Characteristics of Doctoral Programs in Accredited Schools of Public Health and Public Health Programs

Basic requirements

This paper addresses doctoral programs reviewed by the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH). Such programs may be located within a school of public health (SPH) or may be included in the unit of accreditation presented for review by a public health program (PHP).

All SPH must have three distinct doctoral programs either in or relevant to the five core areas of public health knowledge, which are defined in Criterion 2.1. Examples of programs “relevant to” the five core areas include those that draw on several of the five core areas, such as maternal and child health, which might draw upon epidemiology and social and behavioral science; global health; and environmental epidemiology. There must, however, be three distinct doctoral offerings with distinguishing curricula, resources and competencies.

In SPH that include other health professions (e.g., clinical psychology, communication disorders, physical therapy), doctoral degrees in those disciplines do not count toward the minimum requirement of three doctoral offerings. The substance of this paper does not address these degrees; for further information on other graduate professional degrees, refer to Criterion 2.8 of the Accreditation Criteria for Schools of Public Health, amended June 2011.

The three required degrees may be all academic, all professional or some of each, and degrees including the PhD, DrPH and ScD would be considered acceptable. The SPH may offer additional doctoral degrees as it wishes and as resources allow. Doctoral degrees offered in collaboration with another school or college within the university may present excellent opportunities for interdisciplinary study, but only those degrees that the SPH is capable of fully supporting independently may count toward the three required degrees. That is, for the three required degrees, the SPH may draw upon outside resources or collaborations to strengthen the program, but it must have, for each doctoral program of study 1) a minimum of five faculty, fully appointed in the school, (see Criterion 1.7); 2) sufficient advanced-level coursework available within the school; and 3) functional control of the doctoral program.

PHP may present doctoral public health programs for review if they are defined as part of the same unit of review as an MPH or equivalent professional masters degree. Any included doctoral programs must be listed in the degree matrix requested in Criterion 2.1 and should be fully documented throughout the self-study in all relevant criteria. PHP should not document doctoral programs if they are not included in the unit of accreditation.

Curriculum: general

As with masters and bachelors degrees, classification as an academic or professional degree for CEPH review is not based on degree nomenclature but on specific examination of the curriculum, competencies and outcomes associated with the degree. Criterion 2.1 notes, “A professional degree is one that, based on its learning
objectives and types of positions its graduates pursue, prepares students with a broad mastery of the subject matter and methods necessary in a field of practice… A research or academic degree program…prepares students for scholarly careers, particularly in academia or other research settings…” (emphasis added)

**Curriculum for academic degrees**

Academic doctoral degrees, such as the PhD, must comply with the relevant accreditation criterion (Criterion 2.11 for SPH/Criterion 2.10 for PHP). This criterion requires that the curricula allow students to “acquire a broad public health orientation, as well as depth of education in a specific discipline.” It is particularly important that academic degree students, whether masters or doctoral students, are familiar with and competent in other areas of public health that are particularly relevant to their specialization. Gaining this breadth of knowledge requires at least the equivalent of three semester-credit hours of instruction. If the SPH/PHP can document that an academic degree student has completed this requirement for a previous graduate degree, this requirement may be waived for the student.

The criterion also specifically requires that all academic degree students, whether masters or doctoral students, should be familiar with the basic principles and application of epidemiology. Operationally, this may require a minimum of one three-credit-hour epidemiology course for a student who has not taken epidemiology in his or her previous study. The epidemiology course may, but need not be, the same course offered to professional degree students. The SPH/PHP may choose to develop an introductory epidemiology course tailored to doctoral students’ needs, applied through discipline-specific examples.

**Curriculum for professional degrees**

Professional doctoral degrees, such as the DrPH, must ensure that students develop competence in the five core areas of public health knowledge. This may be accomplished by requiring coursework in each of the five core areas or by ensuring that each doctoral student has completed coursework in each area prior to enrollment. The SPH or PHP must individually verify completion of this coursework, through transcript review or other means, even in institutions that require doctoral students to enter with an MPH. Some SPH or PHP allow doctoral students to enter on a conditional admission status if they lack preparation in one or more of the core areas, making completion of core coursework a requirement before progression to doctoral-level courses.

Professional doctoral degrees must also require all students to complete an applied practice experience and an integrative culminating experience. Comprehensive examinations and dissertations typically fulfill the latter requirement. In professional degree programs, a culminating experience that focuses on practice-based scholarship may deviate from a traditional dissertation format, and SPH/PHP should ensure that the experience is both sufficiently rigorous for doctoral study and appropriately directed to advanced-level practice.

For practice experience, SPH/PHP should structure an advanced field experience that allows students to gain experience and develop competencies in advanced practice skills under a qualified preceptor’s supervision. This practice experience should focus on developing advanced leadership skills in public health disciplines. There is no minimum number of hours specified in the accreditation criterion for practice experience; experience suggests that 200-500 hours is often appropriate for structuring such an experience.
Competencies

The SPH/PHP must develop competencies for each doctoral degree (eg, PhD, DrPH) and for each specialization or track within each degree (eg, epidemiology, health systems research). This is true for both academic and professional degrees. Competencies must be structured at the appropriate level; the Council expects that doctoral competencies will define a more advanced level of scholarship and practice than that associated with the MPH and other masters degrees.

Because of the often specialized nature of doctoral curricula, there are few transferable models for doctoral competencies; hence, SPH/PHP must develop doctoral competencies based on criteria tailored to the setting. The accreditation criteria do not specify a set of competencies that must be addressed. Professional associations in a number of public health fields have developed competencies, but the accreditation process does not mandate adoption of any particular set of competencies.

In general, doctoral competencies should prepare individuals for greater leadership responsibilities and/or greater scholarly independence than masters-level competencies describe. Doctoral competencies, for example, may describe the skills necessary to direct a health department or major research project, in contrast to masters competencies, which may describe skills necessary to lead a unit or project within a larger unit or to function effectively as a researcher. Skills in areas such as policy analysis and community networking will receive greater emphasis in professional doctoral programs, but basic competencies in these areas inform high-level academic public health. Similarly, professional doctoral preparation requires advanced-level methodological training.

Competencies for doctoral programs must be linked to coursework and to other curricular experiences, such as examinations, practica and the dissertation, so that the SPH/PHP ensures that all competencies are covered through required student experiences. The SPH/PHP must assess the extent to which doctoral students attain each competency, and institutions should use all available opportunities to do so. As with masters programs, assessment should not be construed as confined to completion of a series of courses.

Resources

The SPH/PHP must have resources adequate to support doctoral education, and the Council expects that these resources may differ from and will exceed the resources associated with masters programs in a given disciplinary area. The SPH/PHP should have the computing resources, laboratory resources, library holdings, etc. to support doctoral programs’ specialized needs. The SPH/PHP must also have a faculty complement that is appropriate in quantity and preparation to cultivate an environment of scholarship and to provide mentorship that addresses doctoral students specifically. At a minimum, the SPH/PHP must comply with the faculty requirements indicated in Criterion 1.7.

For SPH, a minimum of five full-time faculty, fully appointed to the school, must support each core area that offers a doctoral degree. “Core area” refers to the five core public health areas discussed in Criterion 2.1. Five faculty members would constitute the minimum necessary to support the doctoral and masters students in the given core area. The need to surpass the minimum will arise frequently, based on the scope of technical expertise needed and the number of students enrolled. In particular, five faculty are unlikely to be sufficient if 1) a single core area (such as environmental health) offers multiple doctoral degrees or 2) a single doctoral degree (such as global health) draws on more than one core area.
When a single core area offers multiple doctoral degrees, it must have sufficient depth of faculty with training and experience to support each degree offered. Thus, if the school’s environmental health core area offers doctoral degrees in both toxicology and environmental health sciences, the school would need more than five fully appointed members to assure an appropriate depth of training and experience to address both toxicology and environmental health sciences.

Conversely, when a doctoral degree is interdisciplinary, the school must explicitly identify the core areas that contribute to the interdisciplinary degree. Each of the identified core areas must meet the minimum requirement of five faculty members and the SPH must demonstrate adequate faculty resources trained in the interdisciplinary area of study itself. For example, if a doctoral degree in maternal and child health is based in two core areas—epidemiology and social and behavioral sciences—the school would need to document 1) a minimum of five full-time faculty in each of the two core areas and 2) additional faculty with training and experience specific to maternal and child health.

Though many additional faculty may contribute to teaching in doctoral programs, there must be a minimum of five individuals for each core area; faculty may not be “double counted” for attaining the minimum resource requirement in each core area.

In PHP, each doctoral area of concentration offered, whether offered in a core area or in an interdisciplinary area, must be supported by at least five faculty who are full-time university professors. The individuals should be trained and experienced in the discipline, and their primary responsibility should be support of the doctoral offering and any masters degrees in the same area of concentration. The faculty complement may draw from multiple departments or colleges, in terms of faculty’s formal appointment, but each PHP doctoral offering should be able to document support from five full-time university faculty with the requisite training and experience to support the defined concentration. As with SPH, faculty may not be double counted: each disciplinary area of concentration must identify a distinct set of five supporting faculty members.

In both SPH and PHP, the faculty complement must be appropriately matched to the degrees and specializations offered. For academic degrees, there must be adequate numbers of research-experienced faculty who generate a sufficient level of externally-funded scholarship. For professional degrees, faculty should be experienced in public health practice and in the scholarship associated with the field. For all SPH and for PHP offering doctoral degrees, the overall level of faculty scholarship (assessed primarily in Criterion 3.1) must be sufficient to support doctoral students’ development as scholars. External grant funding is also often fundamental to providing budgetary and financial support for doctoral students. Faculty must have available time to assist doctoral students in developing their emerging lines of inquiry, and faculty must also provide opportunities for doctoral students to participate in faculty projects. The SPH/PHP must have mechanisms in place to support doctoral student presentations at scholarly meetings and to prepare students for publications in appropriate forums.