Master of Public Health (MPH)
Thesis/Capstone Handbook

Most recent revision to this Handbook: January 2017
# Contents

Overview ................................................................................................................................................. 1

What is the difference between a thesis and a capstone? ................................................................. 1

Choosing a Topic ....................................................................................................................................... 2

A Word on Data Analysis .................................................................................................................... 3

IRB Approval ............................................................................................................................................. 3

How many people are on a committee, and how is the committee formed? .................................. 3

Registration for Credit and Timeline to Completion ........................................................................ 4

When should a student begin preparing for thesis/capstone? .......................................................... 4

How does a student register for PH7990/7991? ................................................................................. 4

How many semesters does the student have to complete and defend the Thesis/Capstone? .......... 5

Writing the Paper ................................................................................................................................... 6

Thesis/Capstone Paper Formatting ....................................................................................................... 6

Suggested Format for Traditional Thesis ............................................................................................ 6

Suggested Format for Manuscript Thesis ............................................................................................ 7

Suggested Format for Capstone ............................................................................................................ 7

Student and Committee Roles ............................................................................................................. 8

Student Responsibilities ....................................................................................................................... 8

Committee Chair Responsibilities ......................................................................................................... 8

Committee Member Responsibilities ..................................................................................................... 9

Thesis/Capstone Defense and Receiving a Final Grade ..................................................................... 10

Defense Format ....................................................................................................................................... 10

Uploading the Final Paper ..................................................................................................................... 10
Overview

The thesis/capstone, also referred to as the culminating experience or integrative learning experience, constitutes a significant part of the work toward a Master’s degree and is the culmination of all other activities. The thesis/capstone must reflect high standards of scholarly inquiry, technical mastery, and literary skill. It should be a contribution to the student’s area of study (concentration) and should reflect the student’s independent efforts with guidance from the thesis/capstone committee.

What is the difference between a thesis and a capstone?
The designation of a student’s culminating experience as a “thesis” or “capstone” is determined by the student and committee. In most cases, for a topic to be eligible for a thesis, a student must develop a research question, generate a hypothesis based on existing research about the topic, and then systematically analyze primary or secondary data to determine whether or not the hypothesis is supported. The intent of a thesis should be to generalize the results to a larger population, so adequate data and sample size are paramount.

Some examples of acceptable Thesis titles include:

- “Characteristics of Disease Transmission, Geography and Risk in an Urban Population with Endemic HIV.”
- “Changes in Georgia Restaurant and Bar Smoking Policies Between 2006 and 2012.”
- “An Examination of Attitudinal Differences Between Men Involved in Three Categories of Intimate Partner Violence: Bidirectional, Unidirectional, and No Violence.”

A capstone is often more applied in nature, and there is sometimes an end-product that provides some sort of materials, guide, plan, or evaluation that can be used by the community, agency, or group facing the issue or problem at hand. A capstone may or may not involve data analysis, but the objective is not usually to extrapolate the results to a larger population.

Some examples of acceptable Capstone projects include:

- Grant Proposal/Research Plan: This capstone should include a clearly defined research question, the specific objectives of the proposal, review of literature, study design, methods of analysis, and implications of the work. The research question should be one that is encountered in professional work such as the evaluation of a public health intervention.
- Community Assessment: Student will conduct an in-depth analysis of health factors of a defined population or community of interest.
• Public Health Program Plan: Student will design and develop a plan to implement a public health program. Management, fiscal, and ethical factors must be addressed. Students will develop instructions, procedures, and manuals for the program.
• Community Intervention: Student designs and implements a community intervention.
• Program Evaluation: Student examines and evaluates the effectiveness and outcomes of a specific program.
• Analysis of a Public Health Problem: Student will conduct an in-depth analysis to assess a public health problem of interest. The capstone must describe the specific problem, its determinants and magnitude, and also include an assessment of the issue. Students are expected to include sections discussing methods of prevention and intervention.
• Video: Student may create a video documenting a public health issue for an organization.
• Comprehensive Resource Directory: Student create an extensive directory of resources related to a public health issue.
• Training Manuals
• Website Development
• Policy Analysis

Other Capstone formats may be acceptable, and these may vary by concentration. Previous student theses and capstones may be found at http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/iph/.

Choosing a Topic
The thesis/capstone topic is the responsibility of the student. Normally, students will need to have a reasonably well-defined topic in mind before requesting faculty to chair or serve on their committees. In the thesis/capstone application, students must write a brief statement of their plan and receive approval of the topic before they will be able to register for thesis/capstone credit.

Students should aim to produce novel research or application material. Efforts should be unique and innovative to those in existing research and materials. In other words, there would be no reason to answer a research question that has already been answered, unless there were limitations or other considerations in current studies that would justify the student’s replicating those efforts. Likewise, there would be no reason to conduct a community assessment or public health program just like one that has already been developed, unless there were limitations or other considerations in current assessment or program that would justify the student’s building on those efforts.

Students are encouraged to utilize multiple resources to help generate and define a thesis/capstone topic – i.e., talk with faculty who have experience in the field of interest; conduct informational interviews with public health practitioners and researchers; talk with other students; attend lunch and learns and other SPH research events to learn about public health problems and efforts to address them; conduct a literature review to highlight gaps in the literature that need to be addressed (many articles name or list areas of needed, future
research in their discussion areas, which can provide some very direct suggestions of possible topics).

While students are encouraged to select a topic they are interested in, it should be noted that the choice of a thesis/capstone topic does not dictate an MPH graduate’s career choices (i.e., a capstone that focuses on diabetes prevention does not limit one’s career path to those related to diabetes prevention). The thesis/capstone is designed to be a demonstration of skills and knowledge gained from the foundational and concentration courses, including research and critical thinking skills, and all of those skills are translatable among an array of public health careers.

A Word on Data Analysis
As previously mentioned, the thesis/capstone is a “culminating experience” or “integrative learning experience.” This means that it is intended to be a demonstration of what students have already learned from their MPH classes and articulated in the MPH foundational and concentration competencies.

If the student’s topic requires an advanced analysis that he/she was not taught during his/her MPH program of study, the research question or methods will likely need to be modified. This is not the time for a student to attempt an analysis that he/she has never learned and is beyond the scope of the MPH level training.

Neither the student nor the committee should rely on outside faculty (i.e., Biostatistics faculty), GRAs in the Biostatistics lab, or anyone else to conduct the data analysis. One of the top reasons that a student’s defense is delayed is a lack of knowledge and resources for the student’s data analysis.

IRB Approval
Students participating in human subjects research will need to seek prior approval from the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board: http://ursa.research.gsu.edu/ursa/compliance/human-subjects/. It is highly recommended that students planning to collect primary data submit their application to the IRB as early as possible. Students utilizing secondary data may still need to submit to the IRB, even if it is for exemption, although some publicly available data sets have already been pre-approved: http://ursa.research.gsu.edu/ursa/compliance/human-subjects/policy-for-publicly-available-archival-and-secondary-data/. If a student is utilizing a data set on that aforementioned list, the student does not any further IRB approval.

Students who are not sure whether or not their research qualifies as human subjects research should consult their committee chair.

How many people are on a committee, and how is the committee formed?
The thesis/capstone committee is selected by the student. The committee must be comprised of a faculty chairperson and at least one additional member. The faculty chair for a
thesis/capstone committee must hold primary faculty appointment in the School of Public Health at GSU, and for thesis committees specifically, the chairperson must hold the designation of “graduate faculty.” Students should confirm with the faculty member director or contact the Graduate Advisor if they are not sure whether a faculty member has these two designations.

Together, the student and committee chair will select at least one other committee member. This person should have the appropriate academic preparation and experience relative to the thesis/capstone topic to help guide the student through the process. He/she does not need to be a faculty member in the School of Public Health. Practitioners and faculty from other institutions in the field of public health and outside of SPH are welcomed.

The Graduate Advisor and the student’s Division Director must approve the composition of the thesis/capstone committee by signing off on the Thesis/Capstone Application before students are permitted to register for thesis or capstone credit hours.

Registration for Credit and Timeline to Completion

When should a student begin preparing for thesis/capstone?
It is never too early to begin thinking of an appropriate topic. Students are required by the policy outlined in their student handbook to submit a Thesis/Capstone Application to the Office of Academic Assistance & Career Services by the time they have completed 36 credit hours. It is advisable for a student to begin forming his/her committee and finding a topic no later than midterm of the semester before the student seeks to register for Thesis (PH7990) or Capstone (PH7991) credit hours.

If the student plans to collect primary data, it is advisable to begin preparing even earlier and possibly submit materials to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the semester prior to registering for PH7990/PH7991, to avoid delays in degree completion.

How does a student register for PH7990/7991?
After the committee and thesis/capstone topic are selected, the student must turn in the completed Thesis/Capstone Application to the Office of Academic Assistance & Career Services to obtain permission to register. Students can submit the application via e-mail (publichealthadvising@gsu.edu), fax (404-413-1489), or in person (One Park Place, Suite 640).

The student will receive an e-mail to his/her GSU student email account when the application has been approved and permission to register has been granted. Students must register for a minimum of 3 hours of Thesis/capstone credit (PH7990 or PH7991).
How many semesters does the student have to complete and defend the Thesis/Capstone?

Students are expected to successfully defend and upload their final documents to ScholarWorks within two academic semesters from the time they first enroll in PH7990/PH7991 (including summer). Failure to complete the thesis/capstone within two academic semesters will place the student on academic probation. Failure to complete the thesis/capstone by the end of the third semester may result in a scholastic dismissal from the MPH program.

For students who aim to finish their Thesis/Capstone in one semester, below is a general suggested timeline:

**Suggested Fall & Spring Thesis/Capstone Approval Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At least one week before the first day of class</td>
<td>Complete and submit Thesis/Capstone Application.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Register for PH7990/7991 once application is approved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four weeks into the semester</td>
<td>First draft due to committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven weeks into the semester</td>
<td>Second or final draft due to committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten weeks into the semester</td>
<td>Defense scheduled and announced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least two weeks before last day of classes</td>
<td>Final draft due to committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last day of classes</td>
<td>Thesis/Capstone defense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Final thesis/capstone approved and submitted electronically.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Writing the Paper

Thesis/Capstone Paper Formatting

- Formatting style for the thesis/capstone is at the discretion of the student and his/her committee, and the chosen style must be consistent throughout the paper. Whether the student uses APA, AMA, Chicago-style, etc., is to be determined by the student and his/her committee.
- Font should be no larger than 12-point, and font choice should be easily readable (Times New Roman and Calibri are both acceptable).
- Use Roman numerals for chapter headings. Ex: Chapter I, Chapter II, etc.
- Margins should be consistent throughout the paper. 1-inch margins all around are suggested.
- Text should be 1.5- or double-spaced.
- There is no officially required paper length, although theses and capstones are rarely less than 35 pages. 35-50 pages is typical.
- Students can find templates for the initial pages (Abstract, Title Page, Approval Page, Acknowledgments, Author’s Statement, Table of Contents, List of Tables, and List of Figures) on the website.

Suggested Format for Traditional Thesis

The traditional thesis is written in five chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results, and Discussion/Conclusion.

- **Initial pages.** Use Roman numerals when assigning page numbers to the initial pages, until the body of the thesis begins.
  - Abstract not counted or numbered
  - Title page: number “i” is assigned but not typed
  - Approval page: number “ii” is assigned but not typed
  - Acknowledgments optional; if used, it should be listed in the Table of Contents.
  - Author’s Statement required, but not numbered.
  - Table of Contents may have more than one page
  - List of Tables used if necessary
  - List of Figures used if necessary

- **Body of Thesis.** These pages are numbered with Arabic numerals beginning with “1”. All Chapters must begin on a new page.
  - Chapter I – Introduction
    - i. Include the study purpose and research questions
  - Chapter II – Literature Review
    - i. Utilize subsections for different topics
• Chapter III – Methods and Procedures  
  i. Include a description of study instrument, recruitment of study participants, ethical considerations (e.g., IRB approval and informed consent process), and methods of data collection and analysis.

• Chapter IV – Results  
  i. List results of data analysis and includes relevant tables

• Chapter V – Discussion  
  i. Include interpretation of results, study limitations, suggestions for future research, and a conclusion

• References  
• Appendices

Suggested Format for Manuscript Thesis
The manuscript format can be used when a manuscript prepared for publication is incorporated as a chapter into the thesis. The manuscript will be prepared according to the guidelines of the journal to which the manuscript will be presented. The student should reach out to his/her committee for guidance on the manuscript format, as these may vary by concentration.

• Initial pages. Use Roman numerals when assigning page numbers to the initial pages, until the body of the thesis begins. 
  • Abstract not counted or numbered  
  • Title page: number “i” is assigned but not typed  
  • Approval page: number “ii” is assigned but not typed  
  • Acknowledgments optional; if used, it should be listed in the Table of Contents.  
  • Author’s Statement required, but not numbered.  
  • Table of Contents may have more than one page  
  • List of Tables used if necessary  
  • List of Figures used if necessary

• Body of Thesis. These pages are numbered with Arabic numerals beginning with “1”. All Chapters must begin on a new page. 
  • Chapter I – Introduction  
  • Chapter II – Literature Review  
    i. Include references at the end of this chapter  
  • Chapter III – Manuscript in style of journal  
  • Appendices

Suggested Format for Capstone
Because Capstones vary so much in their approach, students are not required to utilize the five-chapter or manuscript suggested formats (e.g., the traditional format may not appropriate if the student is creating a training manual). However, many students do utilize a suggested thesis
format for their capstone, if the chapters are applicable to their approach. To see examples of how the suggested format has been adapted for Capstone papers, please visit http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/iph_capstone.

Student and Committee Roles

Student Responsibilities
- Select a thesis/capstone topic
- Secure a committee chairperson
- Together, the student and committee chair should select at least one other committee member
- Complete Thesis/Capstone Application and submit to Office of Academic Assistance for registration authorization
- Submit an application for approval to the university IRB, if applicable
- Stay on track with the committee’s agreed-upon timeline, submitting drafts by their due dates
- Remain in regular communication with the committee chair
- Work with all committee members to find a day/time for the defense (all committee members must be present at the defense in some capacity)
- Reserve a conference room for the defense
- Complete Thesis/Capstone Defense Announcement and submit to Office of Academic Assistance
- Bring thesis/capstone Results of Defense form to the defense for the committee to sign on the day of the defense
- Make any post-defense edits as requested by the committee
- Upload final paper to ScholarWorks to receive a final grade for PH7990/7991

Committee Chair Responsibilities
- Assess the student’s topic and ability to carry out all components of the proposed thesis/capstone. Provide feedback and suggestions for modifications if necessary.
- Guide the student on whether or not IRB approval is necessary, and what kind of approval he/she should seek
- Approve the student’s additional committee member(s).
- Communicate with the student early in the process so that expectations are clear from the beginning (e.g., How should drafts be submitted to the committee? What kind of turnaround can the student expect on receiving feedback on those drafts?)
- Work with the student and other committee members to establish a realistic timeline for completion, and discuss how the student will be held accountable to the timeline
- Provide timely feedback throughout the semester
• Work with committee members to assess the student’s progress and readiness to defend by the defense deadline. If the committee determines that the student is not adequately prepared to successfully defend, the student should continue his/her progress in the following semester.

• Attend the defense, complete and sign the Results form, and explain to the student any edits that need to be made before uploading the final document to ScholarWorks

• Approve the final document of the Thesis/Capstone to be uploaded to ScholarWorks

Committee Member Responsibilities

• Read, advise on, and sign the Thesis/Capstone Application

• Agree upon a realistic timeline for completion, as guided by the committee chair

• Read the student’s drafts and provide timely feedback, as guided by the committee chair

• Advise on specific aspects of the Thesis/Capstone in which the committee member has expertise

• Work with committee chair to assess the student’s progress and readiness to defend by the defense deadline

• Attend the thesis/capstone defense, sign the Results form, and provide feedback and suggestions for edits to the final document, if necessary
Thesis/Capstone Defense and Receiving a Final Grade

Defense Format
Every student who has completed a thesis/capstone will complete a final oral examination of his or her work, also known as the defense. The thesis/capstone can only be defended in the student’s final semester of the MPH program.

The student and thesis/capstone committee must agree upon the date, time, and place of the defense. The student is responsible for reserving a conference room for their defense. As of Fall 2016, the reservation form can be found at http://publichealth.gsu.edu/thesis-defense-room-reservation-form/. The student must submit the Thesis/Capstone Defense Announcement to the Office of Academic Assistance at least one week prior to its administration.

The defense must be attended by all members of the student’s committee and will be open to the School of Public Health community (i.e., faculty, staff, and students). For committee members who cannot be present, Skype or teleconferencing capabilities can be arranged but must be requested ahead of time.

Students should expect to deliver a 30-minute presentation (usually via Microsoft PowerPoint, but other presentation formats are acceptable), covering major aspects of their thesis/capstone, and then allot 30 minutes for questions from their committee and the audience. Since this thesis/capstone is considered a “culminating experience” or “integrative learning experience,” students may also be asked to synthesis their respective MPH concentration’s foundational and concentration competencies, particularly how they relate (or even do not relate) to their thesis/capstone project. This ensures that the thesis/capstone experience addresses the foundational and concentration-specific competencies.

Following questions, the committee will deliberate privately and then, if appropriate, sign off on the student’s Results of Defense form. Most students “successfully present pending revisions,” meaning that edits need to be made before the final document can be uploaded.

It is strongly recommended that students attend at least one defense before their own to familiarize themselves with the format.

Uploading the Final Paper
The last step uploading the final version of the thesis/capstone paper to the university’s digital library, ScholarWorks. Uploading is mandatory. Detailed instructions will be sent to the student upon receipt of the Results of Defense form. For students who are interested in publishing their work in an academic journal, ScholarWorks offers an embargo option. MPH students can embargo their work for up to a year at a time. The Office of Academic Assistance will automatically be notified when a student has submitted a paper to ScholarWorks. The Graduate Advisor will approve the submission and assign a final grade for PH7990/PH7991.