

Social and Behavioral Sciences, Ph.D.

Degrees Offered

- Doctor of Philosophy

Nature of the Program

PH.D. IN PUBLIC HEALTH SCIENCES (SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES MAJOR)

The mission of the Ph.D. in Public Health Sciences, Social and Behavioral Sciences Major, is to provide state of the art doctoral education in the theory and application of social and behavioral science to a select group of highly qualified and committed students desiring to transform public health. Our program trains students using a research intensive curriculum led by a distinguished faculty at the cutting edge of public health science. This program emphasizes both evidence-based, theory-driven primary prevention of disease and injury and health promotion research and practice. Graduates will complete their degrees with a competitive record of research achievement, ready to embark on high-impact research careers.

The curriculum is designed so that students receive a methodologically-intense training and one-on-one research experience with faculty in Social and Behavioral Sciences, typically over a three- to four-year period. The first years of the program emphasize research and statistical methods complemented by theoretical and process-oriented coursework relevant to Social and Behavioral Sciences. During the latter years of the program, students are engaged in their dissertation research while given the freedom to further diversify their training by choosing electives.

FACULTY

CHAIR

- Keith Zullig, Professor - Ph.D. (University of South Carolina)

PROFESSORS

- Alfgeir Kristjansson - Ph.D. (Karolinska Institute)
- Ranjita Misra - Ph.D. (Old Dominion University)

ASSOCIATE PROFESSORS

- Elizabeth Claydon - Ph.D. (West Virginia University)
- Danielle Davidov - Ph.D. (West Virginia University)

TEACHING ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

- Audra Hamrick - M.A. (West Virginia University)
- Anthony Peluso - Dr.PH., MPH (East Tennessee State University)

ADJUNCT PROFESSORS

- Ahmed Aboraya - M.D. (Cairo University)
- Lesley Cottrell - Ph.D. (West Virginia University)
- Samuel Zizzi - Ed.D. (West Virginia University)

ADJUNCT ASSOCIATE PROFESSORS

- Janie Leary - Ph.D. (West Virginia University)
- Toni Morris - Ed.D. (West Virginia University)
- Melissa Olfert - Ph.D. (Loma Linda University)

ADJUNCT ASSISTANT PROFESSORS

- John Blosnich - Ph.D. (West Virginia University)
- Michael Brumage - M.D., MPH (West Virginia University)
- Molly Matthews - Ewald - Ph.D. (West Virginia University)
- Frances Peterson-Burch - Ph.D., RN, BSN (University of Pittsburgh)
- Thomas Sims - M.A. (Georgia State University)
- Kimberly Williams - Ph.D. (McMaster University)

RESEARCH ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

- Adam Baus - Ph.D. (West Virginia University)
- Traci Jarrett - Ph.D. (West Virginia University)

FACULTY EMERITI

- Geri Dino - Ph.D. (Kansas State University)
- William Reger-Nash - Ed.D. (West Virginia University)
- Pete Shaffron - Ed.D. (West Virginia University)
- Kenneth Simon - Ed.D. (Columbia University)
- Nancy O'Hara Tompkins - Ph.D. (University of Maryland)

Admissions for 2026-2027

If you are ready to apply to West Virginia University School of Public Health, the admissions team is here to assist you.

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (PH.D.) IN PUBLIC HEALTH SCIENCES (SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES MAJOR)

ADMISSION GUIDELINES

- A Master's degree in Public Health or a closely related field is strongly preferred. Exceptional applicants with a Bachelor's degree in a relevant field may also be considered.
- A minimum GPA of 3.0 is required, 3.5 is preferred.
- The following GRE scores are preferred: Verbal 150; Quantitative 155; and Writing 3.5. Submission of GRE scores are optional. Applicants may submit GRE scores if they feel that scores enhance their application.
- International students must meet WVU's minimum score requirements for English language proficiency. (<https://graduateadmissions.wvu.edu/how-to-apply/apply-for-2023-2024/international-graduate-applicant/>)

APPLICATION PROCESS

Applying to the Ph.D. program is a two-step process in which prospective students first submit an application through the national SOPHAS service, <http://www.sophas.org/>. If you are accepted into the Ph.D. program by the School, the next step is for you to complete a WVU Graduate Application, <https://graduateadmissions.wvu.edu/>.

The SOPHAS application requires:

- Official test scores
- Official transcripts from all US institutions attended
- A Personal Statement
- 3 Letters of Recommendation
- Current CV/Resume

Applicants must indicate their first choice of Major and may indicate a second choice (you are allowed a maximum of two choices).

There is a SOPHAS application fee. However, SOPHAS grants fee waivers based upon financial need for McNair Scholars, Gates Millennium Scholars, as well as for AmeriCorps and Peace Corps Volunteers.

TIPS for completing the SOPHAS application:

- **APPLY EARLY!** Allow up to 4 weeks for SOPHAS to verify your transcripts and test scores and send them to the Universities to which you have applied. Your application may not be reviewed if it does not contain verified transcripts and test scores.
- If opting to submit your GRE scores, **be sure to use the college code 0157 for the WVU School of Public Health**. This code **MUST** be used so that verified scores are sent by SOPHAS to the WVU School of Public Health for review.
- Submit your application once you have provided the required information. **DO NOT** wait for SOPHAS to receive transcripts, recommendations or test scores prior to submitting your application.

Personal Statement

The Personal Statement is a critical piece of the application. The content of the Statement and the applicant's writing skills will be evaluated in the admissions decision. The Statement should address the following in no more than 1000 words:

- What is it about Public Health that interests you?
- What is it about your selected major, specifically, that interests you?
- What are your career goals?
- What topics or areas of research do you wish to pursue and why? If you have identified a potential dissertation topic, briefly describe that as well.
- Which faculty members in the SPH do you see as being potential mentors to help you succeed in your area of interest?

Applicants should also include any additional information about their interests, background, prior experience, or special circumstances that may be helpful to the SPH Doctoral Admissions Committee.

Letters of Recommendation

Three letters of recommendation are required. At least two of these should be from people who can attest to your academic abilities.

Deadlines

Please refer to SOPHAS for the current deadline. New applications received after this deadline will not be reviewed. All admissions are for the Fall semester. We do not admit students into the Ph.D. program in the Spring or Summer semesters.

Review Process

All completed and verified SOPHAS applications are first reviewed by the Admissions Committees of the major to which an applicant has applied (EPID or SBHS). Candidates that are recommended for admission at this level, are put forth to the SPH Doctoral Admissions Committee, which makes the final decisions on admissions and funding.

Advanced Standing for Applicants with an Approved Master's Degree

Students who enter the Ph.D. program with an MPH or approved Master's degree are eligible for *Advanced Standing*. This allows students to complete an abbreviated course of study that takes between 2 and 3 years to complete, depending on the student's past course work and current interests.

PhD Major Code: 8409

Doctor of Philosophy

MAJOR REQUIREMENTS

Code	Title	Hours
A minimum GPA of 3.0 is required.		
BIOS 503	Applied Biostatistics 2	3
BIOS 604	Applied Biostatistics 3	3
BMS 700	Scientific Integrity (and Ethics)	1
PUBH 510	Contemporary Foundations of Public Health Practice	2
PUBH 511	Epidemiology for Public Health Practice	3
PUBH 512	Research Translation and Evaluation in Public Health Practice	3
PUBH 701	Public Health Grant Writing	3
PUBH 790	Teaching Practicum (Two 1-hour experiences)	2
PUBH 796	Graduate Seminar (Taken 2 times for 1 credit)	2
PUBH 797	Research (Two 1-hour research rotations)	2
SBHS 715	Intervention Design	3
SBHS 760	Survey Research Methods	3
SBHS 761	Qualitative Research Methods (Offered only during even years)	3
SBHS 763	Advanced Evaluation Public Health (Offered only during odd years)	3
Electives		12
Qualifying Examination - written and oral components		
Dissertation Proposal		
Dissertation Research (minimum credit number shown)		27
PUBH 797	Research	
Dissertation Defense		
Total Hours		75

PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS FOR STUDENTS ENTERING WITH ADVANCED STANDING

Students entering the SBHS PhD program that are admitted with advanced standing (that already hold strongly relevant Master's degrees) will work with the departmental PhD advisor for a recommended course of study. This includes initiating a selection of course credits that can be transferred (600 level and above, graded B or above, passed in the last 5 years) and/or waived that ultimately will be reviewed and approved by the PhD Program Director in consultation with the PhD Advisory Committee. Under typical circumstances a student with a recent MPH degree or similar, can expect to transfer and/or waive up to 20 credits or roughly one year of course work.

ELECTIVES

Courses may be selected from among the department's, School of Public Health's, or university's many course offerings. This will allow students to develop an area of focus. These courses will be discussed and approved with the faculty advisor.

TEACHING PRACTICUMS

Students will complete two (1 credit) teaching practicums (PUBH 790) during which they will spend time in a mentored relationship with a faculty member, assisting with the administration and teaching of a course. These may be graduate or undergraduate level courses. Students who have a strong interest in teaching should also consider taking C&I 789 Teaching in Higher Education (3 credits). This is a general methods course involving instructional concepts and strategies for present/prospective faculty in higher education.

**Full-time HSC-funded stipend students are expected to participate in the SPH teaching mission to a greater degree.*

QUALIFYING EXAMINATION

The Qualifying Examination is the capstone experience for Ph.D. program coursework. Successful completion of the examination signifies competence in the field of public health sciences and indicates readiness to engage in independent research. Following completion of the majority of the PhD coursework, students are then eligible to take the qualifying examination, which consists of two components, a written exam and an oral defense as follows:

Written exam: The written exam consists of questions related to social and behavioral sciences generally as well as those pertinent to the student's research focus.

Oral defense: The oral component consists of a defense of student's answers to the written exam and includes additional questions that further test the student's understanding of key concepts in social and behavioral sciences and knowledge specific to the student's research focus. The oral defense of the written exam must be attempted within two academic weeks of completing the written exam. *Note: Students are not eligible to begin their dissertation, or sign up for dissertation credits, until they have successfully completed both components of the qualifying examination.*

RESEARCH

The research component of the SBHS PhD program consists of both a dissertation (27 credits, minimum) and completion of two research rotations (2 credits).

Research Rotations: Students will participate in two research rotations in their first year, meeting and working with research faculty with similar interests in order to develop mentorship for dissertation research.

Dissertation: Students will complete a dissertation in which they design and conduct an original work of research. First, students will develop a proposal for an original research project. This proposal will be presented and defended orally before the student's dissertation committee. Upon successful completion of the proposal defense, students are admitted to PhD candidacy and may then complete their dissertation research. There are two options for the dissertation format, a traditional book format or a three Journal Article Format (JAF). The decision of which format to use is something that students should discuss with their committee chairperson. Regardless of the format selected, students must have a minimum of one first-authored publication based on their dissertation topic area, at least under review in a peer-reviewed journal before they can defend their dissertation. While the required publication may come from one of the student's three dissertation articles if using the JAF, this is not mandatory. Upon completion of the written dissertation, the student will present and defend their work before the dissertation committee. *Note: The dissertation defense is open to all members of the WVU community and the public.*

University Doctoral Degree Requirements: For further details on WVU's requirements for Doctoral programs please visit the following website: http://catalog.wvu.edu/graduate/advisingcoursesdegrees/degree_regulations/.

PLAN OF STUDY

Upon matriculating into the PhD program, students should contact the SBHS PhD Program Coordinator, or their advisor if already identified, to discuss the course requirements and to develop a plan of study (POS) to meet their individual needs. Below is a suggested POS with the minimum requirements for students entering the program with a BA/BS. *Note: Research credits show below reflect the minimum requirements. Students may enroll in additional research credits as necessary to achieve the degree competencies.*

SUGGESTED PLAN OF STUDY

First Year

Fall	Hours	Spring	Hours	
PUBH 510		2 BIOS 503		3
PUBH 511		3 PUBH 797		1
PUBH 512		3 SBHS 763		3
PUBH 796		1 SBHS 715		3
BMS 700		1		
		10		10

Second Year

Fall	Hours	Spring	Hours	Summer	Hours
BIOS 604		3 PUBH 701		3 Qualifying Exam	
PUBH 790		1 PUBH 790		1	
PUBH 796		1 SBHS 760		3	
PUBH 797		1 SBHS 761		3	
Elective 1		3 Elective 3		3	
Elective 2		3			
		12		13	0

Third Year

Fall	Hours	Spring	Hours	
PUBH 797		7 PUBH 797		10
Elective 4		3		
Dissertation Proposal				
		10		10

Fourth Year

Fall	Hours	
PUBH 797		10
Dissertation Defense		
		10

Total credit hours: 75

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Program Competencies

- Develop effective strategies for teaching in higher education
- Review and synthesize pertinent literature and formulate focused research questions that address identified knowledge gaps
- Design and conduct original research that uniquely contributes to the public health scientific knowledge
- Disseminate research findings through appropriate peer-reviewed publications and presentations, and to other public health community audiences

Major Competencies

- Display broad knowledge and application of relevant public health social and behavioral theories to health promotion and disease prevention strategies
- Demonstrate rigorous understanding of methodological and statistical principles that enhance research in the public health sciences
- Create comprehensive translational intervention and evaluation plans in research or practice settings to inform policy or practice.

COURSES

SBHS 521. Grant Writing for Public Health Practice. 1 Hour.

This course covers the skills and techniques necessary for writing successful grant proposals tailored to foundations.

SBHS 601. Social and Behavioral Theory. 3 Hours.

The focus of this course is on the role of individual behavior in attaining health. Integration of the concepts of health education and behavioral science to facilitate changes in health behavior is addressed.

SBHS 610. Public Health Research Methods. 3 Hours.

Provide students with the practical skills necessary to read, understand, critique, and contribute to the public health literature. Emphasis is placed on common research methods used in public health research.

SBHS 611. Community Assessment. 3 Hours.

Provides students with the knowledge and skills needed to conduct meaningful community needs assessments to improve a community's health. The course will cover various community health topics including the nature of health and its varied social determinants, the use of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection methods, and data analysis.

SBHS 617. Community Engagement and Advocacy in Public Health. 2 Hours.

Addresses the roles of community engagement and advocacy as essential tools to mobilize organizational and social change. Through lecture, discussion, case studies, self-assessment, and experiential exercises, students develop the knowledge and skills necessary to engage and empower communities through participation and advocacy.

SBHS 619. Intervention Planning & Design. 3 Hours.

This course focuses on the utility of social and behavioral science theories as tools to confront public health problems, understand the behavior change process, and how to develop and implement interventions to address these problems at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, and community levels. Students create an intervention program plan informed by theory as a skills application experience.

SBHS 620. Implementing and Managing Public Health Programs. 3 Hours.

PR: SBHS 619 or consent. This course provides students with conceptual and practical tools used for implementing and managing health promotion programs. Critical elements include learning to implement theoretically sound intervention programs with high levels of program fidelity; effectively engaging and managing human, financial, and community resources; and identifying and responding to commonly occurring opportunities and challenges. Course methods emphasize cooperative and experiential learning.

SBHS 629. Capstone Course. 2 Hours.

This is the culminating experience for social and behavioral sciences majors in the MPH program and requires students to demonstrate their capacity to synthesize and integrate the core and SBHS departmental competencies via a paper and poster.

SBHS 665. Grant Writing for Public Health Practice. 3 Hours.

PR: SBHS 601 and (SBHS 613 or SBHS 612). This course addresses skills and techniques necessary for writing successful grant proposals for professionals in public health agencies. This is a writing intensive course focused on grant writing and evaluation of social and behavioral based health promotion and disease prevention programs and interventions and is specifically tailored for the public health practice workforce.

SBHS 690. Teaching Practicum. 1-3 Hours.

PR: Consent. Supervised practice in college teaching of social and behavioral sciences. Note: This course is intended to insure that graduate assistants are adequately prepared and supervised when they are given college teaching responsibility. It also provides a mechanism for students not on assistantships to gain teaching experience.

SBHS 691. Advanced Topics. 1-6 Hours.

PR: Consent. Investigation in advanced topics that are not covered in regularly scheduled courses.

SBHS 693A. Special Topics. 1-6 Hours.

A study of contemporary topics selected from recent developments in the field.

SBHS 695. Independent Study. 1-9 Hours.

Faculty-supervised study of topics not available through regular course offerings.

SBHS 696. Graduate Seminar. 1-3 Hours.

PR: Consent. Each graduate student will present at least one seminar to the assembled faculty and graduate student body of his or her program.

SBHS 697. Research. 1-9 Hours.

PR: Consent. Research activities leading to thesis, problem report, research paper or equivalent scholarly project, or a dissertation. Grading will be S/ U.).

SBHS 698. Thesis or Dissertation. 1-6 Hours.

PR: Consent. This is an optional course for programs that believe that this level of control and supervision is needed during the writing of the students' reports, theses, or dissertations.

SBHS 711. Research Translation for Health. 3 Hours.

PR: SBHS 610. Principles, theories, and evidence-based methods of knowledge and research translation for health are discussed to facilitate student competence for translating research discoveries into policies and practices that promote health and prevent disease.

SBHS 715. Intervention Design. 3 Hours.

This course will provide students with the conceptual and practical tools used in planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating health promotion programs. Through reading, cooperative learning, and discussing, students will gain experience in these four areas. Students will also apply information learned in foundation courses.

SBHS 760. Survey Research Methods. 3 Hours.

This course presents scientific knowledge and practical skills used in survey research. Focus is on question construction and development, questionnaire design, sampling and survey modes, interviewing techniques, and survey data analysis. (Also listed as SBHS 660. Students may not count both SBHS 760 and SBHS 660 toward degree requirements.).

SBHS 761. Qualitative Research Methods. 3 Hours.

This course will introduce students to qualitative research methods, including the various types of study design. The course will include critiques of qualitative studies in the relevant research literature as well as student-driven studies using various types of study designs. Students will also learn about analyzing and reporting the results of qualitative studies.

SBHS 763. Advanced Evaluation Public Health. 3 Hours.

PR: PUBH 612 and (SBHS 601 or SBHS 619). Application of scientific public health program evaluation methods. Students will learn about theory and methods of program evaluation, identification of stakeholders, data collection, preparation, analysis, reporting and conclusion.

SBHS 790. Teaching Practicum. 1-3 Hours.

PR: Consent. Supervised practice in college teaching of SBHS. Note: This course is intended to insure that graduate assistants are adequately prepared and supervised when they are given college teaching responsibility. It also provides a mechanism for students not on assistantships to gain teaching experience.

SBHS 793. Special Topics. 1-6 Hours.

Study of advanced topics that are not covered in regularly scheduled courses.

SBHS 795. Independent Study. 1-9 Hours.

PR: Consent. Faculty-supervised study of topics not available through regular course offerings.

SBHS 796. Graduate Seminar. 1-3 Hours.

PR: Consent. Each graduate student will present at least one seminar to the assembled faculty and graduate student body of his or her program.

SBHS 797. Research. 1-9 Hours.

PR: Consent. Research activities leading to thesis, problem report, research paper or equivalent scholarly project, or a dissertation. (Will be graded S/U).