

MPH Capstone Guidelines

2022-2023

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A. THE CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE

Overview

The capstone is an individualized or group based faculty supervised project that meets the Integrative Learning Experience (ILE) requirement of the MPH degree. The capstone project is an opportunity for students to:

- Immerse themselves in contributing solutions to a public health problem
- Expand, synthesize and hone their public health practice skills
- Gain specialized experience in an area of particular interest

Capstone project goals

The MPH capstone provides an opportunity for students interested in public health practice. Capstone efforts should meet the broad goals outlined below.

Experiential Goals - to contribute to solving a public health problem in a meaningful, effective, and culturally appropriate way, specifically by:

- Working to solve an applied public health problem.
- Finding and applying evidence-based solutions to a defined public health problem.
- Exploring problem-solving methods in the contexts of specific communities and populations.
- Understanding the organizational, political, economic, and social contexts that can promote or constrain public health interventions.

Academic Goals -- Both the MPH course work and the MPH capstone project are structured to assure that students achieve core public health competencies. Capstone projects should help students:

- Apply advanced public health assessment and problem-solving skills.
- Develop comprehensive knowledge in an area or areas of special interest.
- Evaluate the successes and weaknesses of the project through either formal evaluation or reflection.
- Hone communication skills and use them to summarize findings in professional-quality written presentations.
- Expand writing skills in a final paper that can be used to inform problem solving in the field of public health.

Capstone advising and supervision

While conducting the capstone project, students work closely with a supervisory committee composed of at least two members. The Chair of the capstone committee must have a faculty appointment in the School of Public Health. The second member can be another faculty member or someone with related expertise working in public health practice. Both advising members will assist in planning the project, monitoring progress toward stated objectives,

reviewing project-related documents and products, and participating in project evaluation and grading.

What's the difference between a capstone and a thesis?

The MPH capstone project demonstrates students' ability to produce independent professional-quality work for a public health practice audience. A thesis is conducted explicitly for the purpose of creating generalizable new knowledge and contributing to the public health literature. Both the capstone and thesis count as the *Integrated Learning Experience* or 'ILE' part of a student's requirements and synthesizes the students' academic learning through a writing experience.

What's the difference between the practicum and a capstone?

The practicum (aka Applied Practice Experience) is a planned, supervised, and evaluated field-based experience, requiring a minimum of 160 hours under the guidance of an SPH Faculty Advisor and a Practicum Site Supervisor. The practicum allows MPH students to apply classroom learning to the field of public health, serving as trainees to practicing professionals while expanding the capacity of a public health organization. The capstone serves as the culmination of the students' MPH degree by completing a substantial written report. The capstone may be connected to the practicum; for example, conducted in the same partner organization or further developing knowledge and skills in a similar content area. However, the capstone should result in a product distinct from the practicum that is **substantially greater in scope** since the capstone requires more credits and time.

Examples of capstone project deliverables

Some examples of potential capstone deliverables are listed below. It is the student's job to review any criteria or additional guidance provided by their department or program.

- An implementation plan for a public health program
- A program plan for a public health intervention (report)
- A curriculum manual and related materials
- An evaluation (report)
- A needs assessment (report)
- A communications campaign (advertisements, video, etc.)
- A policy analysis
- A systematic review

Examples of capstone project settings or audiences

Students may choose to work with a community partner or agency to complete their capstone. Examples of potential project settings are listed below. Regardless of the setting in which the work is conducted, the capstone deliverables are intended to have a public health practice audience.

- Health departments
- Local, state, federal, and international governmental human service agencies
- Non-governmental human service agencies
- Community-based organizations (CBOs)
- Advocacy organizations
- Government policy-making bodies
- Community clinics
- Community centers
- Community coalitions
- Hospitals, nursing homes, and other long-term care facilities
- Schools
- Child care and day care centers
- International non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

Criteria for partner organizations

The following criteria may be helpful in identifying an appropriate community partner organization:

- ***Have an identified need*** that can be addressed with the problem-solving skills attained during MPH academic work.
- ***Identify a capstone committee member*** who can meet with the student regularly and who is willing to provide substantive guidance and assistance.
- ***Provide necessary and/or requested resources*** (desk, data, access to clients, etc.) to enable a student to carry out the project.
- ***Enable students to apply skills and competencies*** learned in the academic program.

B. MPH CAPSTONE PROJECT PARAMETERS

Academic credits and time commitment

The MPH capstone project is an activity in which students work to identify and contribute to the solution of a public health problem and summarize this effort in writing. The total timeline may vary depending on when the student begins the project. Students are required to enroll in and complete a total of 9 credit hours to conduct the project, from conception and planning stages to the final written deliverable and presentations. Students should note that 9 credit hours equates to approximately 270 hours of work. In a few cases, capstone credits and projects are completed through a specific capstone course (e.g. Nutrition) which may differ in the number of credit hours required.

Grading the capstone

At a minimum, each capstone will be graded as credit/no credit. Individual departments or programs may choose to grade the capstone using a decimal grade. Some departments and programs may also choose to recognize high quality capstone projects with awards or designations.

Students are required to adhere to established milestones for each quarter in which they are enrolled for capstone credits. This is intended to keep students and faculty advisors on track towards completion for graduation. Faculty are encouraged to evaluate progress each quarter and assign grades or credit accordingly.

Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) Requirements

Students are required to identify competencies they will learn and be assessed on as part of the Integrative Learning Experience (ILE) (this is section D7 under the CEPH criteria). Students should work together with their faculty committee members to identify appropriate competencies in a process similar to that of the practicum. The School of Public Health requires that students select a minimum of two competencies for their capstone project, and that at least one of these competencies should be unique to their department or program. CEPH foundational competencies can be found [here](#) on pages 17-19 (section D2). Competencies need to be tracked individually regardless of whether the capstone project is a group or individual project. Once competencies are chosen, students will create their capstone project and enter their competencies into an online tracking form. The ILE project tracking form is currently integrated with the practicum dropbox and management system, <https://practicum.sphcm.washington.edu>. The protocol for tracking can be found [here](#).

Additionally, part of CEPH compliance requires schools to ensure thorough documentation management. This means that each student's capstone project materials need to be saved in an internal, secure location. In years when a self-study is due, schools must submit a random mix of student work examples showing how this criteria is met.

UW Records Retention

The University of Washington guidance on records retention is for schools to retain these types of records in their system for six years after the degree has been awarded. This is longer than the CEPH requirement so we will use this timeframe as the SPH requirement for retaining this type of record.

Project process criteria

Students conduct capstone projects in a wide variety of topics that address an equally wide variety of public health questions and issues. While departments and programs may have additional guidelines, all capstone projects must meet the following criteria:

- ❑ ***Address a need and/or have direct, practical value*** to a community organization or public health-related agency.
- ❑ ***Involve an identifiable activity (or set of activities) with a clear endpoint*** and produce a specific “product” that can be described in detail and evaluated formally or through reflection.
- ❑ ***Apply and extend specific public health skills, knowledge, and experience*** in an area of special interest to the student.
- ❑ ***Be evidence-based.*** You must build on—or place in the context of—what is known (i.e., “evidence”).

- ❑ **Include an evaluation** or self-evaluation component.
- ❑ **Be summarized in a written report that is rigorous**, thoughtful, and professional.
- ❑ **Contribute to efforts** to improve the health of a community, advance social justice, eliminate health disparities, and/or improve public health practice.
- ❑ **Meet CEPH competency requirements**

Project deliverable criteria

Capstone projects should not consist of a collection of unrelated tasks. And, while students may learn of a number of *interesting* projects with indirect connections to public health, students must select projects for which they can clearly articulate the public health connection and problem they will address. It's important for the capstone product to showcase its impact. While departments and programs may have additional guidelines, all capstone projects must include the following sections:

- ❑ Project proposal which outlines the specific components of the project
 - ❑ For students working with an outside agency, a project contract that specifies the supervisor, project deliverables, timeline, responsibilities of student, faculty, and agency is also required
- ❑ Background section and problem statement that summarizes the existing evidence
- ❑ Methodological section that describes how the work was accomplished
- ❑ Specific deliverable(s) outlined in the project proposal
- ❑ A section describing the public health implications of what was done
- ❑ An evaluation and/or reflection on the deliverable and competencies

Suggested Timeline

We encourage first-year students to read these capstone guidelines closely early in their program and ask questions about the capstone project to their program director or first-year faculty advisor. Capstone projects should begin after completion of the first-year curriculum.

Students should aim to submit required documents during the quarters listed below. Those starting projects during the summer before the second year should submit a proposal before beginning project work. Please check department and program guidelines for specific dates. The faculty advisor is encouraged to use these milestones to check the progress of the project each quarter.

FALL QUARTER

Capstone Proposal (and Contract, if needed)
Background Section/Problem Statement

WINTER QUARTER

Primary Methods

SPRING QUARTER

First Draft of Deliverables
Final Draft of Report

Evaluation & Reflection
Final Draft of Deliverable

C. RESPONSIBILITIES OF STUDENTS, FACULTY ADVISORS, AND ON-SITE MENTORS

Students

- Initiate the MPH capstone project by researching prospective sites, making community contacts, and identifying potential faculty advisors.
- Familiarize themselves with potential sites by scheduling informational interviews and identifying potential mentors.
- Schedule regular meetings with their committee members. (Students are also encouraged to seek assistance from other faculty members who can offer expertise and guidance for the MPH capstone project.)
- Identify competencies for the capstone.
- Perform all of the tasks outlined in their project proposal, collect and complete all forms, milestones and deliverables on schedule.
- Formally evaluate the quality of their MPH capstone project experience and make recommendations for improving the experience.

Faculty Committee Members

- Assist students in choosing their MPH capstone project topics and sites
- Advise students to assure that their projects have reasonable and appropriate aims that are both rigorous and feasible;
- Collaborate with students and on-site mentors, develop a schedule of regular meetings to monitor progress, problem-solve around issues that come up, and provide advice on the proposal, background development, methods, and evaluation.
- Assume principal responsibility for project oversight, ensuring scientific quality, and integrating project tasks with academic work, learning objectives, and students' career objectives.
- Review and evaluate all project deliverables, including proposals, work plans, identified competencies, progress reports, drafts, and final reports
- Evaluate student work for the purpose of grading and assure that final grades are submitted to the registrar at project completion.

Community Partner Committee Members

- Assist students in identifying community/agency needs and in formulating an appropriate, feasible, and edifying project.
- Share expertise, experience, and organizational values.
- Assist students in completing the MPH capstone project contract.
- Meet with students and faculty advisors at the onset and regularly during the project.
- Orient students to their sites, serves as an advocate for the student, introducing

them to staff and familiarizing them with organizational procedures.

- Mentor the project, providing expertise on community and organizational ethos and on appropriate public health approaches and practice skills.
- Help students to find appropriate working space and equipment.
- Assist students to obtain access to necessary data.
- Review and comment on written products.
- Contribute to project evaluation and grading