

Guidelines for Special Projects

Department of Community and Family Health

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Purpose of the Special Project

The purpose of the special project is to give the students an opportunity to develop research skills through the conduct of an individual effort on a specific Community and Family Health related topic. The special project will demonstrate the critical thinking skills of students as they prepare to enter their career in public health. The special project should be relevant to their field of study and their long-term goals in public health.

Registration for Special Projects

MPH students in the Department of Community and Family Health should register for their special project following successful completion of their comprehensive examinations. Project design should begin earlier than this registration, and with consent of the project supervisor, the student may implement the project concurrently with their field experience or completion of final course work. Each special project must have a contract form signed by the project supervisor, which specifies the nature of the project and designates an anticipated completion date. This contract form must be signed and submitted at the time of registration for the special project. The project supervisor must be selected, and the contract form must be submitted to the college before work can be started on the special project.

Assignment of Project Supervisor

Each special project will have a project supervisor or reader. The student's departmental advisor will ordinarily supervise the project. In the event that the content areas of the proposed project would make another faculty member more appropriate for this role, alternate arrangements can be made within the department (or in some cases the College). In some cases a second faculty reader with particular expertise may be required. While the following sections of this document focus on the project supervisor it is understood that all steps must be approved by both the primary and secondary readers if a secondary reader participates.

Project Topics

The student's faculty advisor will discuss with the student the process of generating the special project's topic. It is expected to be a topic relevant to the student's concentration area. The topic should be one in which the student can contribute to the existing body of knowledge about an issue, program, or policy, or confirm existing data through replication of earlier work. After a topic area has been chosen, the student will select the faculty member who is most appropriate to be project supervisor. Students may select from a wide range of project types. These include, but are not limited to, the following activities:

1. Analysis of data which relates to the student's field experience or other research activity;
2. Evaluation of a program which the student has chosen either through field experience or other contacts;
3. Analysis of a policy or policy issue related to the student's area of concentration;
4. Pretesting and revision of health materials; or
5. Development and implementation of a health program.

In some cases, an extensive assessment of the literature, which is available surrounding an issue of concern to the student, may be appropriate for the special project. Replications of existing studies are

also appropriate for special projects if approved by the project supervisor. In all cases, a written summary of the special project is to be presented in a typewritten, bound document to the supervisor and faculty reader. (A more detailed discussion of the Special Project Report is given on page 8) Also, all students will be expected to become familiar with the literature surrounding the topic or problem, and knowledgeable about the methods selected to complete the project. Each student will also be expected to generate recommendations for public health practice or policy, or recommendations for further research in a specified field that emerge from the special project.

The specific content of the special project must be approved by the student's faculty advisor prior to implementation of the project. A written proposal and a one-page abstract briefly describing the idea should be submitted to the student's faculty advisor prior to approval of the project.

Project Proposal

A written proposal and a one-page abstract briefly describing the idea should be submitted to the student's faculty advisor prior to approval of the project. The proposal should be written following careful discussion and planning with the project supervisor. By the time the proposal is completed, few questions should remain about its acceptability. The proposal is expected to be the final opportunity for the student and the project supervisor to decide on the scope and nature of the project. The proposal must be formally approved, in writing, by both the project supervisor before the student begins the project.

The proposal will form the basis of the special project report. In fact, the first two chapters of the proposal will be almost identical to the final paper. The third chapter will be the blueprint which will be used to conduct the study. When the proposal is complete, it will be submitted to the project supervisor. When they have approved it in writing the project can begin. When the project is complete, it must be presented in the form of a special project paper.

Research and Pretesting Special Project Proposals

Proposals for research projects should include the following components. These are outlined in the order that they should appear in the proposal.

1. Statement of the problem, background, purpose

This section of the proposal delineates the issue that the student is studying. The statement should specifically identify the question that the student is addressing. It should include background information on why this is an important issue or an issue of interest to a public health researcher. Included in this background information might be policies, legislation, program changes or other bodies of information that contribute to an understanding of the significance of the research. The purpose of the study should be clear. If it is the intent of the study to contribute to general knowledge in the literature, this should be specified. The uses to which the data might be put are of critical interest. For example, if the content of the study is to determine whether public health nurse home visits increase or decrease later attendance at child health clinics, then the purpose of the project might be to make recommendations to public health providers about the benefits of continuing or discontinuing home visits.

2. Literature review

A complete literature review should be included in the proposal. This literature review will help to focus the study, as well as to ascertain whether similar types of studies have been done and their results. The review should include not only a description of the literature, but also a review of the adequacy of the literature. For example, in reviewing a topic one might find that there are a number of articles about the topic but that all of them are theoretical. No empirical or data-based or systematic studies have been conducted to test the theories that have been presented. In other situations it may be clear that though there are a few studies in the area of interest, most may be improperly conducted. Often one will find that the conclusions drawn from the data analysis are controversial or open to debate. All these issues should be described in the literature review. The literature review should be scientific, preferably from refereed journals. Although important information about trends and policies might be found in popular literature;

this should be mentioned in the introduction or conclusions, not in the literature review, unless the article is specifically evaluating the impact or trends of popular literature.

3. Proposed methods

The final section of the proposal should include the methods proposed for the project, including a description of the population, sampling procedures, methods for collecting information or data, methods of analysis, and limitations of the research design. Human subjects review (IRB) approval is required for most special projects. Students should consult with their faculty advisor about completing the information needed for IRB.

Policy Analysis Special Project Proposals

Proposals for policy analysis projects should include the following components. These are outlined in the order that they should appear in the proposal.

1. Statement (restatement) of the problem

When analyzing a policy the first step is a restatement of the problem that the policy was designed to address. It should include background on the question at the time the policy was developed, and should include statements about why this is an important issue for a public health researcher. Issues that might be discussed are such items as legislative intent, political perceptions, data supporting problem existence, etc.

2. Statement of analysis criteria to be used in analysis

These criteria are the values that will be utilized to analyze the policy. They will cover both the values of the researcher and the values of the policy developer. Examples include values such as equity, liberty, fraternity, efficiency, justice, rights, such as privacy, self-determination, etc.

3. Synthesis of information

This section will include the literature review and available data on the topic, including historical data.

4. Alternative strategies

The alternative strategies are the most realistic possibilities for policy implementation. The analyst should select those strategies that seem to have been most successful or which should have been tried. Two or three strategies (no more) should be selected for analysis.

5. Criteria for strategy choice

The student will select the criteria for analyzing the different criteria, identifying the factors that they will utilize in assessing the strategies. Examples include cost, effectiveness, and political feasibility.

Length and Format of the Special Project Report

There is no specific length requirement of the special project report. The length will be dependent upon the nature of the study. The paper should be prepared in American Psychological Association (APA) style. A copy of APA rules should be obtained by each student for use throughout their course of study, as papers in the Department of Community and Family Health will be required to be in this style. Students are encouraged to design their report in a manner that will enable them to easily convert the report to a paper suitable for publication. The student's project supervisor shall assist the student in manuscript development in cases where immediate publication is indicated.

Grading of Special Projects

The project supervisor will approve the final project as represented in the written document. Specific letter grades will not be assigned. If after review of the written document, the project supervisor feels that it is appropriate or necessary, the student may be asked to present his/her project in oral discussion. The oral discussion includes the student, the project supervisor, the faculty advisor (if different) and the chairperson of the department and any guest.

How to Do Your Project

Step 1: Discuss the project with your faculty advisor. Do this early in your course of study. With your advisor, decide on a topic and on the person who will be your reader. Your advisor will usually serve as the project reader.

Step 2: Ask the professor to serve as your reader, and begin working with them him or her to develop your project's overall design. Register for credit for special project work and sign a contract with your reader.

Step 3: Conduct your literature review. Finalize your project's purpose and method of data collection. Prepare a final proposal for presentation to your reader. This proposal should include the statement of the problem with background and purpose, the review of the literature, and your anticipated method of analysis.

Step 4: Submit your study to the human subject's review board for approval.

Step 5: Conduct your study.

Step 6: Write the final sections of your report including the data, data analysis, and your summary, conclusions, recommendations and submit the report to your readers for approval.

Step 7: Submit the report for publication if appropriate.

Special Projects Completed by MPH Students

One very common question we hear from Master's students is, "What can I do for my special project?" Rather than try to explain the breadth of topics available for special projects, it might be more illustrative to share some examples. Below you will find the titles of some special projects complete over the past several years. Hopefully, this list will help you generate ideas for your own project. To see the complete list, stop by the Academic Coordinator's Office, room 2137.

Behavioral Health

Caregiver's Abuse of Community Residing Alzheimer's Patients.

Perceptions of Mental Illness in Coptic Orthodox Adults.

Health Education

An Analysis of Community-Based Services and Supports for Children and Young Adults with Special Needs in Hillsborough County.

Development of a Survey to Determine Use of Barrier Methods of Protection during Sexual Activity of College Students.

Analysis of Bicycle Helmet Use in Children in Hillsborough County.

Development and Implementation of the Breakfast Bunch Program at Schmid Towers.

Assessment of Hispanic Female VA employees for a Workplace Wellness Program.

Maternal and Child Health

Assessing the Utilization of Post-abortion Contraceptive in Medical versus Surgical Abortions.

Burnout among Family Services Counselors in Hillsborough County.

The Association of Maternal Pregnancy Complications and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

Evidence Based Practices in Youth Suicide Prevention.

An Event History Analysis of Recurrent Child Maltreatment Reports.

Socio-Health Sciences

The Quality of Life among Lymphedema Patients due to Lymphatic Filariasis in Three Rural Towns in Haiti.

Determinants of Physical Activity among Individuals with Arthritis.

Perceptions of Care and Cultural Competence in Cancer Healthcare.