

**THE DOCTOR OF
PUBLIC HEALTH
(DrPH): FINAL
DISSERTATION
*POINTS TO
CONSIDER*
FOR STUDENTS AND
SUPERVISORS**



Table of Contents

Purpose of Document.....	3
Foundational Elements of the DrPH Dissertation.....	4
Descriptive Elements of the DrPH Dissertation.....	5
Format of the DrPH Dissertation	5
Planning Elements of the DrPH Dissertation.....	6
Structural Elements of the DrPH Dissertation.....	7
Central Role of Your Supervisor and Your Academic Committee	8
Producing Your Thesis	9
Your Final Oral Examination.....	10
Examples of DrPH Dissertations	10

See Also: The Doctor of Public Health Dissertation Proposal Points to Consider

Purpose of Document

The following guidance document is intended to highlight the dissertation requirements for the DrPH Program. It begins with guidance on submission and approval of your proposal. Additionally, it provides the framework of a DrPH dissertation itself.

For the student, it is a resource to assist in the development of an approved proposal. **For the supervisor**, most of whose experience is with PhD programs, it provides key elements of focus for a practice-based thesis typical of a DrPH program. The term “practice-based” is typical professional degree programs and reflects that the dissertation will be informed by the student’s experiences in the field. The document intends to foster partnership between student and supervisor along the DrPH journey.

It will become evident that certain PhD dissertation topics may indeed fit this DrPH guidance.

Several components, mostly found in Text Boxes, are extracted from public domain guidance posted by the University of Toronto. As our early cohorts are at the stage of their dissertation proposals, there is no precedent at this writing. Therefore, examples from other institutions granting the DrPH degree are offered for reference to dissertations from accredited programs.

This document does not address submission and defense of the dissertation in one’s final oral exam. These strictly follow School of Graduate Study guidelines found on the SGS website: <https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/current-students/program-completion/>.

Foundational Elements of the DrPH Dissertation

The DrPH program offers flexibility in the selection of a dissertation topic with the overarching requirement being an issue of public health practice. The dissertation should demonstrate the student's ability to generate and use evidence to explore a real-world problem drawn from their own professional experiences. This is a distinctive requirement between professional (DrPH) and academic (PhD) doctorates and is the basis for the significant real-world experience required to enter the program. In other words, it addresses problems of public health practice. (See Text Box 1). While certain PhD dissertations *may* address a real-world issue, a DrPH dissertation *must*. The dissertation topic is approved by the student's supervisor and supervisory committee with endorsement from the Program Director.

Textbox 1. The DrPH Thesis Will Focus on Generating New Translational Knowledge for Public Health Practice

The thesis must be an independent piece of work on an applied research topic of significance to the practice of public health within or outside of Canada. It should address a gap in knowledge. Completion of the thesis will demonstrate the student's ability to produce original applied research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review and to be of publication quality. Publication, however, is not a requirement. The thesis will focus on generating new translational knowledge and creating value for a public health change, as opposed to a PhD-equivalent of focusing on public health outcomes or application of new methods. Students will engage with the literature and be informed by their practice-based experiences to identify an issue and provide new learning on implementing public health change. In other words, the thesis should demonstrate the student's mastery of the skills and knowledge to lead or create substantial change in programming or policy development or development of new methods or strategies to accomplish either of these two goals. Consequently, the DrPH thesis most-often results in a different product than the traditional PhD, but maintains the same level of rigor, critical analysis, and peer review (University of Toronto(A), 2020).

When addressing an issue of public health practice, the foundational element of a clear research question applies. A well-defined specific aim will foster development and completion (See Text Box 2).

Topics can range from historical, ongoing, or emerging public health issues, including those related to events, programs, policies, organisations, and the professionals that lead them.

Textbox 2. The DrPH Dissertation Emphasizes Real-world Public Health Issues

The DrPH thesis places emphasis on the scholarship of scientific knowledge to solve real world public health issues. For example, a PhD dissertation, broadly in the public Health Science field, might explore the prevalence of human papilloma virus (HPV) among a particular population group. In comparison, a DrPH thesis would use these findings to characterize the barriers and facilitators toward communicating effective implementation strategies that would improve and support the uptake of the HPV vaccine in a public health setting. By developing these competencies, the DrPH graduate is ideally positioned as a transformational leader with expertise in evidence based public health practice and research (Declercq, 2008; Sherman, 2017).

Descriptive Elements of the DrPH Dissertation

At the University of Toronto ([University of Toronto School of Graduate Studies Guidelines](#)), “the professional doctoral thesis in practice includes the identification and investigation of an issue in practice, the application of theory, research, and policy analysis to the issue of practice, translating research into practice, and a proposed plan for action to address the issue of practice. The professional doctoral thesis in practice is expected to have meaningful generative impact on practice and policy”.

All dissertations will have a synthesis of existing evidence (literature review), which is an element of research addressing the public health issue at hand, and an implementation plan based on the findings and, when appropriate, the student’s gained knowledge of individual and organisational leadership. All of this will begin with a succinct research question(s).

Thesis development will be aided by the foundational competencies acquired in the required courses and skill-building electives. In fact, many of the courses and their sequence are intended to frame and build the thesis topic. For example, Critical Appraisal and Use of Evidence (CHL4002H) can form the basis of your literature review, your selected methods course(s) will help develop and/or refine your methodologic approach, and the DrPH-specific Seminar on the Practice of Implementation Science (CHL4008H) can in development of the dissertation chapter on application of your work in practice. Leadership courses focusing on self (CHL4003H) and organisations (CHL4005H) will provide foundational insight across many topics. Other required courses provide foundational knowledge in the field of public health practice.

Format of the DrPH Dissertation

Building on the professional experiences of the DrPH student and the intended impact of their work in practice, the dissertation should conform with ***The Professional Doctoral Thesis In Practice*** described in [University of Toronto School of Graduate Studies Guidelines](#).

While other formats may be appropriate to meet the program requirements, a deviation requires the approval of the supervisor, the program Director, and the Associate Dean, Academic Affairs.

Regardless of the format of the doctoral thesis, certain criteria must be met. For your thesis to be acceptable, you must do the following:

- Demonstrate how your research makes an original contribution by advancing knowledge in your field.
- Show a thorough familiarity with the field and an ability to critically analyze the relevant literature.
- Display a mastery of research methods and their application.
- Offer a complete and systematic account of your scholarly work.
- Present the results and analysis of your original research.
- Document your sources and support your claims.
- Locate your work within the broader field or discipline.
- Write in a style that respects the norms of academic and scholarly communication.

Most doctoral thesis writers understand that their theses will need to meet these criteria without necessarily understanding *how* they will do so. A central element of writing a thesis is coming to understand how to write an extended text that meets these criteria. With guidance—from your committee, from your peers, from institutional writing support—and with your own growing expertise as a writer, these criteria will ultimately help you to understand when you have met your thesis writing goals.

Planning Elements of the DrPH Dissertation

The dissertation planning can begin at any point of enrollment; however, priority should be given to the successful completion of:

- 1) All required courses in Years 1 and 2,
- 2) your Applied Research Project, and
- 3) the Comprehensive Exam.

Thus, more dissertation-specific attention and effort typically begin in the summer between Years 2 and 3. In the ideal scenario, the completed core courses will have assisted in building elements of the dissertation (e.g., evidence review, methodologic skills strengthened etc.).

The DrPH Program offers an optional summer seminar between year 2 and year 3 (Beginning *June 2024*) to guide students through the dissertation planning process and review the university and program dissertation requirements. This supplements but does not replace

the student-supervisor obligations for meetings, which are to be documented on official forms for each and every meeting (<https://www.dlsph.utoronto.ca/academic-policies/>).

Ethics reviews and approval and renewals are paramount as are any potential data sharing agreements. These approval processes take time and should be factored into the planning process.

Peer reviewed publications are not a required output of the DrPH program; however, all work should be of publication quality and publications are encouraged in both peer-reviewed and grey literature.

Structural Elements of the DrPH Dissertation

There is a range of formats utilized in doctoral theses (Textbox 3), but you may refer to these basic structural elements as a starting point:

- The research issue at hand
- Research question(s) and specific aims
- The context of the research
- The methods employed
- The findings
- The conclusions.

A typical outline follows:

- An introductory chapter
- A literature review chapter
- A method chapter
- A findings chapter
- A discussion/concluding chapter, including implementation approach

Textbox 3. The Traditional Format is Organized as a Single Narrative Describing the Research Problem

The traditional, or monograph-style, thesis format reflects the original conception of a thesis as a “book” presenting the candidate’s research project. The traditional format is organized as a single narrative describing the research problem, the context of the research, the methods used, the findings, and the conclusions. The organization of a traditional thesis is generally organic. If the thesis deals with experimental research, it may be structured with an introductory chapter, a literature review chapter, a method chapter, some number of findings chapters, and a discussion/concluding chapter. If the thesis is based on non-experimental research, the form is likely to be determined by the exigencies of the topic. After doctoral studies are complete, a traditional thesis will often be revised into a scholarly monograph or a number of research articles, but the form in which it is presented for the final oral exam is not itself intended for publication. This style of thesis remains the norm in the Humanities and in many Social Science disciplines (University of Toronto (B), 2024).

The above paragraph is describing typical PhD dissertations where some elements but certainly not all are considered for the DrPH dissertations. For example, the 3-paper dissertation is not a requirement for the DrPH Dissertation. Rather, a monograph style document is encouraged with the data to be presented in a quality of a peer-reviewed manuscript. This need not be published, per se, but submission is encouraged. This is distinct from the 3-paper option of the various PhD programs.

The traditional format of a PhD thesis is provided in various university guideline documents. While DrPH dissertation has elements of a PhD thesis, it is distinct.

It is expected that the thesis will follow the traditional monograph style. Thesis length should be sufficient to adequately cover the overarching elements described. The student's supervisor and committee serve as a guide. Other professional doctorates within the University of Toronto note a typical length of 125-150 pages, which can be used as a reference as applicable. Acceptable lengths (for example shorter) may be appropriate and agreed with the student author and their supervisor.

Central Role of Your Supervisor and Your Academic Committee

Your doctoral thesis is the culmination of your investment in advanced studies and research (Textbox 4). Focus is important and is a key element of mentoring by faculty throughout the process of designing and writing of the dissertation. One of the primary purposes of requiring a dedicated supervisory committee meeting for dissertation proposal approval, and at least two committee meetings per year, is to foster discussion and to support your progress towards the stated research question. All supervisory committee meetings should be documented.

Textbox 4. The DrPH Thesis is the Pinnacle of the Doctoral Program

Your doctoral thesis is the culmination of your investment in advanced studies and rigorous research in your field of study. It is the pinnacle of your doctoral program, and the most far-reaching undertaking in your studies. Although the thesis is indisputably significant, it is also important to remember that the doctoral thesis is just one of many steps along your career path and should therefore be well-defined and manageable (University of Toronto (B), 2024).

The Supervisory committee must approve the dissertation proposal before proceeding to ethics and implementing the proposed research. A dedicated meeting is scheduled by the student for the sole purpose of discussing if the proposal research is ready to proceed and documenting the decision using the **Approval of Dissertation Proposal (Form 5)**. The length and scope of this meeting is determined by the student and supervisor. There is no departmental defence of the DrPH dissertation proposal. Thus, the proposal should be sufficiently developed prior to this meeting. The student and supervisor may agree to invite

a non-faculty member currently in public health practice to provide perspectives on the work, but this is not a formal requirement nor does this individual vote on approval. This is distinct from the external reviewer in your final oral exam (i.e., dissertation defence), which is described in the SGS guidelines for Final Oral Examination (FOE).

Given the foundational elements described above, the student, supervisor and committee may find it useful to have the following incorporated into their early discussion:

*Has the student developed a **clear research question** to address in their dissertation work?*

*Is the work addressing a **gap in knowledge**?*

*Does the student present an independent piece of work on an applied research topic of significance to the **practice of public health**?*

*Is it evident that the **student is relying on their lived professional experience** in their exploration of a real-world public health issue?*

*Will this work demonstrate the student's ability to **produce original applied research or other advanced scholarship** leading to publication quality work?*

*What new translational knowledge might this proposal generate and **how may it create value for public health change**?*

*How is the proposed work conducive to a development of an **implementation plan for public health practice change**?*

*Has the student determined the **need and action plan for ethics review** and/or data sharing agreements?*

Should there be any uncertainty about the appropriateness of the dissertation, topic, and approach, the student and supervisor should arrange a meeting with the DrPH Program Director to ensure continued progress.

Producing Your Thesis

In due course, you should become familiar with the parameters in producing your thesis and discuss any questions with your supervisor and/or program director. Please review the standards set forth by the School of Graduate Studies.

<https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/current-students/program-completion/producing-your-thesis/>

Your Final Oral Examination

The Final Oral Examination (FOE) is the forum to defend your thesis.

All doctoral students must defend a thesis at a Final Oral Examination organized by the graduate unit with the cooperation of the School of Graduate Studies. These contain strict school-wide requirements that are addressed in documents prepared by the School of Graduate Studies and are followed by all candidates for the Doctor of Public Health degree.

Basic information is provided in the link below and in informational sessions provided by the DrPH program. You should familiarize yourself with the guidelines of the School of Graduate Studies, including roles and responsibilities, your committee make up, scheduling of the final oral exam, and provision and presentation of your thesis. The link below is a core resource.

<https://www.dlsph.utoronto.ca/students/current-students/academic-policies/procedures-for-arranging-phd-final-oral-examination-foe/>

Examples of DrPH Dissertations

Given the relatively recent launch of the DrPH Program at the University of Toronto, our repertoire of approved dissertations remains a few years away. Thus, one may find it useful to review of topics and approaches of accredited DrPH programs elsewhere. These are provided for reference (Text Box 5).

Proposals under development by the early Cohorts in the DrPH Program, while not necessarily associated with approved proposals at this writing, are listed (Text Box 6) to illustrate the creative approaches and potential impact in practice.

Textbox 5. Examples of DrPH Dissertation from Other Accredited Public Health Schools

Martin, Barbara Alvarez

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Gillings School of Global Public Health, Department of Health Policy and Management

Improving Public Health Communication In A Politically Polarized Environment: Exploring The Use Of Moral Values In Message Framing

<https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/dissertations/dj52wf88m?locale=en>

Pope, David Lewis

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Gillings School of Global Public Health, Department of Health Policy and Management

Going Upstream: How Community-based Mental Health Services Can Reduce Use of The Emergency Department for Mental Health Crises In Rural North Carolina

<https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/dissertations/m613n776m?locale=en>

Russo, Joseph M.

The University of Arizona.

Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health

Improving Access to Reproductive Health Services Through GIS Mapping and Data-Informed Community Engagement

<https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/668193>

Gonzalez Figueroa, Emmanuel

The University of Arizona.

Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health

Characterization and Exposure Assessment of Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs) Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) Particulate Matter 2.5 (PM2.5) and Dioxins Produced by Garbage Burning

<https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/667007>

Rainie, Stephanie Carroll

The University of Arizona.

Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health

Promoting Family and Community Health through Indigenous Nation Sovereignty

<https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/594540>

Bethany L. Stewart

University of Kentucky College of Public Health

Concussion Perceptions and Reporting Behaviors by Individual and Team Sport Participation Among Female DIII Student-Athletes

https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cph_etds/391/

Madeline Aulisio

University of Kentucky College of Public Health

Utilizing CDC Framework for Program Evaluation to Inform Assessment of an Interprofessional Leadership and Teamwork Curriculum

https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cph_etds/264/

Daniel Driffin

George State University School of Public Health

One in Two: Lived Experiences of HIV Seroconversions among Black Sexual Minority Men in HIV Workforce

https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/sph_diss/87/

Jasmine Rockwell Heard

George State University School of Public Health

Using Community-Based Participatory Research to Assess the Service Needs of Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Atlanta

https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/sph_diss/81/

Allen, Monica Delores

UC Berkeley School of Public Health

Exploring Motivations and Expectations of Churches in Public Health Partnerships

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0jw8s9jx>

Gidi, Virginia Eve

UC Berkeley School of Public Health

Examining Public Health Systems Responses to the Chronic Diseases of HIV/AIDS and Diabetes: Experiences from Mexico and Brazil

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2t503314>

Robb, Katharine

Harvard T.H Chan School of Public Health

Harvard University

Further Inspection: Leveraging Housing Inspectors and City Data to Improve Public Health in Chelsea, MA

<https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/40976724>

Wheelahan, Christopher

Harvard T.H Chan School of Public Health

Harvard University

Innovation Ecosystems for Health: A Learning Approach to Public Health Implementation

<https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/37945629>

Approved Dissertation and topics currently under in development for ultimate approval by the students supervisory committee include:

Proposals Approved

KH: Development of standardized performance indicators for Ontario public health unit chronic disease prevention programs.

GTK: Leadership Competencies to Engender Public Trust in Governance in Context of Canada's Institutional Distrust

ZM: Looking to the past as we respond in the future: A historical foundation of leadership framework for public health leaders in an epidemic.

SOC: Potential usability and usefulness of systematic monitoring of unsolicited social media posts of self-reported adverse events following immunization (AEFI) for monitoring vaccine safety

SVM: Effect of credible social-media scientific communication on vaccination choice impact

LW: Public health systems performance indicators for integrated disease surveillance

JR: A Qualitative Exploration of How Public Health Leaders Create a Vision for Resilient, Future-Ready Public Health Organization in Ontario.

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