

Faculty Guide to Graduate Program Academic Advising

Department of Epidemiology
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University of Washington

November 11, 2021



SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON

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A. Background

Education is one of the three pillars of the Department of Epidemiology's mission: "To train future leaders in the field of epidemiology through excellent master's and doctoral degree programs, and educate others through undergraduate and graduate level courses on epidemiologic topics." Success at our educational mission depends on the individual faculty who advise our graduate students through all components of their training, including (but not limited to) recommending coursework, experiential learning, and culminating research activities.

Each Department of Epidemiology Core faculty member is responsible for the initial academic advising of students enrolled in our MS, MPH, and PhD programs. Initial academic advising is the process between the student and their academic advisor of reviewing the services and policies of the Department, discussing educational and career plans, and making appropriate course selections for their first 1-2 years. This process prepares the student to solidify their interest in potential topics for their culminating research experience and eventual career as a professional epidemiologist. In contrast to a faculty *mentor*, who is typically chosen by the student and is responsible for guiding the student through their research and thesis/dissertation process, an *academic advisor* is typically assigned to the student by the Graduate Program Director and is responsible for serving as a resource to the student as they navigate their introduction to the UW Epidemiology Department and degree requirements. The focus of this document is on the role of faculty as academic advisors.

This guide is designed to enhance the quality of academic advising that our faculty provide to our students by making explicit the expectations of faculty advising responsibilities and "standard" advising practices and content. While it addresses many topics relevant to academic advising, please feel free to contact the Graduate Program Director (uwepigpd@uw.edu) if you need any clarification or assistance.

1. Overview of Expectations of Faculty Academic Advisors

Although the approaches used in academic advising will differ across faculty and across students according to student needs, the UW Department of Epidemiology has a core set of expectations for all faculty in the role of academic advisor. In particular, it is expected that, at a minimum, the faculty academic advisor will:

- Meet with their advisees at least 2 times a year, but make themselves available to meet on a more frequent basis (e.g., monthly or as needed) according to the needs of the advisee. (When a faculty member becomes the chair of the students Masters or Doctoral Supervisory Committee, obviously more frequent contact will be necessary).
- Discuss with the advisee their coursework plans, to ensure that the trainee is on track with satisfying degree requirements and to evaluate whether additional courses might support the advisee in gaining the skills they need to meet their goals.
- Help connect the advisee with faculty who have research interests relevant to the interests of the trainee, to ensure the advisee is able to locate a thesis / dissertation mentor.
- Help connect the advisee with other resources within the Epi Department and the UW as needed (e.g., Epi Student Academic Services [SAS], Biostats consulting, tutoring, Hall Health).

B. Guidelines for Department of Epidemiology Graduate Degree Programs

This section contains the minimum information that Department of Epidemiology Core faculty need to know in order to be an effective initial academic advisor. Some information applies to all of our graduate programs (Section B.1) and other information pertains more specifically to MS, MPH, or PhD students (Sections B.2 through B.4, respectively).

1. Applicable to Multiple Graduate Degree Programs

a. Degree Requirements

Details regarding each graduate degree offered by the Department are described in modules and assignments maintained on the [Canvas](#) student page. Epi SAS updates the documents annually with changes as necessary to reflect revisions to degree requirements and other features of the Department's academic programs. (The Degree Checklist documents are particularly helpful for tracking student progress.) Please familiarize yourself with these documents so that when you are advising your students you can ensure you are providing guidance that is current and accords with the information your advisees have received about their degree requirements.

b. Regular Meetings with Advisees

Plan to meet with each of your advisees *at least* twice per year. The timing of these meetings varies depending on the degree program in which the advisee is enrolled (MS or MPH vs. PhD) and year in the program; details are provided on the [Progress/Plan forms](#). For incoming students, the Department expects you to contact each advisee during the summer prior to enrollment and arrange a Zoom or in-person meeting before the start of the Fall quarter. Other than this initial meeting, Epi SAS informs all students that it is their responsibility to reach out to faculty to schedule meetings with you. However, some students may forget that they need to schedule these meetings. If a student does not contact you, do not assume that they do not need your support. Epi SAS will send email reminders to students and you will be cc'd on the messages that go to your advisees. If you do not hear from an advisee by the end of the first week of a quarter in which a meeting should occur, the Department expects you (i.e., the faculty advisor) to contact them and propose a meeting time.

During each such meeting you should address the following topics with each advisee: a) review prior quarter coursework performance; b) review coursework planned for the current and subsequent quarters; c) the extent of their current or planned research activities; d) adjusting to life in Seattle and/or graduate school; e) career goals; and g) networking and professional opportunities. While not every one of these topics necessarily will require extensive discussion, you nonetheless should be prepared to address each one. If necessary, more than one meeting might be required. Epi SAS will remind each student to bring a copy of their current UW transcript to their meeting with you. Also, please be compassionate during your interactions with your advisees; understand whether they are doing okay and if not, what steps they think would help to improve their situation.

Some students may desire (and/or require) check-in meetings more than twice a year. In these instances, it is expected that the faculty academic advisor will make themselves available to meet with the student on a more frequent basis - up to once a month is reasonable. In an initial meeting, the advisor and advisee should decide on a meeting schedule that is mutually agreeable. Advisors should also make themselves available to answer questions via email between scheduled meetings.

Finally, Epi SAS informs students that they are responsible for being prepared when they attend meetings with faculty advisors. If you find that one or more of your advisees are not meeting that expectation, tell them that advising meetings will be much more valuable if they arrive prepared. If you observe that one or more of your advisees are repeatedly unprepared when they meet with you, please contact the [Graduate Program Director](#) who will follow-up with the student.

c. Academic Load (credits per quarter)

The minimum number of credits for which a full-time student can enroll per Fall, Winter or Spring quarter is 10. While the minimum credit load for Summer quarter is 2, students only need to enroll in

Summer quarter in certain circumstances. These include funding requirements (some funding sources, such as NIH training grants, require year-round enrollment) or in order to complete a particular degree requirement that involves summer enrollment.

Some students enroll for fewer credits in one or more quarters if they are not planning to complete their required coursework within the first two years, or if the student feels that they need a lighter credit load. While there is no maximum number of credits permitted per quarter, for practical purposes students do not enroll for more than 18 credits since the tuition cost per credit increases dramatically once that total is exceeded.

Since there is no financial disadvantage to a student to enroll in the maximum number of credits (if they are already planning on registering for 10 credits), and the School of Public Health (SPH) receives more funds from the Provost as the number of enrolled student credit hours increases, please encourage each of your advisees to “max out” their credit load in as many quarters as is feasible. Among the potential approaches to recommend to your advisees are: i) signing up for independent study credits (see below), ii) signing up for as many thesis or dissertation credits as permitted, and/or iii) enrolling in “low impact” courses such as SPH departmental seminars.

d. Advice about Independent Study

Many of our students are interested in working with faculty on their research studies or applied projects to gain practical experience in our field. If a student wants to assist you with one of your projects, and you are unable to provide financial compensation to them, offer them the opportunity to earn independent study credits.

e. Advice about Research Directions and/or Mentorship

While many of our graduate students arrive with a strong sense of the research area they are hoping to pursue, some do not. And, some of those who initially have a strong sense will need or wish to change their research direction after one or two quarters, particularly MS or MPH students. If an advisee has questions about which faculty to speak with about a particular research topic, please make sure they are aware that the Department’s website [maintains a list of faculty by research interest area](#). (The research selection tool is on the lower left side of the page). It’s collegial to offer to introduce your students to relevant faculty, recognizing again that some students do not feel comfortable approaching faculty they do not know well. If a student has exhausted the options amongst our faculty, encourage them to investigate whether there are faculty in other SPH departments, or other schools within the UW Health Sciences (e.g., Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, or Nursing) who might be potential mentors. Students should be reminded, however, that faculty who do not have appointments in the Department cannot serve as the Chair of a Masters or Doctoral Supervisory Committee. Although less than ideal, over the years many of our students have established successful research or practice arrangements with non-Epidemiology faculty. Finally, strongly consider offering to serve as the Chair of your advisee’s supervisory committee if they have not located someone else for that role.

f. Advice about Planning 1st and 2nd Year Coursework

Most of our graduate students within a particular degree program should follow the same recommended course schedule in their initial two years. The Department makes such schedules available on the [Canvas](#) student page.

g. Advising Medical Residents or Clinical Fellows

The Department’s MS and MPH programs are popular with School of Medicine medical residents and clinical fellows who are interested in gaining clinical research skills. These students typically juggle their

academic activities with fairly limited clinical service or training, as well as research they are conducting with mentors in their home departments. That said, for each such student to have been admitted, their fellowship director provided a written guarantee that the student would be permitted sufficient time to attend all courses and other activities required by our academic programs. If you are advising a medical resident or clinical fellow and they inform you that they consistently have challenges attending courses or other required activities because of the competing requirements of their fellowship program, please inform the [Graduate Program Director](#) so that he can check in with the student and, potentially, the student's fellowship leaders.

The academic requirements for medical residents or clinical fellows are essentially the same as those for other students in the same degree/tracks. The one exception is that clinical fellows are required to enroll in EPI592D, which is a series of highly-tailored sessions designed to assist the fellows with their progress through their degree program. Clinical fellows can choose to substitute EPI592D for EPI583 (Epidemiology Seminars).

h. [Advice about Graduate Certificate Programs](#)

Some of our students are interested in participating in one of the UW's [Graduate Certificate Programs](#). These programs provide a student an opportunity for focused training in an area of interest, and completion of the certificate is noted on a student's transcript. Details of each Graduate Certificate's requirements are found on the individual certificate program webpages.

i. [Career Advice](#)

The Department does not have dedicated career advising staff; Epidemiology faculty therefore are the primary source of career advising for our graduate students.

While many of our students have a strong sense of the type of career they wish to pursue following receipt of their degree, others do not. Although the Department's MPH program emphasizes a public health practice (PHP) career, a subset of our MPH students will decide that they want to pursue a research-oriented career (including, potentially, a future Epidemiology doctorate). These students most likely will need advice regarding more advanced analytic second year coursework than MPH students seeking a PHP career path.

Many PhD students enter our program anticipating a career in academia. Among these students there likely is great variation in the awareness of the path to, and the features of, such a career. We strongly encourage you to engage with each of your PhD advisees early on in their time at the UW to discern whether they are aiming towards a career in academia. Early engagement might result in a student changing their mind about their career goals, leading to different choices in coursework, participation in research and/or practice activities, and other training-related opportunities they undertake. For example, some PhD students may develop an interest in public health practice (PHP) and wonder about specific courses or non-course opportunities to enhance their training in preparation for working as a leader in a state or local health department. Others may wish to consider a career working in the private sector (e.g., biotechnology industry) and have need of similar advising. It's not necessary that you have personal experience working in non-academic settings to help such students; only that you know the resources to which you can point them for what you can't provide (including colleagues outside of academia).

Note: As of October 1, 2021 the SPH will have an Associate Director of Career Development. This professional will provide leadership and strategic direction to support the provision of excellent career

services and development, in partnership with existing efforts in the School and beyond, for all students across the SPH degrees and programs.

j. Academic Progress

Each of your advisees is expected to make progress towards their degree consistent with the degree-specific material that Epi SAS provides in the Canvas modules. In particular, you should strongly advise your advisees to enroll in their required coursework in the specified sequence on our documents. Although the great majority of our students face no issues making progress, a small number find themselves facing unanticipated difficulty. Please be alert to signs that an advisee is not making progress. Examples include: marks other than a passing numeric grade (≥ 2.7) or S (as opposed to NS) in required courses (all degrees); having not identified a thesis topic by the end of the summer following their first three academic quarters (MPH and MS); having not identified a practicum topic before the summer following their first three academic quarters (MPH only); having not identified a dissertation topic and doctoral supervisory committee by the end of their first 9 academic quarters (PhD only). In such instances please alert the [Graduate Program Director](#) as soon as possible.

If in the Graduate Program Director's or Faculty Advisor's opinion a student exhibits lack of progress over 2 consecutive quarters, the Graduate Program Director will ask the student to attend a meeting with them and the Faculty Advisor. Typically the meeting focuses on helping the student identify the reasons why they are not progressing, and strategies moving forward to help the student overcome the impediments. Following the meeting the Graduate Program Director prepares a written summary, including a set of milestones the student is expected to meet during the upcoming quarter. Unless the student has failed to meet previously specified milestones, there is usually no reason to report the student's lack of progress to the Graduate School.

k. Student Concerns

Academic institutions are as susceptible to expressing toxic culture as other parts of our society, so it should come as no surprise that some of our students experience various injustices (intentional or otherwise), including micro-aggressions; frank racism, sexism, and other expressions of social dominance; physical abuse; and educational sabotage. Epi Department, School of Public Health, and University policies expressly forbid such behavior.

Please therefore be attuned to whether an advisee has concerns about how they or others are being treated by their fellow students, faculty or administrative staff. Since not all students who have such concerns will feel comfortable raising this topic, whenever you meet with an advisee, please ask them directly "Do you have any concerns you'd like to share with me about bias or mistreatment you have experienced?"

Whether or not a student is willing to acknowledge or discuss their concern(s) with you, please direct them to the SPH webpage that contains the [School's Student Concern policy](#). This page details the informal and formal approaches that a student can take to address their concern(s), and of course you should become familiar with it. In particular, remind them that their concerns can be reported to the School's Office of Student Services using an [anonymous reporting tool](#).

l. Academic and Emotional Support

One or more of your advisees may express a need for support to improve their performance in coursework, make progress towards a non-course requirement, or to deal with non-academic aspects of their lives.

Academic Support: The Department offers tutoring for EPI 512-513 as well as some Department of Biostatistics courses. The details regarding courses and how to request tutoring assistance are on the [student Canvas pages](#). If it is late in a quarter and the student is feeling incapable of completing the work for one or more courses successfully, remind them that it's perfectly acceptable for them to decide to ask their instructor(s) if they can be assigned an "Incomplete" or "Withdrawal" mark for that quarter. For non-course requirements, please attempt to elicit the specific issues the student faces and provide advice based on your experience with other students.

Non-Academic Support: A student who expresses concerns or distress about situations outside of the UW (e.g., personal or family health problems) should be directed to an appropriate UW resource. Options to recommend to students include [MySSP](#) (24/7 crisis support for students) and [Let's Talk - Health Science Schools](#) (drop in consultation for Health Science students). These and others are listed on the [Student Resources](#) section of the Department's website. If you need ideas as to how to assist students who are experiencing social or emotional health problems, the following resources may prove helpful: [Working with Distressed Students](#) and [Health Sciences Liaison Counselor](#).

m. Going on leave

The UW Graduate School sets the baseline policy for enrollment: students are expected to be continuously enrolled (with the exception of summer quarter) throughout their time in their academic program. Should a student wish to take one or more quarters off and maintain their "spot" in their program, they must [apply formally for on-leave status](#) for each quarter they do not register for the minimum number of credits. The Department has specific additional criteria that a student must meet in order to be permitted to be on-leave: an up-to-date Progress/Plan form submitted to the Epi SAS office, and being in good academic standing.

n. International Students

Our department highly values international students in our programs. Advisors can be important sources of support to these individuals when they face administrative and structural hurdles that are unique. For example, depending on the socio-political climate here and abroad it may be very difficult for them to obtain student visas, or be allowed to enter the US (or leave from or return to their home country) even with the appropriate documents. To the extent possible, Epi SAS staff try to stay abreast of these issues when they are likely to affect all or the majority of our international students. If one of your advisees is facing a particular challenge related to their status as a student, please refer them to the [UW International Student Services office](#). International students may also face greater challenges obtaining funding to support their education and living expenses since they may not be eligible for as broad a range of financial support mechanisms as students who are US citizens or residents.

2. Master of Public Health (MPH)

a. Overview

Our MPH program is designed to provide each student with competency across a wide range of knowledge, skills, and activities that will prepare them for a career in epidemiologic practice and research. The Department's [MPH degree](#) currently includes three tracks. The "General" track is the most flexible because it has the fewest course requirements. The "Maternal and Child Health" (MCH) track builds on the core requirements of the "General" track with specific requirements for courses relevant to MCH. Finally, the "Global Health" track builds on the core requirements of the "General" track with specific requirements for courses relevant to Global Health.

b. MCH Track

Most students enrolled in these tracks have advisors who are connected to these programs and thus familiar with the [requirements of the individual tracks](#) . If you are not connected to these programs and yet are assigned an MCH MPH student and are unsure of a specific issue, please contact the faculty lead for this program [Daniel Enquobharie](#) for clarification.

c. Common Core Curriculum

The MPH curriculum, particularly in the first year, is highly standardized across the SPH's many MPH degree programs. The required [series of core courses](#) ensures that each MPH student receives sufficient training in the foundational public health competencies to meet the requirements set forth by the [Council on Education in Public Health \(CEPH\)](#) . The curriculum for Epidemiology MPH students strengthens their quantitative skills by further requiring core courses in Epidemiologic Methods and Applications (EPI 512-513, EPI 510, EPI 514) and Biostatistics (BIOST 511-513), and depending on their track, electives through which they gain substantive knowledge in areas of interest to them.

c. Practicum

Each Epidemiology MPH student must complete a [practicum](#) at a public health-oriented organization where they can learn and apply public health strategies outside the classroom. Each practicum requires a faculty practicum advisor . If any Epidemiology MPH student, whether or not you are their initial academic advisor, asks you to serve in that capacity we encourage you to agree. As with other aspects of a student's academic program, the student is responsible for knowing the requirements for the practicum. Fortunately, SPH provides robust documentation of the practicum requirements and process obtainable through its web pages. We strongly recommend that you review these pages even if you do not serve as a faculty practicum advisor . If your MPH student is uncertain about any aspect of the practicum requirements please feel free to refer them to the SPH's [Manager of Experiential Learning](#) or to the Department's Graduate Program Director.

d. MPH Thesis

A research-based thesis is the required culminating activity of the Department's MPH degree. The Department's guidelines for the thesis, including requirements for the composition of the thesis committee, links to the required human subjects documentation, information about the thesis proposal, and links to thesis formatting guidelines are available on [Canvas](#).

e. Application to PhD Program

MPH students often decide, by the end of their first academic year, that they want to pursue doctoral training in epidemiology in the Department. We recommend that you speak with your MPH advisees about their interest in pursuing a PhD at the UW. If they have such a goal, you should advise them that they should plan on preparing a very strong application package. For example, explain to them that: 1) performing exceptionally well in EPI 512 & EPI 513 is not sufficient to warrant admission; 2) it is advantageous to have given some thought to the dissertation research they would pursue, and have spoken with faculty who they might want to have serve as their dissertation chair; and 3) they should strongly consider sitting for the doctoral preliminary examination in June following their first 3 quarters in their program. With regard to item #4, note that it is not required that students applying to the PhD program from the MPH program have taken the preliminary exam, and that receiving a good score on the exam is not a guarantee of admission to the doctoral program. MPH students who are interested in taking the preliminary exam should be encouraged to enroll in EPI 592B (i.e., the preliminary exam prep course) in Spring Quarter of their first year.

3. Master of Science (MS)

a. Overview

The MS degree is designed to help a student develop a solid foundation in quantitative research methods skills while providing curricular flexibility that allows them to explore substantive content areas of interest. The Department's [MS degree](#) includes two tracks. The "General" track is the most flexible because it has the fewest requirements. The "Clinical & Translational Research Methods" (CTR) track (see below) builds on the core requirements of the "General" track with specific requirements for the electives.

b. Clinical and Translational Research Methods Track

The CTR track was initially developed to appeal directly to the interests and needs of the School of Medicine residents and clinical fellows who are obtaining research training to improve their clinical research skills. Examples of such skills include clinical trials on the effectiveness and safety of new treatments, studies of new tools for diagnosis or for monitoring disease following treatment, and studies of factors that influence the outcome of illness.

c. MS Thesis

A research-based thesis is the required culminating activity of the Department's MS degrees, and an option for culminating activity for the Department's MPH degrees. The Department's guidelines for the thesis, including requirements for the composition of the thesis committee, links to the required human subjects documentation, information about the thesis proposal, and links to thesis formatting guidelines are available on [Canvas](#).

d. Application to PhD Program

It is common for our MS students to decide, by the end of their first academic year, that they want to pursue doctoral training in epidemiology in the Department. We recommend that you speak with your MS advisees about their interest in pursuing a PhD at the UW. If they have such a goal, you should advise them that they should plan on preparing a very strong application package. For example, explain to them that: 1) performing exceptionally well in EPI 512 & EPI 513 is not sufficient to warrant admission; 2) it is ideal to have made very good progress on their thesis project before the application due date; 3) it is advantageous to have given some thought to the dissertation research they would pursue, and have spoken with faculty who they might want to have serve as their dissertation chair; and 4) they should strongly consider sitting for the doctoral preliminary examination in June following their first 3 quarters in their program. With regard to item #4, note that it is not required that students applying to the PhD program from the MS program have taken the preliminary exam, and that receiving a good score on the exam is not a guarantee of admission to the doctoral program. MS students who are interested in taking the preliminary exam should be encouraged to enroll in EPI 592B (i.e., the preliminary exam prep course) in Spring Quarter of their first year.

4. Doctoral (PhD)

a. Overview

The Department's PhD program is designed to provide students with competency in a wide variety of areas that will prepare them for a career as a leader in epidemiologic research. The Department's [PhD degree](#) is offered in a single track ("General").

b. Coursework

The coursework requirements for doctoral students are more extensive than for MS and MPH students. At the same time, many of our doctoral students enroll in our program with a strong basis in biostatistics

and epidemiologic analyses from their prior master's degrees. Thus, many of our first year PhD students can successfully waive the required introductory series of biostatistics courses (i.e., BIOST 511-513 or 517-518) and EPI 510 and/or EPI 514. The space in a first-year PhD student's schedule available due to these waivers permits them to pursue more advanced coursework that fills their scholarly interests. Options explored by our doctoral students include one or more course offered at the appropriate level in the [Department of Biostatistics](#) (e.g., BIOST 524 ["Design of Medical Studies"], BIOST 545 ["Biostatistical Methods for Big Omics Data"]) or the [Center for Statistics in the Social Sciences](#) (e.g., CSSS 526 ["Structural Equation Models for the Social Sciences"]). The Department of Biostatistics also offers several [Summer Institutes](#), each of which includes multiple courses within different topic areas (e.g., infectious disease, genomics). Please remind your advisees that although they can receive credit for some of these Summer Institute courses, the costs are not covered by UW tuition.

c. Non-Coursework Opportunities

Whether a doctoral student is interested in a research career or a public health practice career, it behooves them to gain as much experience in these areas--beyond their dissertation projects--as feasible during their training. Ideally some or all such training could happen in the context of employment as a Graduate Research Assistant. Alternatively a student could be advised to seek out independent study work with a faculty member involved in either research or public health practice. The faculty academic advisor should discuss these interests with their advisees and help to connect them with faculty working in relevant areas.

d. Doctoral Preliminary Examination

The Department requires each enrolled doctoral student to attain a passing grade on its annual preliminary examination. The purpose of this exam is to ensure that a doctoral student has attained a sufficiently strong foundation in epidemiologic methods to be able to develop and execute a successful dissertation project. The examination typically is offered in mid-June, and is focused almost entirely on the material presented in EPI 512-513. The Department offers a 1 credit course ([EPI 592B](#)) in Spring quarter to assist students with preparing for the exam. If you have a 1st year PhD student as an advisee, please strongly recommend that they enroll in that course. And, if your 1st year PhD advisee has a weak grade from EPI 513 you should advise them strongly to consider additional preparation activity (such as individual tutoring).

If a student does not pass the preliminary exam on their first attempt, they are permitted one additional attempt to do so.

e. Dissertation Topic Advising

The Dissertation is the culminating activity for our PhD students. It requires substantial time and resources from the student (and their Supervisory Committee) to plan and execute the research performed to complete the Dissertation.

Your PhD advisees may seek guidance from you about successful strategies for developing dissertation projects. Although those topics are addressed to some extent in EPI584 ("Doctoral Dissertation Seminar"), please feel free to share the following ideas (as well as your own) with your advisees:

There are at least two approaches to the process. First, the student decides (at least broadly) what topic(s) are of interest to them, and then meets with faculty who are working in those areas. Second, the student decides which faculty are of interest to them, and then meets with them to discuss possible project ideas. You can assist your advisee in these steps by offering to supervise them for independent

study credits while they develop a topic, introduce them to different faculty, and provide general guidance until they have picked a Chair.