

M.P.H. Project Guidelines
Biostatistics/Epidemiology Division
School of Public Health and Health Sciences

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Adopted by the Biostatistics/Epidemiology Faculty, August 1996

It is the student's responsibility to see that these guidelines are followed properly. Please read them carefully, and re-read them often as you progress through the various stages of your project. Although the process may appear daunting, almost every student manages to complete the project. Even climbing Mount Everest is achieved by continuing to put one foot in front of the other, one small step at a time.

A. Registering for M.P.H. Project Credits

An Epidemiology M.P.H. student should register for six credits of "BIOEPI696D - Independent Study - MPH Problem" during the second year of class work. A Biostatistics M.P.H. student should register for a total of three credits of BIOEPI696D - Independent Study - MPH Problem" during the second year. To finish the project, or to even make substantial progress on the project, the student should register for as few additional courses as possible. Otherwise, as faculty experience has shown repeatedly, the student is diverted by the immediacy of course work and inevitably neglects the project.

B. Nature and Purpose of the M.P.H. Project

The M.P.H. project provides the student with an opportunity to develop an individual project, usually of an applied nature, under the guidance of a faculty committee. The student gains experience in applying the knowledge of the classroom to a practical problem while working in collaboration with fellow professionals. The final oral presentation of the project provides a collegial forum within which to present the major points of the project.

It is expected that the project will demonstrate the student's competence in applying theory and methods to a problem of significance to a health related agency. The faculty consider the process of carrying out the project, and the integration of knowledge by the student, to be more important than the final implementation which may result.

C. Coming Up With a Topic

The student considers possible topics based upon areas of personal interest, discussions with other students, with faculty and agency personnel. One's academic advisor and/or other faculty may be approached for help in exploring possible topics. What is an appropriate project? The only possible answer to this question is: "A project which enough faculty members find acceptable so as the student is able to constitute an appropriate committee." A review of M.P.H. projects recently completed by other students will help give you an idea of the range of

acceptable projects. Students should start considering possible project topics by the middle of their second semester. The summer internship, required for Epidemiology majors, is often a source of data for projects for those students who seek out such opportunities. A topic should be in hand by summer for a January graduation, and by December for a student wishing to graduate in May. For students undertaking a more theoretical project, a longer lead time is advisable.

D. Assembling the Project Committee

Once the specific topic is decided upon, the student should ask a faculty member to be chair of the project committee. As the topic is developed further, the student selects at least one other committee member in conjunction with the chair. If the committee chair is not the same as the academic advisor, then the chair automatically assumes the role of the academic advisor and the student's advising folder should be transferred to the committee chair.

The M.P.H committee will have at least one Biostatistics or one Epidemiology faculty depending upon the academic major, and will have at least one (or more) additional faculty or adjunct faculty from other specialties as may be appropriate. The chair must be from the academic major and must be a faculty from the Amherst campus for students registered on the Amherst campus. In the case of an Epidemiology student it may be appropriate to have a Biostatistics faculty committee member in addition to an Epidemiology faculty. Graduate faculty from other campus Departments or health agency adjunct faculty are often useful contributors to a committee depending upon the topic. For Biostatistics students, an Epidemiology faculty member may be appropriate in selected situations.

Adjunct faculty, if they have a graduate level appointment, are eligible to serve as voting members of a committee but may not serve as chair of a committee if the student is registered through the Amherst campus. For the Worcester M.P.H. students, the chair and other members may be solely from the Worcester campus. Other related professionals may serve on the committee and may be listed as a consultant on the cover page, and are expected to attend the presentation.

E. Developing the Project Proposal

With the help of the chair, a brief one or two page "pre-proposal" synopsis of the project should be written initially for recruiting additional faculty for the committee and to serve as a blueprint for the development of the project proposal. After the committee is recruited it is the chair's responsibility to assist the student in developing the pre-proposal into a reasonably polished document before it is presented to the other committee members for their input.

A recommended final proposal format is as follows:

A. Statement of the Problem

A background statement outlines the nature of the problem to be studied and indicates the contribution the study will make.

B. Brief Review of the Literature

A brief review of the literature should include at least several primary articles or recent review papers and should document the major issues to be addressed in the proposed project. It is expected that this section will provide the background for the project.

C. Project Questions

A statement of the questions to be addressed or the goal(s) of the project.

D. Methods

The central feature of the proposal. This section should provide the details on how the project will be carried out.

E. Project Limitations

It is important to demonstrate an understanding of the limitations of the project and any anticipated problems that may be encountered.

F. Significance

There should be some thoughtful comments explaining the importance of the anticipated outcome(s) such as contribution to program effectiveness, improvement in prevention activities, better tracking of treatment, etc.

G. Human Subject Protection

This section should indicate the procedures which will be used to insure confidentiality and protection of the privacy of the subjects. An informed consent statement should be included if original data are being collected. The section should indicate whether an outside agency Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval of the project is involved. If there is no other human subjects review, the proposal will be referred automatically by the Graduate Program Director to the School's Institutional Review Board. In this case the student is responsible to obtain an IRB form from the Graduate Program Director to be filled out and turned in at the same time as the finished project proposal. Data collection from human subjects, or use of confidential records, may not proceed until an IRB approval has been obtained.

H. Timeline for Completion

A realistic timetable for completion of each phase of the project should be outlined. Include a convincing discussion of why your project is feasible.

I. Access to project population or faculty/agency database.

Include a written statement from the agency (or faculty owner) or gatekeeper of the records or population indicating their willingness to grant you access to the information or the population.

The proposal represents a demonstrated readiness to carry out a project on a specific topic, and the proposed approach or procedures may need to be revised further, with the agreement of the committee, as the project proceeds. The proposal should be written using the future tense. Students may wish to review several recent project proposals similar to theirs as available from any faculty member. But the up-to-date outline included in this write-up should be followed. The usual project proposal averages about ten pages in length.

F. Format for the Proposal

It is highly recommended that the student use the University Graduate School Thesis Preparation Guidelines and project format even when preparing the first draft of the project proposal. There is a computer formatted Microsoft Word project template available for DOS and Windows, and for the Macintosh, from the University Computer Center across the street. Several times a semester (and between semesters) the Computer Center offers a specific course in the use of this template. Included in the document is the cover sheet format.

G. Timelines

The committee should meet as a whole at least once with the student for a comprehensive review of the project proposal prior to the submission of the final proposal to the Departmental Graduate Program Director. Please note that the faculty are not obligated to review and comment on any proposal submitted to them within less than ten calendar days prior to any submission deadline.

A copy of the M.P.H. project proposal must be signed first by the committee and then by the Graduate Program Director for the Department. The Graduate Program Director still signs the proposal if also a member or even the chair of the committee. If the committee and project proposal are appropriate, the Graduate Program Director signs the proposal and files it in the student's Departmental folder. A form for the School's Institutional Review Board's human subjects review should be provided at this time if appropriate. The project proposal must be submitted at least two months prior to the project presentation. It is expected also that you will provide the members of your committee with a final copy of the proposal.

H. Carrying Out the Project

The committee chair is expected to assume the major role in guiding the student through the project. Other faculty generally contribute to selected aspects of the project. It is important that the student keep each of the committee members up-to-date on significant aspects of the project. In the case of conflicting or extreme demands from committee members, the student should inform the chair and request a committee meeting to resolve any issues. Any substantial change in the proposed project should trigger a meeting of the full committee.

I. Writing the Project

Be sure to strictly follow the Graduate School guidelines for Master's theses to the letter. Again, there exists a computerized template for the M.P.H. project available on disk from the Computer Center. Classes are offered in the use of the template. Make use of these resources.

Epidemiology students should use the table format, reference format, and reference citation method of the American Journal of Epidemiology. Biostatistics students should use the Journal of the American Statistical Association as their guide for these aspects. If you port over any of your proposal text to the project, please change the text from the future tense to the past tense.

The chapter headings of the project are as follows:

- A. Introduction
- B. Review of the Literature
- C. Methods
- D. Results
- E. Discussion

J. Scheduling the Project Presentation

When the committee chair affirms a consensus among the committee members that the project is essentially completed and is ready for the final presentation, the chair fills out and signs the M.P.H. Project Presentation Notification Form available in the Department office and circulates it to the other members to sign. The Graduate Program Director will then announce to the Department the topic, time and place of the presentation. The submission of the presentation form must precede the presentation by at least two weeks. At least one week after the project presentation should be built into the schedule to allow for final revisions or changes to the project and the typing of the final copy for submission to the Departmental Graduate Program Director.

Please be advised that the faculty have nine month appointments and are not obligated to be available during June, July, or August. Also, in your planning you should query the faculty about any sabbatical or leave of absence plans.

K. Who May Attend the Project Presentation

The project presentation is always open to any Departmental faculty member who wishes to attend. Generally, Departmental graduate students are welcome to attend also. Other persons may attend the presentation only with advance approval by the committee chair.

L. The Project Presentation Process

Note that the Graduate School requires that all members of the committee must be present for the presentation to be held. Each committee member shall have received a "final" polished version of the project at least a week before the presentation.

The committee chair oversees the proceedings of the presentation. The student is expected to present, generally in about 40 minutes, a synopsis of the key elements of the project, especially emphasizing methods, results, limitations, and the significance of the results within the context of the field. Usually, questions of information or clarification are asked during the presentations, but matters of substance are held for the question period.

When the presentation is finished, the chair directs the question period. Upon completion of the question period, the committee then meets in private to discuss the students performance and decide on the final grade for the project.

Committee members may recommend minor changes to the project. If major changes are required then the presentation was held prematurely. One of the most useful parts of the

presentation process is the professional evaluation by the committee of both the presentation itself and of the career of the student in the Department.

The student should bring one copies of the project signature sheets to the presentation. If only minor changes are required in the final version of the project, then most members of the committee are willing to sign the cover sheets at that time. The project committee chair signs the cover sheet only when the final copy of the corrected project is received. The Departmental Chair signs only after the committee chair does. Please be sure to use the same acid-free paper for the signature sheet as for the bound Departmental copy. All signatures must be in black ink.

The student should also bring a copy of the Notification of Completion of M.P.H. Project Presentation Form to the presentation, and a Change of Grade form if appropriate. Upon completion of a successful presentation, the committee members sign the form and the chair signs the Change of Grade form. The student then returns the completed form(s) to the Departmental office. This sheet initiates the Department's Graduate Program Director's formal notification to the Graduate School that you have successfully defended your project. The Graduate Registrar then records your BIOEPI696D grade as determined by your committee.

M. Publications from the Project

Where the project results are publishable, the student is encouraged to write-up a first draft of the manuscript with him/herself as first author. If the student does not prepare a draft of the manuscript within six months of the presentation, especially where the student was using faculty or agency data, it is the prerogative of the committee chair or other committee member or agency person to prepare a first draft and include the student as an author.

In the case of the use of faculty data or data or when working with an outside agency, it is vitally important the authorship of paper(s) resulting from the project be explicitly negotiated in writing in advance of beginning the project. Such an agreement should state the order of authorship for any potential publication(s) and the general content of such publication(s). Failure to address this issue in advance has caused unhappy complications in the past.

N. Final Steps

1. Pay the commencement and placement fees at the Graduate School Office of Degree Requirements
2. Fill out the yellow Degree Application Form / Eligibility Form from the Office of Degree Requirements. You may wish to list only those courses needed to fulfill the degree requirements. All the courses you have taken will still show up on the transcript, but courses beyond the requirements can often be transferred directly into any Doctoral program pursued in the future, but only if they were not listed for your degree requirements. The yellow sheet must be reviewed and signed by the Departmental Graduate Program Director who certifies

that you have met all the degree requirements. The sheet must be signed also by the Department Chair.

3. Fill out a final copy of the Departmental counseling form which will serve as a archive copy of your record with us. This Departmental form and the yellow sheet for the Graduate School should both be filled out as soon as the M.P.H. presentation is scheduled. Do not delay until the last moment.
4. Have project committee members and/or the Departmental Chair sign project signature page on acid free paper if they haven't already done so.
5. Provide a bound copy of the project on acid-free paper for the Departmental file, with a signed signature page incorporated. A copy is not submitted to the Graduate School.
6. Provide a courtesy copy of the project, in a modest binder, to each member of your committee. This does not have to be on acid-free paper.
7. Turn in any keys you have to Departmental rooms and to Arnold House. It is not appropriate to pass these keys on to other students.

Graduate School absolute deadlines for steps 1-3 to be completed:

<u>Deadline</u>	<u>Graduation Date</u>
January 15	February degree
April 30	May degree
August 31	September degree
