

MPH Practicum Experience



Student Guidebook



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Introduction

As a requirement established by the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH),

All professional degree students must develop skills in basic public health concepts and demonstrate the application of these concepts through a practice experience that is relevant to the students' areas of specialization.

(CEPH, School of Public Health Accreditation Criteria, Amended June 2005).

In concordance with these requirements, all MPH students in The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services (SPHHS) are required to satisfactorily complete a practice experience or practicum before graduation.

Since practical knowledge and skills are essential to a successful career in public health, a **planned, supervised, and evaluated** practicum is an essential component of a public health professional degree program. The goal of the practicum is to provide an opportunity for you to synthesize, integrate, and apply practical skills, knowledge, and training learned through courses, to gain professional experience in a public health work environment, and to work on public health practice projects that are of particular interest to you.

The school's location in the nation's capital allows for a variety of unique experiences within a multitude of practicum sites. To help facilitate this experience, SPHHS has created this guidebook¹ to give you an overall picture of the practicum and expectations.

What is an MPH Practicum?

The practicum is a three-way partnership among SPHHS Students, The George Washington University as represented by the Practicum Director, and sponsoring agencies/organizations as represented by the Site Preceptor. Each party in this mutually beneficial relationship assumes certain responsibilities, performs specific functions, and accrues benefits. The practicum is guided by a set of goals and objectives, which are based on the needs, and resources of all parties involved.

As the student, you contribute to a community's resources and to the solution of public health problems, while developing practical skills and personal confidence as a public health professional. If you are new to the field of public health, the practicum serves as an important first step in a public health career, providing an introduction to the practical skills and experience necessary for a productive and fulfilling career. If you have had prior work experience, you will find that the practicum provides the opportunity to hone your skills or to gain new experience in a different area of specialization.

¹ Individual departments and academic programs may have *additional* materials to tailor the experience to their specific goals.

Practicum placements are individually selected and therefore, the focus, substance, and approach of the practicum will vary, depending on your particular degree, academic program and on your specific interests, professional goals, and objectives. The objectives of the practicum must be consistent with the general objectives of the School, and your academic program.

During the practicum you will work under the supervision of the Practicum Director, Academic Advisor, and the Site Preceptor, who agree to directly supervise the practicum experience. Decisions on the nature, site, specific objectives, and activities of the practicum are arrived at following discussions and agreements amongst you, the Practicum Director, and the Site Preceptor (and perhaps other faculty resources that have expertise in the area). The roles and responsibilities of each person are outlined in this guidebook.

Course Information

The standard practicum experience will require a minimum of 60 hours of field work per credit hour and most programs have a 2-credit practicum requirement.

Your practicum can be performed in a concentrated fashion in one semester, or can be carried out over multiple semesters.

You may not enroll in PubH 214 through online registration. You enroll in this course using a Registration Transaction Form (RTF). This form is available in Ross 222 or via the SPHHS website (<http://www.gwumc.edu/sphhs/studentres/forms/>). ***Return this form to Ross 222.***

The SPHHS MPH practicum will be graded on a Credit/No Credit basis.

Prerequisites

You ***must complete PubH 205*** (Policy Approaches to Public Health) prior to beginning your practicum. You may be required to complete additional courses before enrolling in the practicum depending on your academic program. Refer to your academic program's syllabus for their prerequisites.

In addition, you are ***required*** to complete the CITI Course in The Protection of Human Research Subjects prior to beginning your practicum. In order to fulfill this requirement, you ***must*** complete either the *Social and Behavioral Researchers* module or the *Biomedical Researchers* module. Most SPHHS students will be solely engaged in social and behavioral research while at GWU, however, others may be involved in biomedical research. It is important to complete the module that is relevant to your anticipated activities. The course may be accessed at (<http://www.citiprogram.org/>).

Once you have completed the course, print 3 copies of the certificate. Submit a copy to the SPHHS Dean's Office (Ross 106), one to Student Records (Ross 222), and keep one for yourself.

Roles and Responsibilities

Student

- Discuss practicum-related issues with your Practicum Director and Academic Advisor
- Proactively select practicum site and Site Preceptor
- Negotiate payment with Site Preceptor
- Function as professional at all times
- If applicable, petition for Practicum Equivalent Experience and submit to Practicum Director ***during your 1st semester of enrollment***
- Contact Site Preceptor and Practicum Director if there are any problems, including site safety issues and/or sexual harassment
- See the Student Practicum Checklist on p.6 for a list of tasks that you must complete during the practicum

Practicum Director

- Act as a guide for the Student
 - Review program-specific practicum requirements with the Student
 - Discuss potential sites and types of practicum experiences with the Student
 - Discuss practicum progress with Student while they are on-site
- Review and approve the following:
 - Site and Site Preceptor's Application
 - Student's Practicum Plan
 - Midpoint Evaluation **and** Revised Practicum Plan, if submitted
 - Final Evaluations: Site Preceptor and Student
 - Practicum Equivalent Experience petitions
- Judge practicum as credit or no credit based on evaluations and input of Site Preceptor
- Address Student's reports of problems, including site safety issues and/or sexual harassment

Academic Advisor

- Review and approve the following:
 - Site and Site Preceptor's Application
 - Student's Practicum Plan
 - Midpoint Evaluation **and** Revised Practicum Plan, if submitted
 - Final Evaluations: Site Preceptor and Student
 - Practicum Equivalent Experience petitions
- Recommend Students, sites, and/or Site Preceptors for specific placements
- Refer students to meet with Practicum Director
- Serve as consultant to the Practicum Director
- Judge practicum as credit or no credit based on evaluations and input of Site Preceptor

Site Preceptor

- Sign-in on the Practicum Website and complete the following:
 - Site Application
 - Site Preceptor Application
 - Project Description
- Review and approve Student's Practicum Plan
- Engage Student in work and provide constructive feedback and guidance to Student
- Provide guidance for professional conduct
- Verify Student's weekly contact hours
- Complete the following on the Practicum Website:
 - Midpoint Evaluation Form *in conjunction with* the Student
 - Final Site Preceptor Evaluation of Student and Practicum
- Negotiate payment/stipend with Student, if applicable
- Evaluate Student's professional behavior
- Address Student's reports of problems, including site safety issues and/or sexual harassment

Student Practicum Checklist

- Read MPH Practicum Experience – Student Guidebook **and** sign acknowledgement form online
- Read your academic program’s practicum syllabus
- Complete prerequisite course: PubH 205 (Policy Approaches to Public Health)
- Complete program specific prerequisites
- Complete CITI course online **and** print 3 copies of the certificate. Submit 1 copy to the SPHHS Dean’s Office (Ross 106), 1 copy to Student Records (Ross 222), and keep one for yourself.
- Attend Practicum Training session
- Draft resume, cover letter, initial goals, and expectations (these can be practicum-specific as well as your career aspirations)
- Arrange appointment and meet with your Practicum Director – bring a copy of your unofficial transcript
- Sign-in on Practicum Website: complete Student Profile
- Upload your resume and cover letter on Practicum Website
- Select potential practicum site(s) and Site Preceptor(s)
- Take appropriate actions to finalize your site and Site Preceptor, upon advice of your Practicum Director
- Complete Practicum Plan ***in conjunction with*** your Site Preceptor
- Register for the practicum course (must be authorized by your Practicum Director)
NOTE: This may be concurrent with preparation of the Practicum Plan
- Maintain weekly contact form during placement
- Update Practicum Director ***at least twice*** during your time on-site (e.g. in-person, telephone, e-mail)
- Complete Midpoint Evaluation ***in conjunction with*** your Site Preceptor
 - Submit revised Practicum Plan to your Practicum Director, if applicable
- Complete Final Student Evaluation of Preceptor and Practicum

An Overview of the Practicum Experience

The following is a general overview of the processes involved in completing the practicum.

As you engage in the practicum experience, you will find yourself going through a process that begins with thinking about what your goals and objectives will be, finding a site, working with a Site Preceptor, and evaluating the practicum. There are six steps that will encompass the process:

1. Thinking about the Practicum
2. Preparing for the Practicum
3. Development of the Practicum Plan and Learning Objectives
4. Approval of the Practicum Plan
5. Taking Action to Complete the Practicum
6. Evaluation of the Practicum Experience

1. Thinking about the Practicum

Early on in the MPH program, you should set an appointment to meet with your Practicum Director to begin a dialogue on the goals of the practicum from the school perspective, the program perspective and from the student perspective. The Practicum Director is the person in your MPH academic program that will guide you through the practicum. They will review the practicum requirements and discuss potential sites and types of practicum experiences.

2. Preparing for the Practicum

During this phase, you will work with the Practicum Director to prepare to participate in the practicum experience. The opportunity to participate in “real world” practice requires that you act in accordance with the rules, regulations and professional standards of the workplace. To prepare for this experience, you ***must attend a Practicum Training session*** prior to engaging in the practicum. Immediately following this, you will need to develop a resume, cover letter and identify an initial set of goals that you are interested in pursuing.

It is also necessary to complete your CITI online course prior to beginning your practicum. Once you have completed the course, print 3 copies of the completion certificate. Submit a copy to the SPHHS Dean’s Office (Ross 106, a copy to Student Records (Ross 222), and keep a copy for yourself.

You are expected to take a proactive role and demonstrate initiative in selecting a practicum site and Site Preceptor for the practicum. The Practicum Director will assist and guide you to references and established sites that reflect the programmatic focus and objectives of your MPH specialty. This can be a time consuming endeavor. You should plan to ***begin this process no later than the semester before you intend to complete the practicum experience.***

During this phase a practicum site will be selected. Eligible sites are those that offer practice settings that:

- are commensurate with your program;
- have well defined activities that will enable you to apply your public health knowledge and skills;
- offer the opportunity to engage with experienced Site Preceptors;
- offer a work environment conducive to the fulfillment of the GWU SPHHS educational mission.

The location of SPHHS in Washington DC affords you the opportunity of having a plethora of practicum sites that span the spectrum in terms of location and focus. Available sites include local community based organizations, local and state health departments, federal agencies, and international/global agencies and consortiums. The topic areas are as diverse as the settings – health care policy, women, children and families, HIV/AIDS, nutrition, national surveys on health and well-being, refugee health, immigrant health, rural and urban health, environmental issues, and health disparities.

Your practicum can be completed at a site located in the metropolitan Washington DC area or in any area of the world. For those practicum experiences that are completed outside of the United States, please refer to the *SPHHS Guidebook for Traveling Abroad*.

The choice of a Site Preceptor will complete this phase of the practicum process. Skilled public health practitioners who are willing to serve as preceptors represent a critical component of the practicum experience. Site Preceptors are those that will engage you in their work, have substantial experience in public health (or related discipline), have the ability to actively engage you and spend quality time with you, and provide constructive feedback and guidance. All Site Preceptors will be required to submit a Practicum Site Application and a Site Preceptor Application if it is their first time serving in this capacity.

3. Development of the Practicum Plan and Learning Objectives

During this stage of the practicum process, you will work with your Site Preceptor to develop a practicum plan and develop your learning objectives for the practicum experience.

The Practicum Plan will identify: the practicum site where you will complete the practicum, the person who will serve as the Site Preceptor, the learning objectives of the practicum, a description of the practicum activities you will undertake, and, if applicable, a timeline for the Student's products or deliverables. This form is available on the Practicum Website.

Learning Objectives

Learning objectives are statements of what you will engage in during the practicum or will be able to do once you have completed the practicum. Learning objectives are measurable tasks

that you and your Site Preceptor will develop prior to beginning the practicum. These objectives will be evaluated by your Site Preceptor at the completion of the practicum.

Learning objectives must:

- Be linked to your program-specific practicum competencies (see syllabus)
- Build your professional skills
- Be prepared in conjunction with your Site Preceptor and approved by your Practicum Director.

Examples of appropriate learning objectives (LO) are as follows:

- (1) Competency: Assess environmental and occupational exposures
LO: Use air monitoring equipment correctly for taking meaningful workplace samples.
- (2) Competency: Apply knowledge of global health patterns and determinants in support of global health research.
LO: Conduct a needs assessment in response to avian influenza in Uganda.
- (3) Competency: Assessing the methodology and quality of research results.
LO: Synthesizing and summarizing health care policy news as it relates to children, low-income families, and Medicaid.

4. Approval of the Practicum Plan

You will submit your Practicum Plan to your departmental Practicum Director, your Site Preceptor and Academic Advisor for review and approval before beginning work at your practicum site. The Practicum Plan review process could take several weeks and you should plan accordingly.

5. Taking Action to Complete the Practicum

In this stage of the practicum process, you will work under the guidance of your Site Preceptor to carry out the practicum in accordance with the expectations set forth in your Practicum Plan. The practicum will entail a minimum of 60 hours of fieldwork per credit hour.

6. Evaluation of the Practicum Experience

There are two types of evaluation that will be completed for the practicum: a process evaluation that will be completed during your practicum and an outcome evaluation that will be completed at the end of the practicum experience. During the practicum experience ***you are required to maintain a weekly contact form*** for the practicum project during its entirety. In addition, you and your preceptor will both complete a Midpoint Evaluation.

You will be asked to evaluate the site, the Site Preceptor and the practicum experience as a whole. Standardized forms will be used to conduct these formal evaluations and are available on the Practicum Website. The outcome evaluation of the practicum experience will be judged for

credit or no credit by the Academic Advisor based on the evaluation and recommendation of the Site Preceptor and the Practicum Director.

Practicum Website

The Practicum Website provides you with one location for:

- Policies and requirements
- Required forms
- Program-specific materials
- Listing of practicum opportunities
- Tools and resources

You must fill out the required forms on this site. The Practicum Training session will provide students with an overview on how to use this site.

The “match” system is designed to help you find a practicum site and Site Preceptor. SPHHS faculty and staff will assist you in securing a practicum opportunity; however, SPHHS cannot guarantee that a particular site or project will be available for you at any given time.

Practicum Training

You will be required to participate in the ***Practicum Training prior to engaging in the practicum.*** This training will be offered throughout each semester and should be completed ***no later than*** the semester prior to when you will be on-site.

The training is 1.5 hours and will provide information on the practicum requirements, use of the Practicum Website, and professionalism.

Relationship to the Culminating Experience (Thesis or Capstone Project)

The practicum and culminating experience are two distinct MPH curriculum requirements. However, the two experiences can be linked. The practicum is a field placement that may take on a practice or research orientation. A practice-based practicum can be developed into a central thesis theme that can be further explored within the culminating experience. Likewise, a research-based practicum can yield an intensive research investigation that is distinct from the practicum experience. The linkage between the practicum and culminating experience will be further delineated in the program-specific guidelines.

For example, the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics encourages its students to choose one practice activity and make it the focus of both courses. The practicum consists of

three elements: (a) an Epidemiology Skills Building Seminar, (b) the practicum itself and (c) attendance at three Department research presentations.

While the Culminating Experience is a *graded* course which consists of four elements that focus on experiences from the practicum: (a) Concept Paper, (b) Proposal, (c) Final Report, and (d) Oral Presentation.

Research Requirements

Now that you have completed your CITI Course in The Protection of Human Research Subjects (see p.3), please refer to the flowchart on the GWUMC Office of Human Research website (<http://www.gwumc.edu/research/human/>; Login is “research”, Password is “password”). The flowchart is under the “Forms” link on the top left and will help you to determine if you will be engaging in human subjects research.

A human subject has been defined by the GWUMC Office of Human Research as “a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains: data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or identifiable private information.” If you are engaging in human subjects research, this will require you to go through the GWU Committee on Human Research Institutional Review Board (IRB).

However, requirements and timelines will vary depending on the following:

- The type of data you will be working with (e.g., deidentified or exempt data does not need to undergo full IRB committee review)
- The agency or organization with whom you are conducting research
- The location of the research project (e.g., USA vs. International sites)
- Whether the project has previously been reviewed by an IRB.

Thus, it is extremely important that you consult with your Practicum Director and/or Faculty Advisor on your research project and the steps that you will need to take. **Start this process early** as the IRB will not approve studies retrospectively.

Financial Compensation

Financial compensation for the practicum, if available, is a matter to be negotiated between you and the Site Preceptor. The possibility of payment is not a consideration in the approval of the practicum. In most cases, because of the limited duration and nature of practicum placements, they are unpaid.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility to cover any fees that may be associated with your site (e.g. required immunizations, personal protective equipment, travel).

Professional Behavior

An important component of the practicum is practicing appropriate professional behavior in the workplace. As such, you are expected to function as a professional at all times and are responsible for the activities and work described in your Practicum Plan.

Examples of professional behavior include:

- Dressing professionally
- Being respectful to your supervisor and coworkers (e.g. not engaging in gossip)
- Using professional language
- Being prepared for assignments and meeting project deadlines
- Arriving and departing at agreed upon hours
- Informing your Site Preceptor of anticipated absences or delays in arrival
- Maintaining confidentiality

You should demonstrate the standard of behavior expected of other employees in the organization, including compliance with the organization's policies and procedures. This component is evaluated by the Site Preceptor as discussed in the evaluations, and also indirectly by the Practicum Director.

Petitioning for Practicum Equivalent Experience

Although there are no automatic exemptions or waivers of the practicum, in rare situations it is possible to receive Practicum Equivalent Experience. In adherence to rules and policies set by CEPH, this request can only be approved if you can provide evidence of substantial *prior* public health experience relevant to your program-specific competencies. In general, this would include 3 or more years of relevant, full-time public health work in your discipline.

If you wish to apply for Practicum Equivalent Experience, ***file a request by petition during your first semester***. This provides time to plan a practicum should prior experience not be sufficient.

To do this, complete the Practicum Equivalent Experience form on the Practicum Website. In addition to the form, you will be required to submit a copy of your resume with relevant public health workplace references as well as a description of how your experience has demonstrated application of the program-specific competencies for the practicum.

Practical, public health-relevant experience is a requirement for all MPH degree candidates. This requirement is not being waived—rather prior equivalent experience is being accepted in fulfillment of this requirement. The form must be approved by your Academic Advisor, Practicum Director and the Associate Dean. If you are granted Practicum Equivalent Experience, you will need to substitute the required practicum credits (typically 2) with other coursework.

International Students

Curricular Practical Training (CPT) is required before international (F-1) students begin their practicum. The International Services Office (ISO) and the GW Career Center are actively involved in the CPT process.

For more information, please contact the International Services Office:

International Services Office
2029 K Street, NW
2nd Floor
Washington, DC 20052
(202) 296-5254
Fax: (202) 296-5188
iso@gwu.edu

University Policy Statements

Practicum Site and Safety Precautions

The George Washington University cannot guarantee the safety of practicum sites. While at your practicum site, you should take normal precautions to assure your own safety. Should you be asked to do something that you deem unsafe during a practicum experience, or if you believe that conditions at a practicum site are unsafe, you should immediately report any such safety concerns to your Site Preceptor and Practicum Director.

Sexual Harassment

The George Washington University is committed to maintaining a work and learning environment in which students, faculty and staff are free from sexual harassment. The University's Policy and Procedures on Sexual Harassment are posted on its web site (http://www.gwu.edu/~academic/Faculty_Recruitment/pdf/univpolicy_sexharass.pdf). If you believe you have been subjected to sexual harassment, you should report the problem to the Site Preceptor and Practicum Director or any other University official, including the Department Chair or Dean.

University Policy on Equal Opportunity

The George Washington University does not unlawfully discriminate against any person on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, or sexual orientation. This policy covers all programs, services, policies, and procedures of the University, including admission to educational programs and employment. The University is subject to the District of Columbia Human Rights Law. Inquiries concerning the application of this policy and federal laws and regulations concerning discrimination in education or employment programs and activities may be addressed to:

Susan B. Kaplan, Associate Vice President for Human Resources
Rice Hall, 2121 I Street, NW
Washington, DC 20052
(202) 994-4433

Or to the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education.

Who to Contact

Associate Dean for Research and Public Health Practice			
Rebecca Parkin	Office of the Dean	parkinr@gwu.edu	(202) 994-4569
Practicum Coordinator			
Marina Moses	Office of the Dean	eohtmms@gwu.edu	(202) 994-7418
Practicum Directors			
David Goldsmith	Environmental and Occupational Health	eohtdfg@gwumc.edu	(202) 994-1734
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