



**Arnold School of
Public Health**
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA



2026-2027

Department of Health Services Policy and Management

PHD PROGRAM HANDBOOK

Revised May 2026

This handbook of the programs, policies, and practices of the Department of Health Services Policy and Management is not an official University document. If there are discrepancies between this handbook and the University's Graduate Studies Bulletin, the Graduate Studies Bulletin supersedes.



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1 About the Department of Health Services Policy and Management

We are passionate about making a difference in the lives of others and contributing to a better and more equitable world. Many of us have roots in rural or underserved areas, where we witnessed firsthand the challenges in accessing quality care, the impacts of economic and social inequities, and the profound consequences these disparities have on individuals and communities. Consequently, we share a collective desire to make a real-world impact on health and healthcare systems, particularly for underserved and marginalized populations. We do this by studying the organization, financing, and delivery of healthcare in South Carolina, across the United States, and around the globe. We conduct rigorous and innovative research to generate evidence that informs health policy, improves healthcare delivery and outcomes, and advances health equity. We are also dedicated to training the next generation of public health and healthcare leaders, practitioners, and health services researchers with the competencies needed to contribute towards a more effective and equitable healthcare system.

1.1 Mission

Our mission is to promote health equity and improve health outcomes by conducting rigorous research that informs health policy and practice. We are dedicated to training the next generation of leaders in health services policy and management to drive transformative changes in healthcare and public health.

Adopted by faculty: Fall 2024

1.2 Vision

We envision a world where all people, regardless of their background or circumstances, have access to high-quality, affordable healthcare that promotes their well-being and enables them to live healthy, fulfilling lives.

Adopted by faculty: Fall 2024

1.3 Values

COLLABORATION. We value and purposefully pursue partnerships with scholars locally, nationally, and globally, and actively engage with diverse community, patient, industry, and government partners through **interdisciplinary** team science.

CREATIVITY. We are always **learning** and are motivated by the desire to answer interesting questions in **novel** and **creative** ways, generating new knowledge that will meaningfully advance healthcare policy and practice.

INTEGRITY. Knowing that our **credibility** as teachers and researchers depends on it, we conduct ourselves with the utmost regard for ethical, legal, and moral principles. In short, we endeavor always to do the right thing, even when no one else is watching, precisely because it is the right thing to do.

EQUITY. We are resolute in our pursuit of a more **just** world. In everything we do, from the creation of departmental policies and procedures to the research agendas we pursue and the concepts we teach in the classroom, the advancement of equity is one of our bedrock principles.

RIGOR. We consistently esteem **high-quality** work. Put simply, we believe that if something is worth doing, it is worth doing to the very best of our ability.



INCLUSION. In everything we do, we strive to create a scholarly and professional environment where all feel welcome to be—and openly express—their **authentic** selves.

COLLEGIALITY. We are intentional about creating an environment in which people enjoy both the work they do and those with whom they do it. We build **trust** by being **kind, respectful, honest, and empathetic**, while practicing **open communication** with—and **accountability** to—one another.

IMPACT. We are intrinsically motivated by our desire to make a difference in the world by conducting research that is **policy and practice relevant** and training the next generation of health services researchers, healthcare administrators, and public health professionals to pursue similarly meaningful work in their chosen careers.

HUMOR. Higher education doesn't have to be a soul-sucking enterprise. We take our work seriously, but we don't take ourselves too seriously, and we have fun together as a team, both at work and outside of it.

WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION. We believe that our careers, while important, are only one facet of our lives. We realize that this looks different for everyone, and we are deliberate about making space for our people to integrate their personal and professional lives in a way that works best for them.

Adopted by faculty: Fall 2024

2 The Doctoral Program

2.1 Overview of Program Competencies

The PhD program prepares students to conduct rigorous health services research designed to inform health policy and practice. Graduates are equipped for careers in academia, government, and various public and private agencies and organizations in the healthcare sector. The program provides students with foundational knowledge, a strong emphasis on research design and analytic methods, and professional development in health services policy and management. Students select additional coursework in one of two concentration areas: 1) Health Economics and Outcomes Research; or 2) Health Policy. All students must complete a PhD dissertation that demonstrates the ability to conduct original research.

1. Apply theoretical knowledge and conceptual frameworks to inform the study of contemporary issues in health services policy and management.
2. Formulate evidence-based research questions with testable hypotheses designed to advance health policy or practice.
3. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of various research designs to answer specific health services research questions.
4. Apply appropriate quantitative or qualitative methods to answer specific health services research questions.
5. Interpret the significance of health services research findings for diverse audiences.



2.2 Admission Criteria and Application Requirements

Admission Criteria

1. Applicants must have a master's degree; preferably in public health, health administration, public policy, or a related field (e.g., economics, political science, sociology).
2. The Health Services Policy and Management PhD degree is a 61-credit hour program (including 12 credit hours of dissertation preparation).
3. A grade point average of 3.00/4.00 or higher is required on previous undergraduate and graduate course work.
4. All international applicants are required to provide English language proficiency exam scores unless they are from or have earned a degree in a country where English is an official language. Minimum score requirements are:
 - TOEFL iBT: 95
 - IELTS International Academic Course Type 2: 7 (overall band score)
 - PTE Academic: 60
 - Duolingo: 125

Application Requirements

1. Resume or CV
2. A personal statement that explains why you are interested in pursuing your PhD, outlines your research interests, and describes what appeals to you about our program, including potential faculty with whom you would like to work
3. Three letters of recommendation from academic and/or professional sources
4. Official transcripts from all schools or colleges previously attended
5. Non-US institution transcripts must be verified by World Education Services (WES) or equivalent evaluation service. Please submit a comprehensive course-by-course evaluation (WES ICAP).
6. Scores for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) are optional.
7. If applicable, submit English proficiency exam scores electronically using the following codes for USC:
 - TOEFL: 5818
 - IELTS: University of South Carolina, Columbia Admissions
 - PTE: University of South Carolina
 - Duolingo: University of South Carolina, Columbia Admissions
8. Applicants should consult our program [website](#) and our faculty research and [biography page](#) to assess whether their research interests align with the mission and objectives of the department, as well as the research expertise of our faculty members. Applicants may direct any question about the program to our Academic Programs Specialist at hspm@mailbox.sc.edu.



9. **Selection procedure:** The PhD Program Committee reviews all applications and recommends selected applicants for an interview. Then, a single interview will be conducted by one or more HSPM faculty members who share the applicant's research interests. Given our apprenticeship model, a tenured or tenure-track HSPM faculty member must agree to mentor a prospective student for the applicant to be admitted to the program. The results of the interview are reported to the PhD Program Director, who makes the admission decision in consultation with the Department Chair and the applicant's proposed faculty advisor.

2.3 Financial Support

2.3.1 Full Support during First Two Years of Study

HSPM offers a competitive financial support package for full-time PhD students in residence in Columbia who are not sponsored by governments or other agencies. Full-time in residence is defined as being in Columbia for 10-13 credit hours per semester in fall and spring for the first two years of study. In exchange for working 20 hours per week as a graduate research or teaching assistant during the fall and spring semesters, students are provided with a generous stipend, plus full coverage of tuition, fees, and health insurance for the first two academic years. During this period, most of the required coursework can be completed. Continuation of funding support in Year 2 is subject to satisfactory academic performance (GPA of 3.4 or better) and graduate assistant performance. Students can earn additional income by working as a research assistant during the summer. Outstanding applicants may also be named Arnold Fellows. Only a select number of PhD students are awarded this fellowship. Details of financial support are outlined in decision letters sent to applicants recommended for admission. Financially supported students must not undertake significant outside employment unless approved in advance by the PhD Program Committee.

2.3.2 Financial Support Opportunities After Two Years

Most students find research assistantship positions with faculty on grant-funded research projects to support themselves after the first two years of study (including tuition support if the grant includes such assistance).

In addition to departmental opportunities for financial support, outstanding applicants may be nominated by the Department for competitive university-level scholarships, such as the Presidential Fellowship and the Grace McFadden Fellowship.

2.4 PhD Curriculum

2.4.1 Minimum Credit Hours

The PhD in Health Services Policy and Management requires completion of 61 hours of doctoral-level course work, including 12 hours of dissertation preparation. The maximum credit hours permitted for dissertation preparation is 30 hours.

Enrollment in courses must be documented in the advisement form that is completed prior to the start of the semester. Students are responsible for scheduling a meeting with their faculty advisor well in advance of the start of the semester to ensure timely advisement, enrollment, and tuition coverage for the upcoming semester.



2.4.2 Prerequisites

Students without a master’s degree from a CEPH-accredited school of public health or public health program must enroll in Perspectives in Public Health (PUBH 700) and receive a grade of B or better. This 3-credit hour, fully asynchronous online course must be completed during the first year of study, and ideally during the first semester. As a prerequisite, this course does not count toward the required PhD credit hours.

2.4.3 Total Credit Hours

Students must complete the departmental core courses, courses in their concentration area and the Doctoral Seminar within the first two years of study. Dissertation hours are completed after courses are complete.

<u>Courses</u>	<u>Credit Hours</u>
Foundational Knowledge (core courses)	15
Analytical Methods (core courses)	18
Concentration Area (designed by student)	12
Doctoral Seminar	4
Dissertation	12
Total	61

2.4.4 Doctoral Seminar (HSPM 800)

This course uses a mixture of didactic presentations and seminar-style discussions to expose PhD students to contemporary research in the field of health services policy and management and introduce various topics related to professional development. For advanced PhD students, presenting at least once in this course is required to satisfy the teaching requirement.

Students will take this 1-credit hour course in both the fall and spring semesters during their first two years in the program for a total of 4 credit hours. The seminar is graded as satisfactory (S) or unsatisfactory (U). For a satisfactory grade, the student must attend regularly (with exceptions for excused absences only) and complete the requirements specified by the instructor.

2.4.5 Concentration Areas

Students select one of the following concentration areas:

- Health Economics and Outcomes Research
- Health Policy

In consultation with their faculty advisor and with the approval of the PhD Program Director, students register for four 3-credit hour courses in their concentration area. One of these courses must be theory-based. Students may select courses from a variety of departments, including—but not necessarily limited to—BIOS, ECON, EPID, HPEB, HSPM, LAWH, PHAR, POLI, and SOCY. No more than 3 credit hours of independent study (HSPM 890) or 3 credit hours of a special topics course (HSPM 791) can be used towards the concentration area credit hours.



2.5 Sequence of Coursework

Below is a typical sequence of courses.

Fall Year 1	Credit Hours
HSPM 710 Introduction to the US Health Care System	3
HSPM 715 Introduction to Health Services Research	3
HSPM 805 Health Services Research Design	3
HSPM 810 Fundamentals of Data Analysis	3
HSPM 800 Doctoral Seminar	1
Fall Year 1 Total	13

Spring Year 1	Credit Hours
HSPM 711 Health Policy	3
HSPM 712 Health Economics	3
HSPM 811 Linear Regression Models	3
HSPM 815 Qualitative and Mixed Methods in Health Services Research	3
HSPM 800 Doctoral Seminar	1
Spring Year 1 Total	13

Qualifying Examination is offered between the end of Year 1 and the beginning of Year 2. See the [section below](#) for additional details on the qualifying examination.

Fall Year 2	Credit Hours
HSPM 812 Panel Data Analysis	3
HSPM 830 Secondary Data Sources for Health Services Research	3
Concentration Area	3
Concentration Area *	3
HSPM 800 Doctoral Seminar	1
Fall Year 2 Total	10-13

Spring Year 2	Credit Hours
HSPM 813 Categorical Data Analysis	3
Concentration Area	3
Concentration Area	3
Concentration Area*	3
HSPM 800 Doctoral Seminar	1
Spring Year 2 Total	10-13

* Note: Students will have some flexibility in how they choose to distribute their concentration area courses (12 credit hours total) across the fall and spring semesters in Year 2. For example, students may enroll in 3 credit hours in fall and 9 credit hours in spring or 6 credit hours in fall and 6 credit hours in spring.



Comprehensive Exam is offered at the end of Year 2. See the [section below](#) for additional details on the Comprehensive Examination.

Fall Year 3	Credit Hours
HSPM 899 Dissertation Preparation - Grant Writing and Proposal Development	3
Fall Year 3 Total	3

Spring Year 3	Credit Hours
HSPM 899 Dissertation Preparation	3
Spring Year 3 Total	3

Dissertation Proposal is typically defended during Year 3.

Fall Year 4	Credit Hours
HSPM 899 Dissertation Preparation	3
Fall Year 4 Total	3

Spring Year 4	Credit Hours
HSPM 899 Dissertation Preparation	3
Spring Year 4 Total	3

Dissertation is typically defended in the spring of Year 4.

2.6 Qualifying Examination

The qualifying examination is a cumulative exam covering material from the first year of the PhD program. The exam tests students on: (1) foundational health policy and management content and theory and (2) research design. The qualifying examination is administered in person at an ASPH facility. Students must complete the examination on an ASPH computer in Microsoft Word, but the use of statistical software for data analysis may also be required. The exam is offered once per year, in late spring or early summer (May/June). Results are reported as pass or fail. Students must successfully pass the exam to continue in the program and may retake the exam once in July if they do not pass on the first attempt. Failing the qualifying examination on the second attempt will result in termination from the program.

2.7 Comprehensive Examination

The comprehensive examination is a cumulative exam covering material from the first two years of the PhD program. The exam has both a written and oral component and tests students on analytic methods for health services research. In the oral component, each student meets individually with the faculty graders to discuss the written component and clarify any concerns the faculty have with the student's written responses. It is offered once per year, in late spring or early summer (May/June). Students must pass the qualifying examination and complete all courses except [HSPM 899](#) prior to taking the comprehensive examination. Results are reported as pass (with or without conditions) or



fail. Students must successfully pass the exam to continue in the program and may retake the exam once the following year if they do not pass on the first attempt. Failing the comprehensive examination on the second attempt will result in termination from the program.

2.8 The Doctoral Dissertation

Each student must prepare and defend a dissertation proposal consisting of a minimum of three chapters describing the importance of the research topic chosen, reviewing the relevant literature, and outlining the data and methods to be used.

After successfully defending the dissertation proposal, each student must then prepare and defend a dissertation that addresses a significant knowledge gap regarding health policy or the organization, financing, or delivery of health services, broadly defined. Students may prepare their dissertation as a monograph or elect the increasingly popular three paper option.

Below we describe in greater detail and in temporal sequence the entire dissertation process.

2.8.1 Identification of a Dissertation Committee Chair

Following successful completion of the comprehensive examination, the student must identify an eligible faculty member who agrees to serve as their Dissertation Committee Chair as outlined in this section.

The Dissertation Committee Chair must be a current tenured or tenure-track HSPM faculty member. If the Dissertation Committee Chair leaves the department after the proposal defense, he or she may continue to serve as the Dissertation Committee Chair if the dissertation is completed within one year, with the help of a Co-Chair selected by the student (with the Co-Chair's and Dissertation Committee Chair's assent). The Co-Chair must meet the eligibility criteria for the Dissertation Committee Chair.

Students entering the PhD program are assigned to a HSPM faculty advisor based on mutual research interests. Under most circumstances, the faculty advisor will become the student's Dissertation Committee Chair. However, for any reason, students may choose a different Dissertation Committee Chair, or the Dissertation Committee Chair may elect to discontinue serving in that role. While we expect these scenarios to be exceedingly rare, if such an occasion arises, the student and/or the Dissertation Committee Chair must notify the PhD Program Director of the proposed change. If the student identifies another eligible faculty member who agrees to serve as the student's new Dissertation Committee Chair, the proposed change may proceed. However, if no eligible faculty member agrees to serve as the new Dissertation Committee Chair, the PhD Program Director will meet with the student and the original Dissertation Committee Chair, separately or jointly, to discuss paths to resolve any potential issues in the student-Dissertation Committee Chair working relationship during the semester in which such issues arose. If despite such an attempt, the student remains without a Dissertation Committee Chair, the student will have one semester to identify a new Dissertation Committee Chair. If no eligible faculty member agrees to serve in this role by the end of that semester, the student will be deemed unable to progress and will be terminated from the program.

2.8.2 Development of a One-Page Dissertation Specific Aims

Students must prepare a short one-page specific aims outlining the essential components of the planned research project and submit it to the proposed Dissertation Committee Chair and secure their



agreement to serve in that role.

For efficient proposal development, candidates are advised to use the following structured guide in developing the specific aims:

1. **Importance of Proposed Research:** Explain how the proposed research meets the criteria of original work that makes a significant contribution to health services research.
2. **Aim(s):** Describe the research questions, hypotheses and expected outcomes in substantive terms.
3. **Setting/Participants:** Describe the site(s) of research or data sources with all relevant detail, identify the research subjects/participants and the target population likely to be impacted by the study outcome. For secondary data sources, describe the validity of the data source to answer the research questions.
4. **Research Design, Statistical or Other Analytical Methods, and Main Variables:** Explain the validity of the research design and statistical/other methodologies proposed to conduct the research. Then identify and justify the proposed dependent and independent variables with an appropriate rationale.
5. **Formatting:** The specific aims page should have 0.5” margins on all four sides, single-spaced, in 11-point Arial font without adjustment to the spacing between characters or between lines.
6. **Ethical Conduct of Research, Approval, Institutional Review Board (IRB):** While IRB clearance is sought after final approval of the proposal by the Dissertation Committee, students should demonstrate knowledge of ethical issues that may affect their planned research (subject privacy and confidentiality, data protection, etc.) in a separate document from the specific aims.

2.8.3 Appointment of a Dissertation Committee

The dissertation committee must be composed of either 4 or 5 members (including the Dissertation Committee Chair). The Dissertation Committee Chair will work with the students to identify the remaining 3 or 4 committee members. Of the 4 or 5 committee members, at least 2 must be from HSPM and at least 1 must be from another academic department at the University of South Carolina, with expertise in the student’s selected research area. Selection of an external committee member must be consistent with the Graduate School policy on [academic qualifications for doctoral committee membership](#). Once the dissertation committee is formed, the student must complete a dissertation committee appointment form and submit it to their Dissertation Committee Chair for onward processing. Policies on committee formation and the form can be found [here](#). The dissertation committee must be formed no later than one semester after enrolling in HSPM 899.

2.8.4 Submission of the Dissertation Proposal

At least 30 days prior to the proposal defense, the dissertation proposal, approved in principle by the Dissertation Committee Chair must be sent to each member of the committee. All students, regardless of dissertation format (see below), must prepare the proposal with the first three chapters as shown



below, to proceed to the proposal defense.

1. **Chapter 1:** Introduction and overview, which briefly outlines the importance of the topic and the questions to be examined
2. **Chapter 2:** Literature review documenting the current literature related to the research topic and study objectives, knowledge gaps and significance of addressing the knowledge gap to be addressed by the dissertation
3. **Chapter 3:** Study objectives and methods in detail
4. **Bibliography**

2.8.5 Proposal Defense

Once the dissertation committee has approved the proposal, the proposal defense may proceed. The student provides a 30-45-minute presentation of the proposal to the committee. The proposal defense generally takes up to 2 hours to complete. The Dissertation Committee Chair will notify the PhD Program Director of the date and time of defense at least 10 working days in advance. The dissertation committee members will deliberate privately to evaluate the performance of the student (pass/fail/revisions required).

The student will be notified of the outcome of the proposal defense after the presentation of the proposal. The student may receive a “pass” on the proposal defense, which allows the student to pursue the dissertation research; a “qualified pass” if the student is asked to complete additional work supervised by the Dissertation Committee Chair; or “fail.” If the student fails the proposal defense, he or she must repeat the proposal defense after completing additional work on the draft proposal. The dissertation committee members will determine whether a new dissertation topic must be selected or if the current topic is acceptable but needs major revision. Students will have a total of two opportunities to defend their proposal. Failure of the proposal defense on the second attempt will result in termination from the program.

2.8.6 Dissertation Writing Phase

2.8.6.1 Definition of a Doctoral Dissertation

The dissertation is a report of an **original research project** that makes a **significant contribution** to health services research, approved by the candidate's dissertation committee. Clarification of these terms is provided below as they apply to HSPM PhD students:

1. **Original research:** The doctoral candidate will develop an original research question to address an existing knowledge gap. The body of work and intellectual contribution should clearly be the candidate's own work and make a new contribution to the field. Candidates may not employ or otherwise utilize other individuals for the original aspects or content of the dissertation, regardless of whether the candidate supervises the work.
2. **Significant contribution:** The outcomes of the research must advance the current state of knowledge of a demonstrably important aspect of health services research or public health practice



as judged by peer scholars. The contribution may stem from new primary data, new analysis of secondary data, or rigorous evaluation of a new policy or public health program. One criterion to judge significance is that the research and its results are deemed by the dissertation committee to have sufficient merit to warrant serious consideration for publication by one or more peer-reviewed journals.

3. Doctoral candidates are expected to demonstrate competent application of research methods and statistical tools relevant to the research. As noted, the services of others may not be hired for this purpose.
4. Dissertation proposals will be approved if the committee members judge the proposed research to be original, with clear potential to make a significant contribution to science and/or public health policy or practice, and feasible to conduct.
5. All dissertation proposals, questionnaires, and related documents must comply with the ethical conduct of research guidelines that are current at the time of review. All candidates must have a valid current CITI training certification in the conduct of research responsible for the duration of the dissertation research and defense. With the advice of the Dissertation Committee Chair, each student is responsible for submitting all required documentation as requested. The proposal must document clear evidence of formal approval (or exemption) from the [USC Institutional Review Board](#) BEFORE any research is undertaken.

2.8.6.2 Dissertation Formats

HSPM dissertations may take one of two formats: the traditional dissertation monograph or a series of 3 publication-ready manuscripts based on the dissertation research. The dissertation format must be agreed upon no later than the time of the proposal defense. The student shall adhere to this agreed upon format when writing the dissertation.

1. Dissertation Monograph

The dissertation monograph submitted by HSPM students has a five-chapter format:

Chapter One: Introduction. An overview statement of the topic to be examined, its importance and research gap to be addressed

Chapter Two: Literature Review. A thorough review of all literature pertinent to the topic should be organized to lay the groundwork for the hypotheses, explain the rationale for testing them to fill a gap in knowledge, and conclude with a statement of the hypotheses in testable form

Chapter Three: Methods. A complete outline of all methods to be used in assessing the proposed research including study design, data sources, variables to be studied, data collection and processing procedures, and the analytic methods that will be used to answer the research questions and test each hypothesis

Chapter Four: Results. A presentation of the results of the research, organized by research questions and hypotheses



Chapter Five: Discussion of findings, Conclusions and Recommendations. A discussion of study findings should relate them to the hypotheses and to findings documented in research studies, and should include conclusions, implications of the research, study limitations, and recommendations for future research

2. Manuscripts for Publication Format

Doctoral students are highly encouraged to choose the manuscripts format, with the concurrence of their Dissertation Committee Chair. When submitting the final draft, the usual concluding chapters (“Results” and “Conclusions and Recommendations”) will be replaced by 3 manuscripts. Per Graduate School guidelines for a manuscript format dissertation, there will be an additional brief final chapter that integrates the findings and implications of the manuscripts. Manuscript topics will be finalized as part of the proposal defense. The dissertation must meet the [formatting standards](#) set by the Graduate School. It must also be approved by the student’s dissertation committee and Chair for the student to pass the dissertation defense and for the Graduate School to accept it as part of the requirements for conferral of the doctoral degree.

2.8.7 Dissertation Defense

An essential milestone for PhD candidates is the successful defense of a dissertation to showcase their original research. Once the research and dissertation writing phases conclude, the student defends the dissertation to the committee at an oral presentation. The written dissertation and its defense must be approved by a majority of committee members (> 50%; e.g., 3 of 4, if a 4-member committee or 3 of 5, if a 5-member committee). The dissertation defense is organized and conducted as the proposal defense, including the prior notification requirement. However, unlike the proposal defense, the dissertation defense is open to the public. The dissertation defense announcement will therefore be posted on the bulletin boards, emailed to all HSPM faculty and students and placed on the departmental website.

After the oral presentation of the dissertation, there will be a question-and-answer session. Committee members will ask questions before the floor is open to others in the audience. At the end of the question-and-answer session, the Dissertation Committee Chair will excuse non-committee members while the committee evaluates the student’s performance. At this stage, the committee can choose one of the following four options: (a) Accepted as is (b) Accepted with minor revisions, (c) Accepted with major revisions required (d) Not accepted as submitted. If the dissertation is accepted with major revisions, all committee members must be provided with the revised version of the dissertation. The committee decides whether to accept the revised version with or without another defense. To successfully complete the program, the second dissertation defense must result in a pass outcome. Failure on the second attempt will result in termination from the program. The Dissertation Committee Chair will notify the student and the PhD Program Director in writing of the outcome of the dissertation defense.

To graduate in the same semester in which the dissertation defense was conducted, the defense must be successfully completed by the date specified by the Graduate School, and within 5 years of passing the comprehensive exam. In addition, the committee-approved and satisfactorily formatted dissertation must be submitted to the Graduate School by the required date. If the deadlines are not met, graduation will be delayed to the following semester, requiring the student to register for at least one credit, even if the required dissertation credits have been fulfilled.



3 Other Information on the Doctoral Program

3.1 Admission to Candidacy and Z-Status

Students are admitted to PhD candidacy by the Graduate School after passing all required coursework, the qualifying examination, and the comprehensive examination. At this point, students can register for dissertation credit hours (HSPM 899) under the supervision of a faculty member who agrees to be the student's Dissertation Committee Chair.

When taking HSPM 899, the student is eligible to request "Z-status" enrollment (1-5 credits, less than full-time enrollment) if the student completed all required non-HSPM-899 coursework, the qualifying examination, and the comprehensive examination. Z-status is also available prior to completion of the qualifying and comprehensive examinations and all non-HSPM 899 coursework, if the student qualifies under the Family and Medical Leave Act. Z-status students are considered full-time students irrespective of the number credits enrolled. Students must apply to the Graduate School for Z-status with appropriate documentation and approval of their faculty advisor and PhD Program Director.

In general, Z-status approval is required for the following purposes: a) seeking graduate assistantship with less than full-time enrollment, b) applying for financial aid, c) receiving a scholarship that requires full-time enrollment, d) receiving a tuition supplement from faculty grants or other university sources, or e) visa renewal for international students (See [Section 3.3](#) below). Students who do not fall within the above groups do not need to apply for Z-status. Students are not allowed to take more than eight academic semesters of Z-status enrollment without the PhD Program Director's approval. To request Z-status beyond 8 semesters, the student must submit to the PhD Program Director documentation of their scholarly accomplishments while in the program, the progress achieved towards dissertation completion, and the dissertation completion timeline, signed by their Dissertation Committee Chair. An approved extension request, including written justification, must be submitted to the Graduate School by the Program Director. The PhD Program Director may decline to approve the Z-Status extension request if sufficient progress has not been made.

3.2 Full-Time versus Part-Time Students

The University of South Carolina defines full-time status for graduate students without a graduate assistantship as enrolling in at least 9 credit hours per semester. For students with a graduate assistantship, enrolling in at least 6 hours is considered full time.

To ensure that our PhD students enjoy a cohort experience in which they work together and support each other's progress through the required coursework, HSPM is not accepting students pursuing a doctorate on a part-time basis.

3.3 Course Load for International Students to Maintain Visa Status

To retain valid student visa status, international students must maintain [full-time status](#) without break throughout their program and remain in good academic standing (GPA of 3.0 or better), unless an acceptable reason for a reduced course load exists. There are several acceptable reasons for a reduced course load, including but not limited to obtaining an approved [Z-status](#). If you think you qualify for a reduced course load, you and your faculty advisor must complete a reduced course load request form (available in the [ISS Forms Library](#)) and submit via email to iss@sc.edu. Please also refer to [Meeting Full-time](#)



[Enrollment Requirements.](#)

In addition, as an international student, only one online class per semester counts toward [full-time](#) enrollment. This means you must be enrolled in mostly traditional classes that require presence in a classroom.

3.4 Transfer Credits

A limited amount of coursework, that was *not* part of a completed certificate program or graduate degree from USC or another institution, may be transferred for credit toward a doctoral degree. The exact number of transfer hours may not constitute more than 50 percent of the hours listed on a program of study, excluding dissertation preparation (899) or the equivalent.

Students wishing to transfer coursework must demonstrate that it is relevant to the program and has course content and a level of instruction equivalent to that offered by USC's own graduate programs. To be accepted to a student's program of study, the proposed transfer credit must first be approved by the HSPM PhD Program Committee, before it is submitted to the Dean of the Graduate School for final approval on the Request for Transfer of Academic Credit ([G-RTC](#)) form. Only credits with grades of B or better (equivalent to 3.0 on a 4.0 grading scale) may be transferred from another institution into a doctoral degree program. Coursework transferred for credit toward a doctoral degree must be from an accredited institution and must be no more than ten years old at the time of graduation. Transfer credits cannot be revalidated if the 10-year limit is reached as of graduation date. Lapsed transfer credit must be replaced by new coursework at USC, that is approved by the faculty advisor to complete the required number of doctoral credit hours.

3.5 Doctoral Residency Requirement

The granting of a doctoral degree by the University of South Carolina requires a minimum of three full-time years of graduate study or equivalent.

At least one year of full-time study (or the equivalent) must be spent in residence at the University of South Carolina in Columbia by successfully completing:

- Two consecutive semesters of 9 or more graduate credit hours per semester on campus, or
- Three consecutive semesters of six or more graduate credit hours per semester.

Students that receive financial support from the department must be on-campus at USC Columbia for at least two years.

The doctoral residency period starts after matriculation in the **doctoral** program. Enrollment in a summer term (Summer I and II) may be counted as equivalent to a semester. However, enrollment in summer is not required to maintain continuity. Dissertation preparation (HSPM 899), independent study, or directed readings may not be used to satisfy the doctoral residence requirement.

The intent of the residency requirement is to ensure that doctoral students benefit from and contribute to the complete spectrum of scholarly activities on campus, including the educational and professional development opportunities offered on the campus of a comprehensive university.



3.6 Teaching Requirements

Between the time of matriculation and the dissertation defense, all PhD students must complete the following teaching requirements:

- Complete the teaching assistant training course offered by the [Center for Teaching Excellence](#)
- Present at least once in the Doctoral Seminar (HSPM 800)

Students interested in faculty careers are encouraged, but not required, to seek out opportunities to serve as a teaching assistant, participate in workshops offered by the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE), and apply to CTE's "[Preparing Future Faculty](#)" certification program (at no extra cost).

The student must submit a letter with documentation of the completion of all teaching requirements to the PhD Program Director prior to graduation.

3.7 University of South Carolina Community Education Courses

The University of South Carolina offers a set of online education courses in accordance with federal mandates and as part of our commitment to fostering a safe and healthy community. All new graduate students are required to complete the following three courses:

1. ***Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging for Students*** helps students better understand and celebrate the diverse USC campus community.
2. ***Sexual Assault Prevention*** presents realistic and interactive skill-building scenarios related to interpersonal violence.
3. ***Mental Well-being*** educates students on critical topics on social and emotional well-being that they may face on campus and provides strategies on how to manage them.

Part 1 of each course should be completed no later than August 19, 2026. After completing Part 1 of each course, students will be notified via email to take Part 2. The deadline to complete Part 2 is October 19, 2026. To access the courses, students will use [Self Service Carolina](#) and use the links under the Community Education tab. For technical assistance, students should contact tech support using "Help" within the course or by visiting support.everfi.com. Questions about the requirements can be directed to the Substance Abuse Prevention and Education Office at sape@sc.edu.

3.8 Time Limits

Doctoral students must complete their studies and dissertation defense within 10 years of matriculation. Otherwise, they will need to repeat coursework or revalidate courses based on the requirements set by the current instructor of the course. If formerly required courses are no longer offered, a required substitute course will be identified by the PhD Program Director.

Graduation and conferral of the doctoral degree must occur within 5 years of the semester of completing the comprehensive examination. Otherwise, the student must retake the comprehensive examination, based on the requirements of the PhD student handbook at the time of the retake. Students who do not plan to enroll for at least one credit hour for 2 or more consecutive major academic semesters (summer not included) must take an approved leave of absence before each semester, up to the Graduate School-prescribed limit for such approved absences. In the absence of



an [approved leave of absence](#), students will be required to apply to the Graduate School for readmission if they have not enrolled for at least one credit hour per semester for 2 or more consecutive major academic semesters (summer not included). If readmitted, the new academic rules, standards, coursework, and degree requirements effective at readmission will supersede the requirements in effect at initial admission.

4 Student Responsibilities and Code of Ethics

All USC students, especially those enrolled in HSPM programs, are expected to uphold the highest ethical standards in both academic and professional settings. As part of the HSPM community, students are called to embody our core values as outlined in section 1.3 of this handbook in all aspects of their work. All USC students are bound by and held accountable to the university's [Honor Code](#). In addition, students are required to commit to observing the [Carolinian Creed](#) at all times.

4.1 Academic Standing, Academic Probation and Termination

The PhD Program Director, in consultation with the respective faculty advisors, will maintain general oversight of the academic performance of PhD students/candidates. Please see Appendix [A](#) for a form to track student progress to graduation.

4.1.1 Academic Standing

Doctoral students must maintain a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.0 (or B average) to continue and graduate from the program. If a student receives a grade of C or lower in any of the departmental core courses, the course(s) must be repeated. Students with a graduate assistantship who earn a grade of C or lower in any course will be asked to reduce their graduate assistantship hours during the following semester to increase their focus on coursework. As a result, their departmental funding may be at risk.

4.1.2 Academic Probation

Students will enter academic probation if any of the following scenarios arise:

1. If their cumulative GPA falls below 3.0 in any semester.
2. If the student receives a U in HSPM 800, HSPM 899 or another pass/fail graduate course.
3. If the student receives less than a B in any department core courses or prerequisites (which will require the student to retake the class) or
4. If the student receives a C or lower grade in graded graduate courses other than the departmental core courses or prerequisites.

Being placed on academic probation requires the development of a written remediation plan by the student, which must be approved by their faculty advisor and the PhD Program Director. The plan should document the timeline and roadmap to overcome the academic challenges and to restore good academic standing going forward.

Note that other than HSPM 899 (dissertation credits), a grade of U in any graduate course (e.g., Doctoral Seminar, HSPM 800) is counted as an F in the cumulative grade point average. An S grade, however, does not count towards GPA. Courses/credits with grades below C, and grades of WF or U will not be counted towards the required credits for graduation.



4.1.3 Academic Termination

HSPM aims to provide a supportive environment for learning and will work with the students through remediation plans when a student is placed on academic probation. However, satisfactory completion of the program requirements is necessary to advance to candidacy and to graduate from the program with a doctoral degree. Therefore, academic termination from the HSPM PhD program will occur in the event of any of the following circumstances:

1. If the student receives any combination of two course grades of U or C (or lower) in graduate courses.
2. If the student receives a grade of C (or lower) in the same departmental core or prerequisite course twice.
3. If the student fails to pass any part of the qualifying examination, comprehensive examination, proposal defense, or dissertation defense on the second attempt.
4. If the student fails, within one semester, to find a willing Dissertation Committee Chair after disengaging from the initial Dissertation Committee Chair.
5. If the student violates the Graduate School's [Academic Integrity Policy](#).

HSPM recognizes that academic termination entails serious consequences. Therefore, students facing academic difficulties are highly encouraged to proactively engage with their course instructors and address the difficulties before they receive the final course grade of U or at or below C. Students should also consult with their faculty advisor when facing academic difficulties to receive counsel on remedial measures, such as withdrawing from a course, adjusting graduate assistantship obligations, or other measures. If necessary, students may withdraw from a course before the WF deadline, the date when a W (Withdrawal) translates into a WF grade (Fail grade) in the transcript and the GPA.

4.2 Leave of Absence

If personal circumstances justify a **leave of absence** for the remaining part of the semester, students may take an approved leave of absence (with documentation) for up to two major semesters. Absence for an academic semester (i.e. not enrolling for credit in fall or spring) requires completion of appropriate Graduate School paperwork to obtain the leave of absence in advance. Absence of such documentation results in loss of active student status and requires approval by the department and the Graduate School to resume coursework/dissertation. See also the section on [Time Limits](#).

4.3 Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to all requirements of the [Carolinian Creed](#). Please note that the student is held accountable to this Creed even if violated inadvertently. Any episode of dishonesty, cheating, or plagiarism in any form will result in a grade of fail for the assignment, course, qualifying examination, comprehensive examination, or dissertation, and may, at the discretion of the relevant faculty member(s), PhD Program Committee, and Department Chair, result in termination of the program. A second episode of violation of academic honesty is grounds for immediate dismissal from the program. In addition to specified items qualifying as violation of integrity in the Carolinian Creed, within HSPM, misappropriating (e.g., taking examination questions or answers from the examination room and sharing, or receiving information on course assignments, examinations, qualifying or



comprehensive examination questions or answers) is a serious violation that will result in a failing grade and termination from the program. All academic integrity violations will be reported to the USC Office of Academic Integrity. Students are encouraged to refresh their understanding of the appropriate use of citations when drafting papers and course assignments to avoid inadvertent plagiarism.

4.4 Graduate Assistantships

All full-time PhD students are guaranteed to receive full coverage of tuition, fees, and health insurance, as well as a generous stipend during their first two years in the program. In exchange, they work 20 hours per week with department faculty as graduate research assistants or graduate teaching assistants to gain applied experience and enrich the learning process beyond the classroom. To qualify for an assistantship, a student must be fully admitted to a degree program, be enrolled full-time, and maintain a GPA of 3.4 or better.



Appendix A. Doctoral Student Progression Tracking Form (Fall 2025 onwards)

Student Progression Tracker					
Name:					
Course number	Course title	Semester/year completed	Instructor	Credits	Grade/waived
Public Health Core Courses (Required if the student does not have a CEPH accredited graduate degree)					
PUBH 700	Perspectives in Public Health			3	
Total credit hours				3	
Foundational Knowledge in Health Services Policy & Management					
HSPM 710	Introduction to the US Health Care System			3	
HSPM 711	Health Policy			3	
HSPM 712	Health Economics			3	
HSPM 715	Introduction to Health Services Research			3	
HSPM 805	Health Services Research Design			3	
Total credit hours				15	
Analytical Methods in Health Services Policy & Management					
HSPM 810	Fundamentals of Data Analysis			3	
HSPM 811	Linear Regression Models			3	
HSPM 812	Panel Data Analysis			3	
HSPM 813	Categorical Data Analysis			3	
HSPM 815	Qualitative and Mixed Methods in Health Services Research			3	
HSPM 830	Secondary Data Sources for Health Services Research			3	
Total credit hours				18	
Concentration Area: Please select your concentration area.					
___ Health Economics & Outcomes Research		___ Health Policy			
				3	
				3	
				3	
				3	
Total credit hours				12	
Doctoral Seminar					
HSPM 800	Doctoral Seminar			1	
HSPM 800	Doctoral Seminar			1	
HSPM 800	Doctoral Seminar			1	
HSPM 800	Doctoral Seminar			1	
Total credit hours				4	
Dissertation					
HSPM 899	Grant Writing and Proposal Development			3	
HSPM 899	Dissertation Preparation			9	
Total credit hours				12	
Overall total credit hours				61/64	



Dissertation Preparation

	Semester/year completed	Credits	Grade
HSPM 899			
HSPM 899			
HSPM 899			
HSPM 899			
HSPM 899			

Qualifying Exam

Date taken	Grade	Re-take Date (if needed)	Grade

Comprehensive Exam

	Date taken	Grade	Re-take Date (if needed)	Grade
Written				
Oral				

Teaching Requirements

	Semester/year completed
Complete the teaching assistant training course offered by the Center for Teaching Excellence	
Present at least 1 session in the HSPM 800 Doctoral Seminar	

Defenses

	Date	Grade	Date (if needed)	Grade
Dissertation Proposal Defense				
Dissertation Defense				

Graduated: _____



Appendix B. Resources for Students

Administrative

[USC Academic Calendar](#)

[Tuition and Fees](#) (Updated each July 1)

[Graduate School Forms for Students](#)

[HSPM Doctoral Program Handbook](#)

Professional Development and Scholarship

[Community Education](#) (required for all students)

[Graduate School Resources](#)

[USC Center for Teaching Excellence](#) (CTE)

[CTE Workshop and Event Calendar](#)

[GIA/GTA Training sponsored by CTE](#)

[Office of Research Compliance](#)

Student Success

[USC Student Success Center](#)

[USC Disability Resource Center](#)

[Writing Center](#)

[USC Student Health and Well-Being](#)

[Living in Columbia](#)

Campus Life

[Healthcare Leadership Association](#)

[Graduate Student Association](#)

[AcademyHealth](#)

[Strom Thurmond Wellness and Fitness Center](#)

[Campus Recreation](#)