

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Medical Center
School of Medicine
Department of Epidemiology & Community Health
Master of Public Health Program (MPH)
Guide to the MPH Research Project

Table of Contents

- A. [Introduction](#)
- B. [Academic credit and demand on your time](#)
- C. [Research project topic](#)
- D. [Preceptor selection](#)
- E. [MPH Research Project proposal](#)
- F. [Course enrollment](#)
- G. [Communication with preceptor and faculty advisor](#)
- H. [Review of proposed project for protection of human subjects](#)
- I. [Content of the MPH Research Project report](#)
- J. [Format of the MPH Research Project report](#)
- K. [Completion requirements](#)
- L. [Approval of preliminary draft of MPH Research Project report](#)
- M. [Presentation of the MPH Research Project](#)
- N. [Final approval of the MPH Research Project](#)
- O. [Copying and binding requirements \(updated 08/06\)](#)
- P. [Responsibility for reporting changes](#)
- Q. [Early preparations and critical deadlines](#)
- R. [Critical Deadlines for MPH Research Project](#)

Printer Friendly Versions - [MPH Guidelines \(word\)](#) ([pdf](#))

- [Appendix A. Partial Listing of Past Research Projects \(word\)](#) ([pdf](#))
- [Appendix B. MPH Research Project Agreement Form \(word\)](#) ([pdf](#))
- [Appendix C. MPH Research Project Sample Title Page \(word\)](#) ([pdf](#))
- [Appendix D. MPH Research Project Submission Statement \(word\)](#) ([pdf](#))
- [Appendix E. MPH Research Project Approval Form \(word\)](#) ([pdf](#))

A. Introduction

A requirement of the Master of Public Health (MPH) degree is the satisfactory completion of an independent research project. The project will serve as a culminating experience to demonstrate application of the knowledge acquired in the MPH Program. The major product of this culminating experience will be a scholarly written report on a topic of public health significance. For example, if the student is interested in studies of urban health problems, the project could be designed as observational, analytic, or evaluative. Observational or analytic studies may be conducted on such topics as urban violence, low birth weight, school attendance, childhood lead poisoning, teen pregnancy, incomplete immunization of children, or HIV transmission and AIDS. The evaluative study may consider the efficacy and effectiveness of ongoing preventive interventions, or the evaluation of various existing programs (eg, alcohol, drugs, asthma, diabetes or tuberculosis treatment programs). These examples are illustrative, not limiting.

All research projects must be human-based and involve data analysis. The data may consist of existing data sets or data collected by the student specifically for the research project. The completed project will

be presented orally on Research Day to demonstrate understanding of the topic and ability to defend the study design and interpretation of results.

B. Academic credit and demand on your time

While the MPH Research Project offers only the equivalent of three to six hours of lecture credit, the course is viewed as a laboratory and is expected to consume an average of no less than 6-9 hours per week during the semester registered. Of course, the demands of high professional standards may call for even more time. You should keep this in mind when planning the semester in which you sign up for the project.

C. Research project topic

The most challenging part of doing a research project is selecting a topic. It is suggested that you develop a research idea based on your own personal interests, your work or school experiences, and your preliminary review of the literature. Once an idea is developed, it is important to start discussing your ideas with faculty members and public health professionals who have similar interests. A good starting point is your faculty advisor. You may also want to consult the MPH Program Director. These individuals can direct you to others who may have expertise in your area of interest. This may take a lot of legwork and phone calls, but it is important to have input from individuals who are experts in the area. Some of the individuals with whom you speak may be interested in becoming MPH Research Project preceptors.

The research project topic should be selected only after a thoughtful and systematic exploration of the following: current research projects underway in which you could be involved; the availability of an appropriate preceptor; the logistics, costs and time required for the proposed project; a review of the principle sources of literature on the topic; and finally, how the project serves your professional and academic interests. If you are having difficulty selecting a topic, consult your faculty advisor.

It is preferable that you begin thinking about your topic early on in the program. Full-time students generally register for the Research Project during the Fall 2 semester. This means that you need to decide on a topic, select a preceptor, and complete the Research Project Agreement Form **no later than July 27th for fall semester and no later than December 1 for spring semester.**

D. Preceptor selection

After deciding on a research topic, you should select a preceptor who has expertise related to the topic of interest. Arrange with a department member, community professional, or other qualified individual to serve as your preceptor. You may wish to review a partial listing of past MPH Research Projects, advisors, and preceptors (see [Appendix A](#)). If an appropriate choice is not on that list, consult your faculty advisor. Please note that your faculty advisor may also serve as your preceptor.

E. MPH Research Project Agreement Form (*Appendix B*)

The MPH Research Project Agreement Form should be completed in consultation with your advisor and your preceptor. It should not exceed two pages (plus signatures). It should include the following:

1. your name, address, telephone numbers, fax, e-mail address, etc.
2. a provisional title for the project
3. the purpose and specific objectives of your proposed research project
4. a brief description of the methods you intend to use
5. a statement or two about the anticipated findings
6. a sentence or two about how your project might contribute to the field of public health
7. an indication of IRB status
8. a brief time-line for completing your project
9. name, title, address, telephone numbers, e-mail address and field of expertise of your preceptor(s); (if your advisor serves also as your preceptor, please indicate this on the Form)
10. name of your faculty advisor
11. signatures/dates of all parties as indicated on the form

The Research Project Agreement Form should be regarded as a formal agreement among the student, the faculty advisor, and the preceptor. Approval of the agreement indicates that the topic is appropriate, that the study design is sound, and that the proposed project is feasible within the projected time frame. The MPH Research Project Agreement Form must be completed and approved by your faculty advisor, preceptor (if not the faculty advisor), and the MPH Program Director before you can register for the research project course. If one or more of the parties disapproves of the project as proposed, a meeting of the student, advisor, preceptor, and MPH Program Director should be arranged to discuss the reasons for disapproval and to suggest modifications to the topic, the study design and/or the methodology. If agreement cannot be reached by all parties, the Department Chair will make a final decision after reviewing the issues. Please note that all revisions to the project as originally agreed upon must be approved by the MPH Program Director to avoid any last minute difficulties. The approved MPH Research Project Agreement Form (and any subsequent changes to the project) must be submitted to the MPH Program Coordinator for signature and filing at least 2 weeks before the start of the semester.

F. Course enrollment and credits

You must enroll for the MPH Research Project under EPID 691 (MPH Program Research Project). Registration for the MPH Research Project is restricted to the later stages of study in order to maximize application of the content of other MPH course requirements, particularly the core courses. An approved copy of your completed MPH Research Project Agreement Form (*Appendix B*) must be filed with the MPH Program Coordinator before you can register for the MPH Research Project course.

Typically, the MPH Research Project is completed as a 3 credit hour course. Occasionally, a student proposes research involving data collection as well as analysis of the data. For such a project, the work involved is substantially greater than for the typical project, requiring more time than a single semester. If this is the case, the student and the advisor should determine the best schedule for the additional work.

- 3-credit project: analyze and report on a secondary data set (ie, data already collected)
- 6-credit project: design data collection instrument, collect and analyze the primary data; note that the 6 hours should be spread over two semesters to allow time for IRB approval and data collection and data clean up. The additional 3 credits may be taken in lieu of one of the MPH Program electives.

G. Communications with preceptor and faculty advisor

Upon formal approval of your MPH Research Project proposal (*Appendix B*), you are expected to be in frequent consultation with your preceptor. Also, you must update your faculty advisor at least monthly on your progress. We encourage you to begin meeting with your faculty advisor during the first semester of your enrollment in the MPH Program.

H. Review of proposed project for protection of human subjects

All student research projects must comply with federal regulations for the protection of human subjects. If: 1) the project *does not* involve collecting data through interaction with human subjects; *and* 2) the investigators have *no access* to identifiable private information, review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) is *not* required. In all other situations, including any questionable situations, IRB review *is* required.

For research projects that *do* require IRB approval, the faculty advisor is considered to be the Principal Investigator (PI). Before students begin to conduct any research involving information from human subjects, the faculty PI must submit a research application to the VCU Office of Research Subjects Protection (ORSP). The ORSP will arrange for review of the proposed project by the VCU IRB. Research may not begin until the PI has received a letter of approval from ORSP. Once the IRB approves the project, the faculty PI is responsible for oversight of student research activities to ensure compliance with IRB guidelines.

I. Content of the MPH Research Project report

The MPH Research Project report is a scholarly accounting of the conduct, analysis, and results of your project. It should be similar in format and nature to an article in a peer-reviewed journal. The following sections are required in your MPH Research Project report:

- **Abstract:** The abstract is a brief summary of the key components of the study. It should not exceed one page, single-spaced, and should include the purpose, methods, results, and conclusions (with implications or recommendations).
- **Introduction:** This section should describe the background of your study, including the literature review. This is where you defend the “reason” for selecting your topic and the overall purpose of the project.
- **Objectives:** Specific objectives of the study must be clearly stated.
- **Methods:** The methods section should describe how the study was conducted. This section should generally include the number and composition of subjects in the target population, when and where the project was conducted, and how the data were collected and analyzed. A detailed description of resources, strategies, and experiences used to accomplish the objectives should be included.
- **Results:** This section should describe the results of your study. Tables and figures should be used to present pertinent findings.
- **Discussion:** This section should include a summary of your results and a discussion of implications of your findings. Your discussion should be supported by pertinent literature.
- **Conclusion:** The final section consists of a conclusion and any pertinent recommendations for further study. Include statements verifying that the research objectives were met. Consider your results in terms of health policy and clinical or public health implications.

J. Format of the MPH Research Project report

The format of the MPH Research Project report should adhere to general report-writing standards. The report should include the following elements:

1. The title page must include the title of the Research Project, your name, the course number and name, Virginia Commonwealth University/VCU Medical Center, School of Medicine, Master of Public Health Program, the names of your advisor and preceptor, and the date submitted (*Appendix C*).
2. Submission statement (*Appendix D*)
3. MPH Research Project Agreement Form (*Appendix B*)
4. MPH Research Project Final Approval Form (*Appendix E*)
5. Dedication (optional)
6. Epigraph (optional)
7. Table of Contents should include a listing of all the key sections of the MPH Research Project report
8. Acknowledgements (optional) may be used to thank individuals who have assisted you in the completion of your MPH Research Project.
9. The Abstract is a brief summary of the key components of the MPH Research Project. It should not exceed one page, single-spaced.
10. The text includes the following major sections: introduction, objectives, methods, results, discussion, conclusion, tables, and figures.
11. Appendices (as needed) should include other relevant material that is important to the study but is not included in the text of the MPH Research Project report. This information should be included if it helps with the understanding of the desired implementation, results, or conclusions. For example, a questionnaire used for data collection may be included as an appendix.
12. References section should include all of the literature cited in the report.
13. Formatting
 - a. The margins should be 1 inch on top, bottom, right and left.

- b. Number each page. The preliminary pages (ie, the Table of Contents and Abstract) should be numbered with lower case Roman numerals. The remainder of the report, generally beginning with the introduction, should be numbered with Arabic numerals.
- c. The font size of the text should be no less than 12 points.
- d. Use double spacing throughout the report except for the title page, submission statement, acknowledgements, abstract, any run-over lines in the table of contents or illustrations.
- e. Check your report carefully for grammatical and spelling mistakes. Use the grammar and spell check mechanisms available in most word processing software packages, but remember that these do not necessarily catch all mistakes. You should also read carefully through the entire report before submitting it for final approval.

K. Completion requirements

All requirements for the MPH Research Project are expected to be completed during the semester in which you are enrolled for project credit. Under some unusual circumstances, the time frame for the course may be extended with a grade of PR (in progress). In these instances, however, you must submit to the MPH Coordinator a written request for extension that must be jointly approved by your preceptor, faculty advisor, and the MPH Program Director. (Please note that taking an extension may mean additional tuition expense.)

L. Approval of preliminary and final drafts of MPH Research Project Report

A preliminary draft of your MPH Research Project report must be submitted to your preceptor and faculty advisor at least **4 weeks prior to your Research Day presentation**. Feedback from your preceptor and advisor is essential to preparation of the final draft. **The final draft of the report is due 2 weeks prior to Research Day**. Both your preceptor and your faculty advisor must indicate their approval of the report by signing and dating the last page of the report.

M. Presentation of MPH Research Project

All students are required to present their findings on a day designated by the MPH Program Coordinator. Please note that the final draft of your MPH Research Project report must have been submitted to your faculty advisor and your preceptor at least two weeks prior to participation in the Research Day presentations.

Use of visual aids (PowerPoint slides and/or overheads) is recommended for your presentation. Try to limit the number of slides to less than 30 for your presentation. See the APHA website: http://www.apha.org/meetings/powerpoint_presentations.htm. Copies of charts, tables, and slides should be provided to the audience. Students are responsible for checking the available equipment prior to Research Day to make sure their software is compatible with the equipment.

Each presentation should be limited to 15 minutes and should include only the key issues, a brief introduction, objectives, methodology, results, findings, and recommendations. Following presentation, 5 minutes will be allotted for questions from the audience.

N. Final approval of the MPH Research Project

Your faculty advisor, with input from the preceptor, will evaluate the completeness of your MPH Research Project based on the following criteria:

- Extent to which the proposed objectives have been met.
- Completeness of literature search and summarization.
- Appropriateness of the methods.
- Appropriate summation, interpretation and presentation of results.
- Relevance of findings and impact on the current status of research in the area.
- Appropriateness of conclusions.
- Attendance at Research Day
- Demonstration of knowledge of the topic in responding to questions on Research Day.
- Conformance to report formatting guidelines.

- Use of clear, concise language; adherence to grammar and punctuation rules; evidence of thoroughly proofread materials.
- Timely completion and filing of the MPH Research Project Agreement Form and other forms as specified in this guide.

The faculty advisor, in consultation with the preceptor, will give final approval (or disapproval) of the MPH Research Project **no later than one week prior to Research Day**. If the project is not approved, the student will not be permitted to present on Research Day. The MPH Research Project Approval Form (*Appendix E*) must be signed and dated by the faculty advisor, preceptor, and MPH Program Director. The faculty advisor then submits the form to the MPH Program Coordinator within 3 days after Research Day. Research project reports will be judged as satisfactory or unsatisfactory. An unsatisfactory report will require that the student do additional work before s/he can graduate.

O. Copying and binding requirements

All graduating students must submit the original plus one copy of their fully approved and signed MPH Research Project Report to Cabell Library for binding. Go to www.library.vcu.edu/services/binding.html and click on Online Processing form. (Your eID is the username and password you will use to enter your VCU email program.) Keep a copy of your report handy to refer to in providing the information requested. The system will generate both a payment summary and a summary screen which you should print out.

One week after Research Day, you must take to the Cabell Library Business Office (room 201) the payment summary from your binding request, along with the original and one copy of your MPH Research Project Report. The original is for the department and the copy is yours to keep. The cost for binding 2 copies of your report is \$45. Payment may be made online by credit card, or you may pay by check in person. The Business Office will provide a receipt which you are to submit to the MPH Program Coordinator.

In addition, you are required to provide soft bound copies of your MPH Research Project Report to your faculty advisor and your preceptor (if applicable). (This can be done at Kinko's for about \$3.00 each, no spiral binding.)

An electronic version (CD or Zip) of your Project Report must be submitted to the MPH Program Coordinator one week after Research Day. This version, which includes the PowerPoint presentation, will be placed on the website of the Department of Epidemiology and Community Health and on VCU's Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Project website at <http://etd.vcu.edu>.

Personal hard bound copies beyond the 2 required copies are \$17.50 each. You have the option of having personal copies mailed to you for a \$5 fee.

P. Responsibility for reporting changes

Any changes in your research project proposal, your preceptor, faculty advisor, or your academic status must be reported promptly in writing to the MPH Program Coordinator. A student who fails to file the Research Project forms in a timely manner or to report changes to the MPH Program Coordinator could face a delay in the expected graduation date.

Q. Early preparations and critical deadlines for the MPH Research Project

The following recommendations will help to ensure that you will be able to meet the critical deadlines and graduate on time:

- Think about selection of a research topic during your first semester in the MPH Program
- Discuss your ideas with your faculty advisor and other faculty members or public health professionals
- Conduct a preliminary review of the literature on your topic of interest
- Inquire about persons with expertise in your topic of interest who might be willing to serve as your preceptor
- Complete the MPH Research Project Agreement Form (*Appendix B*)

- If the faculty advisor decides that IRB approval is required for your project, you must file the proper paper work with the IRB as soon as possible

**R. Critical Deadlines for the MPH Research Project*
2007-2008**

	Summer 07 Semester	Fall 2007 Semester	Spring 2008 Semester
Draft Proposal : Submit preliminary draft of Agreement Form (App B) to faculty advisor, preceptor, and MPH program director for review and approval.	03/23/07	07/27/07	11/29/07
Final Proposal : Submit signed version of App B to the MPH program coordinator (and to IRB if review is required).	04/06/07	08/10/07	12/13/07
Preliminary Draft Report : Submit preliminary draft of Project Report to preceptor and faculty advisor. Please note that ALL analyses and the draft manuscript must be completed before submission.	07/06/07	11/09/07	03/28/08
Final Draft Report : Submit final draft report to preceptor and faculty advisor.	07/20/07	11/21/07	04/11/08
Abstract and Slides : Submit copies of abstract and PowerPoint slides to the MPH program coordinator.	07/27/07	11/30/07	04/17/08
RESEARCH DAY : Give oral presentation of MPH Research Project.	08/03/07	12/07/07	04/25/08
Final Approval : Obtain Final Approval Form (App E) from faculty advisor and submit to MPH Program Coordinator.	08/10/07	12/11/07	04/29/08
Copying and Binding : Submit electronic copy of MPH Research Project Report to the VCU Library via EDT System. (See section O above)	08/17/07	12/14/07	05/05/08

*Deadlines must be met or graduation will be delayed.

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