

Master's Essay Guidelines
Department of Health Policy & Management
School of Public Health

1. General Description of Master's Essay Requirement for Pitt Public Health Students

All MPH and MHA students (to include joint-degree students) must complete a Master's Essay to satisfy the School of Public Health's requirement for a capstone, integrative experience.

2. Rationale for Master's Essay

The Master's Essay is required to fulfill the Council for Education in Public Health (CEPH) accreditation requirement that all the professional degree programs in the school require an integrative experience. Furthermore, for MHA students, the essay requirement fulfills a requirement for the Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education (CAHME) as an "applied and integrative learning" experience. This experience provides the student an opportunity to synthesize and apply the knowledge, methods and practices learned in the curriculum in the form of a scholarly essay, based on the student's independent research. The MHA Program's accreditation body, CAHME, requires that MHA curricula must provide an integrative experience with relevance to the world of practice that gives students an opportunity to synthesize and apply the knowledge, competencies and tools developed in their program of studies. The HPM faculty has determined that completing a management or organizational policy project associated with the student's Management Residency site serves this purpose.

Exceptions must be approved by the student's Primary Essay Advisor, Program Director and the Vice Chair for Education. An example of an alternative might be a project outside of a traditional health care, public health or health policy-making environment. Likewise, a student might wish to conduct graduate-level research on a healthcare policy or healthcare management issue independent of a specific host organization. Both these examples of alternate projects, if approved, require that the student synthesize and apply the knowledge, competencies, and tools developed in their program of study.

For both MPH and MHA students, completion of the essay requirement includes an approved written essay and an accompanying presentation. The written essay must demonstrate the expected level of quality reflective of graduate-level writing. The presentation will be delivered in Power Point or equivalent display followed by a Q&A discussion with the Essay Committee. If not included in the Committee as a 3rd Reader, one executive-level decision maker at the host organization should be invited to participate as an observer. With the concurrence of the Primary Essay Advisor for projects that seem appropriate for a broader audience, the student could consider preparation of an article for publication and/or presentation at a professional conference, based on her/his study.

3. Essay Topic

The focus and content of the essay should be relevant to the disciplinary base of the student's degree program, as well as problems or issues relevant to the profession. **Furthermore, the student must explicitly justify the public health relevance of the study to meet CEPH-related accreditation guidelines.** The specific content and design of the essay should be guided by the student's professional interests and career development goals, and should be finalized in collaboration with his/her Essay Committee.

4. Essay Design & Methodology

The topic, design and methodology must be approved by the student's Essay Committee before the student proceeds with the study. Approval is determined by submission and authorized signature of the Master's Essay Proposal Form by the Primary Essay Advisor. When the project appears to fall within Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, the student must submit a proposal to the University's Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) for review and approval. Many of our students' Master's Essay projects are likely to fall outside the scope of IRB compliance and those that do are likely to be deemed as exempt from full Board review. Nonetheless, The Primary Essay Advisor and student must explicitly address this issue and the student should contact HRPO staff for an informal discussion in situations where the applicability of IRB review seems unclear.

The subject matter of the Master's Essay must be relevant to at least one of the disciplinary bases of the Department within the broad domains of health policy, health systems/public health agency organization and management and leadership. Various alternative approaches may be used to design the study including methods of data collection and analysis that are appropriate for the 3 aims, focus and scope of the study. Among the options that the student may consider (but not limited to) are the following:

- Position (advocacy) paper
- Policy brief (with supporting justification and analysis)
- Health services management or policy analysis
- Quality management, patient safety or process improvement project
- Program/project evaluation
- Case study (single or comparative)
- Systematic review or meta-analysis of the literature
- Grant proposal (external funding)
- Portfolio of Projects (MHA and MHA/MBA only)

Methods of data collection and analysis must be consistent with the aims, focus and scope of the study and include both quantitative and qualitative methods. In many circumstances a mixed methods approach may be most useful. Representative methods of data collection and analysis follow:

- Surveys and interviews
- Medical charts
- Productivity and performance measures
- Quality/process improvement measures
- Focus groups and panels
- Observation and enumeration
- Narrative coding and analysis
- Epidemiological measures
- Descriptive statistics
- Tests of significance including t-tests, ANOVA and Chi-Square
- Correlation and linear regression
- Nonparametric tests

Please note that your topic, design, and methodology must be approved by the Primary Essay Advisor before you proceed with the study, as evidenced by your submission of a Study Proposal Summary/Outline signed by the student and Primary Essay Advisor. If applicable, IRB approval must also be obtained and documented.

5. Organization and Content of the Master's Essay

The following table provides guidance on the organization and content of the written Master's Essay requirement, with the exception of the "Portfolio of Projects" (see Portfolio addendum). Rather than a rigid set of requirements, this checklist provides both the student and the Master's Essay Committee with an architecture that may be adapted as necessary given the aims, focus, design and methods appropriate for the study. The Primary Essay Advisor should discuss the scope of the project with the student to consider which components of this checklist are required and which may be omitted or adapted to the context of the study.

The student's Primary Essay Advisor has final responsibility for determining the appropriateness of the study's focus, design and methods. The student is responsible for preparing a final version of the Master's Essay that is organized and formatted consistent with the requirements of the School of Public Health and University of Pittsburgh.

A. Abstract

- Clear statement of the purpose and objectives of the essay
- Brief description of the essay design, methodology, and sources of information
- Summary of the principal findings and conclusions
- An explicit statement of public health relevance which should also be addressed in the Conclusions section (see below)
- The student's abstract should be 350 words or fewer

B. Introduction

- A clear statement of the relevant health care/public health problem
- Compelling rationale for analyzing the targeted issue
- Objectives or aims for the essay
- Sufficient contextual information about the host organization and domain of health care services or public health to facilitate reader's understanding

C. Literature Review

- An organized approach to review and analysis of the literature relevant to the student's project
- Citation and summary of relevant practice-focused and peer-reviewed scholarly literature
- Identification and citation of relevant publicly available and internal, non-confidential documents, e.g. mission, vision and values statements, marketing material, policy statements, etc.

D. Hypotheses or Expected Outcomes

- Depending on the aims, design and methodology of the study, the student should state her/his hypothesis, most likely or alternative outcomes as informed by the literature review and the student's knowledge of the organizational context

E. Design, Methodology, and Data

- Description and justification of the basic study design
- Identification and rationale for the methods of analysis
- Identification of key source(s) of information/data and how they pertain to key objectives of the study
- Definition for any important technical terms or acronyms used in the essay

F. Findings/Results

- Relevant data displays with titles in appropriate format, e.g., tables, graphs, figures
- Discussion of key findings in a narrative format
- Summary of findings in terms of major themes, consistency with the literature, etc.

G. Analysis

- An objective analysis of the implications of each major finding
- The congruence between major findings and hypotheses or expectations and highlights any unexpected, ambiguous or inconclusive findings
- Any limitations that affect the generalizability of the study findings for theory or practice

H. Discussion

- Identifies action steps or priorities to address any unexpected and/or inconclusive findings and major limitations
- Provides a compelling analysis of the findings including conceptual and practical issues

I. Conclusions, Recommendations and Public Health Implications

- A logical set of conclusions based on the analysis and implications for practice
- Recommendations for site-specific actions, professional best practices, policy changes, etc. and/or opportunities for further research or applied studies
- Statement and justification for the public health relevance of the study

J. References (Bibliography)

- Applies an accepted standard manuscript format for all references cited in the narrative
- Provides a list of references and/or bibliography

6. Professional Development Seminar

All MHA and MPH students are required to enroll and actively participate in the Professional Development Seminars, held in the Fall and Spring Terms of your 1st year. These courses will provide an in-depth overview of the Master's Essay process and expectations, as well as sessions on design and methods, literature and database search strategies, and protection of human subjects in research compliance.

Students typically register for the Master's Essay credit in the Spring Term of their final year.

7. Timeline of Critical Dates

Each entering cohort of MPH, JD/MPH, MHA and MHA/MBA students will be provided a schedule of key progress points and deadlines for completion of the Master's Essay requirements, for both the written essay and the oral presentation. The student must take responsibility for making sufficient progress on the development of the essay to assure adherence to the hard deadlines. A student who has not complied with critical deadlines risks postponing graduation until completion of the Essay requirements in a subsequent academic term. Note that if the student has to delay their normal graduation timeline, tuition for one-credit will be charged for any additional term needed to complete the essay.