covers the departmental specialty area.

Advising: Students should confer with their advisor and department to determine if the culminating examination is an option for their degree program. Not all departmental programs offer the option for the culminating exam. The exam may be taken prior to the practicum. Students are encouraged to take the core courses early in their studies and take Part A of the culminating exam prior to their last semester before planned graduation.

Students may take Part A of the culminating exam when they have completed all 6 core courses. Part B (departmental/program) may be taken after completion of programmatic courses. The student must pass Part A before taking Part B.

Registration: Students register for SPHL 7950-03 Culminating Experience Exam. On the day of the exam, students will report to the SPHTM computer labs on the 12th floor Tidewater Building.

Blackboard: The culminating exam is managed through Blackboard (they must select the -03 section to gain access to the culminating exam Blackboard site). Communication about the exam will be through Blackboard using Tulane e-mail addresses. Grades (pass/fail) from Part A will be posted on Blackboard.

Off-site Exceptions: On a case-by-case basis for very special circumstances, the department chair may give permission for a student to take the exam from an off-campus site. The department must to identify and vet the proctor and the exam location. The person must agree to proctor the exam, meet all qualifications and provide a computer and reliable Internet. The department notifies the exam coordinator and provides the proctors name, affiliation, address, phone number and e-mail address at least 3 weeks prior to the exam.

Grading. The culminating examination will be graded as Pass/Fail. A passing grade requires that at least 70% of the questions be answered correctly. No numerical scores will be given. Both parts of the Exam must be passed to fulfill the culminating experience requirement.

Retakes. Students who do not pass the exam have the opportunity for a retake approximately 1 month after the first exam. Those passing the retake may proceed on to Part B of the culminating exam. Students who do not pass the retake are advised to select the public health analysis.

Part B: Part B of the culminating exam covers the programmatic and departmental requirements. The format and process differs by department. Ask your advisor or departmental administrator for details on Part B in your department.
Dates for the Culminating Exam

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<th>Exam Dates</th>
<th>Retake Exam Dates</th>
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<td>February 10, 2012;</td>
<td>March 8, 2012</td>
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<td>June 15, 2012:</td>
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<td>October 5, 2012;</td>
<td>November 2, 2012</td>
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<td>October 3, 2014 (Tentative)</td>
<td>October 24, 2014 (Tentative)</td>
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The Exam may only be taken on these dates.
Frequently Asked Questions for Part A of the SPHTM Culminating Exam

1. What is the Culminating exam?
   The Culminating exam is one of the three options for the required culminating experience for professional master’s degrees of public health (MPH, MSPH, MPH&TM, MHA). The culminating experience is designed to demonstrate the ability to integrate knowledge across the core areas of public health. The Culminating exam consist of two parts: Part A covers the public health core courses; Part B covers departmental competencies and is given separately.

The other culminating experience options are a research thesis or a public health analysis, both of which are in the form of a major manuscript. Since the Culminating exam is an equal option to the research thesis or public health analysis, it requires comparable effort.

2. What does the Culminating exam cover?
   The Culminating exam includes two parts: Part A covers the core areas of public health and Part B focuses on disciplinary study. Part A covers the 6 SPHTM core courses: BIOS 603, EPID 603, ENHS 603, HSMG 603, SPHL 601 and SPHL 603. Part A is administered school wide to students from all departments. Part B focuses on your specialty area and is managed by the departments.

3. Am I required to take the Culminating exam?
   The Culminating exam is one option for fulfilling the culminating experience requirement. The choice of options is up to you in consultation with your advisor. If you selected the Culminating exam, you must take and pass both parts of the exam. Not all departments offer the Culminating exam as an option for the culminating experience. Check with your department.

The decision of which culminating experience option best fits your degree program and individual goals should be made in conjunction with your advisor early in your studies.

4. If I select the Culminating exam as a culminating experience, when should I take it?
   Part A of the Culminating exam may be taken the semester following the successful completion of all core courses. Part B may be taken after the completion of all departmental requirements. Students are encouraged to take the core courses early in their studies so as to be able to take part A of the Culminating exam prior to the semester they plan to graduate.

5. When is Part A of the Culminating exam offered?

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The exam may only be taken on these dates.
6. What is the format of Part A the Culminating exam?
   Part A of Culminating exam consist of 100 multiple choice questions, each worth one point. The questions are drawn in equal numbers from the 6 core courses. On-line testing is used to administer the exam. You will have 2 hours to complete the exam. The format for Part B varies with degree programs in each department and includes essay questions and may also include multiple choice questions. Check with your department for the format for Part B.

7. What is required to pass the Culminating exam? What if I do not pass?
   A score of 70% is required to pass the exam. A student may retake the exam until they pass or select another option for the culminating experience with permission of the advisor. If you do not pass the exam or retake exam in a semester, you must either complete a drop/add or an Incomplete Grade Extension form (see below for details).

8. How do I sign up for Part A of the Culminating the exam?
   Meet with your advisor to discuss the Culminating exam as your culminating experience option. When your advisor certifies when you are eligible (completion of all core courses), register for SPHL 7950-03 Culminating Experience (the -03 section designates the culminating exam) at the beginning of the semester in which you will take the exam. Logistical information and communications are on Blackboard. The exam will be given in the SPHTM computer labs on 12th floor.

9. Where is Part A of the Culminating exam scheduled?
   The exam will be administered in the computer labs on the 12th floor of Tidewater Building. The time is usually at 1:00 p.m (always check notices on Blackboard). You should plan to arrive 30 minutes early to sign in, receive your password and get seated at a computer. If you arrive late, you will lose time to take the exam. The exam will be open for 2 hours.

10. What do I need to bring with me to Part A of the Culminating exam?
   You will need to bring a picture ID (Tulane ID, drivers license, passport). You may bring a nonprogrammable calculator.

11. What if I do not pass the culminating exam?
    A retake exam will be given approximately 1 month after the first exam. If you do not pass either the first exam or the retake, you may again take the exam the following semester or select another option. If you do not pass the exam in two tries, it is best to select another option.

12. Will Part A of the exam be offered online for those who may not be in New Orleans?
    Special arrangements may be made to take the exam from a distance for those in internships or working on projects outside of New Orleans. The Department Chair may give permission on an individual case-by-case basis. Permission must be obtained at the time of registration with notification and logistical details given to the exam coordinator at least 3 weeks prior to the exam. Your Department will approve a proctor to supervise the exam at a secure location, such as a testing center, university or health ministry. The exam must be taken on the same date as the on-campus version.

11. Is there a study guide available for the exam?
    The Association of Schools of Public Health has produced a study guide for the national Certification Exam that is useful for the SPHTM Culminating exam. www.asph.org.

12. Will study sessions be held for the exam?
    Faculty will not hold study sessions. The Student Government Association may organize study sessions.
Guidelines for Taking the SPHTM Comprehensive Exam at a Distance

Under special circumstances, a department chair may give permission for a student to take the exam from an off-campus site. In giving this permission, the department takes the responsibility to identify a proctor and insure the person agrees, meets the qualifications for a proctor and can provide a computer and reliable Internet.

The proctor must be a responsible person with academic or professional standing and be in a responsible supervisory position or associated with an established testing center. Examples of Proctors

- College/university academic faculty members
- A commercial testing center supervisor or education testing officer
- Military testing or education officer
- Human resource manager
- Hospital education coordinator
- Embassy official
- Official in a ministry of health or other governmental agency

The exam proctor may not be: family member or relative; assistant, coworker or immediate supervisor; neighbor, friend or reside at same address; student; secretary, office manager or administrative assistant; anyone with a conflict of interest or interest in the outcome of the exam.

Responsibilities of the proctor:

- Agree to serve as the proctor, follow the exam instructions and be in the testing room at all times during the examination process
- Provide the student with access to a computer with reliable Internet access
- Have a business e-mail address and be able to receive and secure the exam information
- One day prior to the exam, test the connection and access to the Tulane testing center
- Log onto the comprehensive exam URL a half hour prior to the exam. Immediately contact Tulane SPHTM if there is a technical problem
- Provide the student with a quiet area conducive to testing; make sure there are no disruptions
- Check student photo ID to ensure the examinee is actually the person scheduled to test
- Insure that the student does not access notes, articles, books or other information. A nonprogrammable display calculator may be used; provide a clean sheet of scratch paper
- Insure that the student does not have a cell phone, blackberry or other electronic communication on their person
- Insure no copies of the exam are made
- Make sure that the candidate completes their own exam
- Once the exam is started, the student may not leave the room – no break is allowed during the examination. The exam is concluded if the student leaves the room
- Two hours are allowed for the exam; inform the student when ½ hour remains and again when 5 minutes remain. Tell the student to ‘submit’ their exam at the end of 2 hours.
- Note any testing irregularities and e-mail to the Tulane testing center
- If a fee is charged for exam proctoring, request payment from the student at the time of testing. Tulane will not pay proctor fees
- If the proctor is unable to supervise the exam, contact Tulane immediately; the proctor cannot designate responsibility to another person without permission from Tulane
Proctoring the Exam:

The morning of the exam, you will receive an e-mail with the URL for the exam and the student’s user ID and password. Please enter the URL and it should open to the sign page for the exam. It is then ready for the student to enter their user ID and password. If you have any problems or questions, please call 877-580-3249 for technical assistance the day of the exam.
Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine
CULMINATING EXPERIENCE FORM: Culminating Experience Completion Form

Student name______________________________________________________________

Student number____________________________________________________________

Student degree program & department__________________________________________

Expected semester of graduation_______________________________________________

Option Completed:

____Research Thesis: Title: ___________________________________________________

____Public Health Analysis Manuscript: Title:____________________________________

____Master’s Comprehensive Examination: Date__________________________________

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__________________