

Department of Psychology
University of Pittsburgh

Biological and Health Psychology Program Student Handbook

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROGRAM

Health psychology is an interdisciplinary field of basic and applied research. In broad terms, health psychology seeks to elucidate the role that biological, behavioral, psychological, social, and contextual factors play in the etiology, treatment, and prevention of disease. Health-related phenomena studied by scientists in this field range from preventative, diagnostic and therapeutic interventions to disease pathogenesis at the levels of system and cellular physiology. One of the strengths of the graduate program in Biological and Health Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh involves our emphasis on the biological mechanisms involved in these processes.

The course curriculum and training experiences in Biological and Health Psychology at Pitt emphasize the development of:

1. **A multilevel and mechanistic understanding** of the determinants of health and illness across the lifespan, including:

Biological pathways (e.g., autonomic, cardiovascular, cellular, circadian, endocrine, genetic, immune, metabolic, and neural),

Behavioral pathways (e.g., dietary, physical activity, sleep, and substance use),

Psychological pathways (e.g., emotion, emotion regulation, coping, personality, and stress), and

Social environmental pathways (e.g., social relationships, stressor exposures, and neighborhoods).

2. **Expertise in multimethod tools** for facilitating this type of research, including:

Biological assessments (e.g., immunological and molecular assessments, metabolic assessments, human brain mapping methods, genetic methods, neuropsychological assessments, peripheral neuroendocrine assessments, physical fitness and body composition measures, preclinical disease markers, psychophysiological and psychopharmacological methods),

Behavioral assessments (e.g., actigraphy assessments for physical activity and sleep, behavioral observation methods, dietary assessments, ecological momentary assessments),

Psychosocial assessments (e.g., interview-based assessments, psychometric methods, geographic information system mapping), and

Other methodological tools (e.g., experimental, longitudinal observational, and clinical trials designs that target mechanistic pathways, multilevel modeling, structural equation modeling, machine learning and other advanced quantitative tools).

3. Exposure to lifespan developmental influences on health, with focus on children and early family influences, adult health, and aging.

4. Knowledge of major determinants and patterns of health disparities (e.g., sex and gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic disadvantage).

A few focused areas of interest of faculty affiliated with our program include: the behavioral epidemiology and pathophysiology of cardiovascular disease, dementia, and other diseases of aging; psychoneuroimmunology and behavioral influences on infectious disease susceptibility; psychosocial factors in oncology; disorders of weight regulation; health risks associated with sleep and circadian dysregulation, and behavioral pharmacology and the treatment of addictive disorders. In 1996, graduate training in health psychology was established as a primary academic program of the Psychology Department. The program's training objective is to produce research scientists whose academic careers will advance the study of behavior, health, and disease. This program superseded an earlier departmental graduate program in Psychobiology and accommodates health psychology students who have clinical interests within a joint Health Psychology-Clinical Psychology program. In 2002, the Program in Health Psychology was re-titled the Graduate Program in Biological and Health Psychology, to better reflect the prominence of biological research in our program and to convey the representation of psychobiological science in our Department. For further general description of the Biological and Health Psychology Program see: www.psychology.pitt.edu/biological-health-program

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

The Biological and Health Psychology program is a stand-alone training program. It is also possible, however, to pursue cross-disciplinary training in Biological and Health Psychology with a second subspecialty area.

At the time of application to the Biological and Health Psychology program, students may jointly apply to the Clinical Psychology program (in the joint Clinical & Health track). Except as noted, Clinical/Health Psychology Program students satisfy the same degree requirements as nonclinical Biological and Health Psychology Program students, in addition to completing requirements of the Clinical Psychology Program.

As another option, students with bridging interests may design and formalize a program of cross training with the Social, Developmental, or Cognitive programs. This may be done at admission or after training begins. Students wishing to add one of these programs as a second training area after admission must obtain a letter of approval from the new program's Chair and their primary research mentor. For more information about these options, see section on "Cross-Program Training" in the [Department Graduate Student Handbook](#).

Depending on students' particular interests, specific content of the graduate curriculum at the more advanced levels will naturally vary among individuals (e.g., research methods in epidemiology are less relevant to students pursuing experimental research; students focusing on cardiovascular research may study different areas of disease pathogenesis than those having a primary interest in psychoneuroimmunology).

In overview, students are exposed to a core curriculum covering research methods in health psychology, statistics, systems physiology (human physiology and behavioral neuroscience), a class on basic concepts and methods within the field, and area-specific courses covering a variety of relevant topics, including Health Neuroscience, Cardiovascular Psychophysiology, Alcohol Use and Abuse, Sleep and Circadian Rhythms, and Psychoneuroimmunology. The number and timing of specific courses varies between students enrolled in the joint Health Psychology-Clinical track and in Biological and Health Psychology only track, and all students' programs of study are monitored and approved by a two-member advisory committee composed of Program faculty. Students are encouraged to individualize their research experiences and elective course work to meet their specific career goals.

As in all Department programs, students complete a master's thesis or thesis equivalent, a specialty examination, and a dissertation while in residence. Because of the significant curriculum and practicum demands of the Clinical Program, it is expected that students participating in the joint Clinical-Health track will typically require additional time to complete the doctoral requirements.

Rules and regulations governing the Biological and Health Psychology program are detailed under topical headings below. Students are also referred to the [Departmental Graduate Student Handbook](#) for additional information about department policies and to the handbooks of any other programs that they are in –e.g., [Clinical Psychology Program Student Handbook](#).

ADMISSIONS

Students with a BA or BS degree in Psychology, Biology or related majors will be admitted on the basis of: (1) achievement in their undergraduate courses; (2) GRE scores (optional); (3) three letters of recommendation; (4) prior research experience; (5) a written statement detailing their professional goals and interests; (6) a personal interview; and (7) the match between student research interests and faculty expertise. Students may apply for co-admission to any other program of the Department or to the Joint Health Psychology-Clinical Psychology program. In such cases, the applicant must be admitted to both programs. As another option, non-Clinical students with bridging interests may design and formalize a program of cross-training with a second program area following admission to the Health program. See section on “Cross-program training” in the [Department Graduate Student Handbook](#).

Graduate students of other programs in the Psychology Department may apply to transfer into Biological and Health Psychology. Requests for transfer are handled on a case-by-case basis, with applicants required to follow the same formal admissions procedure as new applicants.

ADVISORS

As noted above, incoming students are selected based on academic qualifications and research interests. When possible, students are admitted to work with a faculty advisor or co-advisors chosen by the student based on correlated research interests. In addition to research mentoring, advisors provide guidance on educational and career plans and approve registration each term. In addition to the primary advisor(s), each student is assigned a program secondary advisor from among Health faculty on entrance into the program. Program secondary advisors are selected by the Chair based on the student's background and interests and in consultation with the student's major advisor(s). The major advisor(s) and the program secondary advisor constitute the student's advising committee, which is designed a) to help the student formulate their course curriculum, b) to track student progress during training and to help address problems and barriers as they arise. Note: If a student is in the joint Clinical and Biological and Health program and their primary advisor is not a core member of Clinical faculty, then the secondary advisor would need to be a core member of Clinical faculty.

Advising Meetings: Students meet with their advising committee twice in their first year in the program and annually thereafter. First year students should schedule a fall or a mid-year meeting with their advising committee to provide them with some early feedback on their progress, to provide support, and to address any initial difficulties that may have arisen. In all years thereafter, students should schedule an annual end-of-year meeting with their advising committee -- the faculty advisor, the program secondary advisor, and any other faculty supervisors (if relevant) early each summer term. These end-of-year meetings will be chaired by the student's program secondary advisor and will typically be held in conjunction with the program's annual evaluation of students. The major focus of the meeting should be on student advising needs in conjunction with progress and plans with respect to department and university milestones. In cases where there appears to be an imbalance between emphasis on the advisor's own demands or expectations for the student and the expectations of the department with respect to student progress and performance, this should be explicitly addressed during the meeting by the student's program secondary advisor and/or other faculty member(s) who are present. Department expectations should be reviewed and clarified, and a plan should be made for achieving a satisfactory balance. The secondary advisor should take minutes of this meeting and submit a summary of discussion and the student's progress to the program Chair. Students will be asked to indicate on their annual self-evaluation when the meeting occurred. The Program Chair should ensure that these meetings occur annually. Additional meetings of the advising committee may be initiated upon student or faculty request. Students should expect to spend at least 30 minutes per week meeting individually with their primary research advisor(s). Meetings should be scheduled at a mutually convenient time, and students should feel free to request more frequent or longer meetings, as necessary. If primary advisors are unavailable for an extended period (e.g., sabbatical or leave), they should notify their advisees as soon as possible and work with them to minimize the impact on students' progress and training. This may include identifying a temporary advisor. These plans should be communicated to the Program Chair. The student's programsecondary advisor may serve in this role.

Students are encouraged to contact the Director of Graduate Studies, Departmental Climate Liaison, or the Program Chair if there are problems with advising or other related matters that cannot be resolved in the context of the two-person advising committee.

RESEARCH TRAINING

During each year in the program, students are expected to be involved in their advisor's or advisors' research program and to spend from 10-20 hours per week contributing to some aspect of an ongoing project. These expectations should be moderate in scope when they are unfunded or do not advance a student's scholarly development (less than 10 hours/week). Note that this policy does not apply when student effort falls within the scope of a GSR appointment, in which case up to 20 hours of weekly student effort can be required, without expectation of co-authorship or other non-financial gain. In the first year, involvement in the advisor's lab should lead to a thesis proposal (by the beginning of the second year). Students should be continuously engaged in research throughout the program and be active members of their laboratory and the program.

As a function of divergent interests or stylistic differences, some students may not wish to pursue a thesis project with the initial advisor(s). Such students will be encouraged to change advisors, with the Program faculty's approval, to establish a more productive relationship. In these cases, it is the student's responsibility to identify advisor(s) to serve in assisting completion of ongoing projects, maintenance of progress on milestones, and funding. The change will then need to be approved by the Program faculty.

Full-time Study: Students are admitted to the Biological and Health Psychology Program with the understanding that they will engage continuously in full-time study towards the Ph.D. Full-time study implies until graduation: 1) being in residence on campus, 2) registration for appropriate course credits, and 3) employment for a maximum of 20 hours per week only as a teaching assistant (TA) or teaching fellow (TF) for the Department of Psychology, as a graduate student researcher (GSR), or as a fellow with a University or external scholarship. Any other arrangement requires the written approval of the Program. In addition, leaves of absence and parental leaves of absence may also be requested (see [Department Graduate Student Handbook](#) for details). Employment overloads, in which additional teaching (TA or TF) or research employment exceeds the 20 hours per week maximum require the approval of the advisor, Program, and Department and in any case cannot exceed a maximum overload of 10 hours per week.

CURRICULUM

Required Courses: All students must fulfill the following coursework: (1) Health Fundamentals seminar (Psy 2502) which covers basic concepts and methods associated with the field and is taken in the first or second year; (2) research methods (e.g., Psy 2200 Clinical Psych Research Methods); (3) two courses in statistical analysis (e.g., Psy 2005 Statistical Analysis 1 and Psy 2010 Statistical Analysis 2); (4) two courses in systems physiology (human pathophysiology (e.g., Psy 2004) and behavioral neuroscience (e.g., Psy 2475). Sometimes, exceptions to these requirements may be made based on students' needs or prior coursework with approval from program faculty. A student having research interests in addictive behavior and psychopharmacology, for instance, may be advised to take a graduate course in pharmacology; if that student also has a sufficient background in physiology, as judged by their advisory committee and program faculty, it may be possible to substitute pharmacology for systems physiology.

For the Ph.D., students must also complete at least 14 elective course credits relating to the program's several fields of research concentration. For Biological and Health Psychology students who are not jointly enrolled in another program, this is approximately 5 courses. For joint clinical/health students, this is at least 8 credits or approximately 3 courses. Examples of such courses (several of which overlap multiple concentrations) include Human Cardiovascular Psychophysiology, Psychoneuroimmunology, Sleep and Circadian systems, Behavioral Medicine Interventions, and Alcoholism. Many elective courses are offered by the program, but courses outside the program (for example, Cardiovascular Epidemiology) can also count toward this elective requirement.

Selection of elective course options should be discussed with the students' advising committee and when necessary or appropriate also approved by the Program Chair (i.e., if there is uncertainty or if there are questions about whether a course would count toward the elective requirements). Decisions about how to fulfill this elective course requirement should take into consideration a) the development of proficiency in the student's area of program concentration (for example, Psychoneuroimmunology); b) the development of a broad understanding of the models and mechanisms relevant to the fields of Biological and Health Psychology: Students are strongly encouraged to take program-relevant courses outside of their area of concentration; and c) the development of a broader knowledge base outside of the program but relevant to one's career trajectory. There may be some circumstances in which an advanced statistics course could count toward the elective requirements if a course has a clear biological or health psychology emphasis and content coverage that would be comparable to a typical graduate seminar in the area or field. In such cases, the Program Chair and Faculty would need to provide final approval prior to enrollment. Students whose specialty areas involve other programs in the department, such as Pediatric Health Psychology, can satisfy their elective course requirement using relevant courses from other Psychology programs (Developmental Psychology in this example) with this criterion in mind. With counsel from the student's advising committee, students may, on occasion, opt to exceed the minimal required number of elective courses in pursuit of these three goals.

Biological and Health Psychology Research Proseminar: For their training, all students are expected to enroll and participate in the Program Research Seminar (PSY2505), scheduled in both the Fall and Spring academic terms. This seminar serves to bring together graduate students, faculty, and postdoctoral fellows to provide a forum for discussion of conceptual and methodological issues bridging the various specialty areas of biological and health psychology. To gain experience with scientific presentations, it is expected that students will present their master's thesis projects as part of either this proseminar or another program's proseminar series if they are a joint student.

Departmental Teaching Requirement: To obtain a Ph.D. in the Department of Psychology, all students must demonstrate proficiency in teaching. This requirement is fulfilled by (1) serving as a Teaching Fellow in which the student is the instructor of record for a course or certain lab or recitation sections, and (2) taking a 3-credit teaching seminar (**Psy 2970** typically offered in the fall or the seminar offered by the Faculty Development office (**FACDEV 2200**)). It is strongly recommended that students fulfill the teaching requirement prior to proposing the dissertation. For further details, see the [Department Graduate Handbook](#). Students planning to pursue an academic career in a 4-year college should consider completing the requirements of the Teaching Certificate. Note that once a student signs a TA/TF appointment letter, this is considered a binding commitment. Should an alternative source of

support arise after an appointment letter has been signed, it may be possible for the student to be released from this commitment if a replacement can be identified, but this is not guaranteed.

Exemptions and Grades: Students with an adequate background in areas covered by the core curriculum may wish to request exemption from certain required coursework. Such requests should be directed to the student's two person advising committee, accompanied by documentation of prior courses, syllabi, grades, etc. The committee will decide whether to recommend a waiver of the core requirement, and if recommending the waiver, will communicate this in writing to the Program Chair. The Chair will then either approve the request or bring the matter to the Program faculty for review and decision.

Summer Term Registration: During summer terms when not registered for required courses, students should register for "Summer Milestone Study" or "Full Time Dissertation Study" when they have passed their Comprehensive Examination and have 72+ credits. SMS is worth 0 credits and does not impact tuition.

It is expected that students will maintain at least a B average in all graded coursework; in addition, students must earn a grade of B or better in all core courses and B- or better in all electives. Students who fail to meet the minimum requirement for graded performance on a specific course will need to retake the course; in the case of electives, students receiving an unacceptable grade may either retake the course or substitute an additional course in satisfaction of their electives requirement.

For students enrolled in the Joint Clinical Health program, all the above regulations apply, as well as any guidelines unique to the Clinical Program. In the case of exemptions, the student must receive approval from both the Biological and Health Psychology and Clinical Psychology program faculties.

MILESTONE REQUIREMENTS

In fulfillment of the degree requirements, in addition to the required coursework, students will complete (1) a Master's Thesis, (2) a Specialty Examination (Comprehensive Paper), and (3) a Doctoral Dissertation. Each of these milestone requirements must be completed in a timely fashion. In 2011, the department adopted a set of policies regarding the timely completion of each of these milestones. Students and their advisors should refer to these policies (see "Satisfactory and Timely Degree Progress" in the [Graduate Student Handbook](#)) in making decisions about how to prioritize training efforts while pursuing the doctoral degree.

1. MASTERS THESIS

Students are required to complete a Master's Thesis or an equivalent piece of research that is of potentially publishable quality. Students are expected to complete the thesis (or equivalent) by the end of their second year in residence or at least by the end of the first term in their third year (see section "Satisfactory and Timely Degree Progress" in the Department Graduate

Handbook https://pitt.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/dsas/natural/psychology/_layouts/15/Doc.aspx?sourcedoc={6c2da41e-e1fa-4089-8c04-fc183f2fc6fb}&action=view&wdAccPdf=0&wdparaid=1EF8E355.

Students who completed a thesis at another institution may request exemption from the thesis requirement. Exemptions will be granted by the Program faculty upon determination that the completed thesis is equivalent to our requirements (i.e., a formally prepared document describing an empirical study that reflects meritorious science). To seek exemption, the student should first present

copies of the thesis to their advising committee for review; in turn, the advising committee will make a recommendation to the program faculty to approve or disapprove the request. **Master's Committee:** The thesis work is overseen by a committee of three faculty members (selected in consultation with the student's advisor based on their expertise in the topic area) and chaired by the student's advisor(s). It is preferred that at least two members be faculty in the Biological and Health Psychology Program, with at least one of these having a primary (i.e., tenured or tenure-stream) appointment in the Psychology Department. Students should receive approval of their proposed thesis committee from the Program Chair before scheduling their first meeting with the group.

Master's Proposal: The research plan is approved at a proposal meeting, after which the student conducts the proposed research and data analysis. **Format:** The master's thesis proposal should be no longer than 25 pages double-spaced (excluding references, tables, and figures; 1" margins, 12-point font). The proposal should include the following sections: Specific Aims (no more than 2 double-spaced pages), Background and Significance, Research Design and Methods, Expected Outcomes and Implications, and Future Directions. The written proposal, after it has been approved by the student's advisor(s), should be circulated to the committee members at least one week prior to the proposal meeting. Master's thesis proposal meetings are typically scheduled for 2 hours. It is customary for the student to present a brief overview (approximately 15 minutes) of their proposal prior to responding to questions. Following successful defense of the proposal and approval of any required revisions, the student should contact the Graduate Administrator to have the Master's Thesis Proposal Form signed by the committee and filed. An approved proposal is required before beginning the thesis research.

Master's Defense: On completion of the thesis document, the student presents and defends the thesis at an oral examination. The final Master's thesis should be in journal article format (APA guidelines) and should be no more than 35 pages (excluding references and tables, 1" margins, 12pt font, double spaced). The final thesis should be submitted for publication with minimal revisions. The student will present the thesis to the committee at an oral defense meeting. Master's defense meetings are typically scheduled for 2 hours. It is customary for the student to present a brief overview (approximately 15 minutes) of the study prior to responding to questions. Following a successful defense and approval of any required revisions, the student should notify the Graduate Administrator to have the Report on Examinations for Master's Defense signed by the committee and filed.

Students will have two chances to pass the Master's requirement. If the defense is not passed initially, the committee may recommend changes and schedule a second meeting within one month. If the Thesis Committee does not approve the second defense, the Program faculty will make the final decision, based on the Master's Thesis and other performance, concerning the student's status in the program.

M.S Degree: To receive a Master's degree (optional) students must successfully defend their Master's thesis and earn at least 30 credits. They will need to submit a formatted Electronic Thesis to the Office of Graduate Studies and apply for graduation before the M.S can be awarded.

Preliminary Evaluation of Eligibility for the PhD: While the Psychology Department does not admit students into a distinct Master's Degree program, students are not automatically eligible to pursue the PhD degree following completion of the Masters. Rather, the Biological and Health Psychology Program will conduct a formal Preliminary Evaluation of each student after completion of the Master's Thesis,

with the aim of determining whether the student should be allowed to continue their studies toward the Ph.D. Successful completion of earlier requirements does not guarantee that the student will be permitted to continue, as the faculty will consider other factors as well (such as grades, successful and timely completion of milestones, positive annual evaluations, and demonstrated ability to function in a manner that is consistent with ethical and professional expectations) in making a determination.

The Preliminary Evaluation is conducted by the Program Chair and faculty after the successful defense of a Master's Thesis, but before the student is permitted to take the Specialty Examination. If the faculty concludes that the student is not eligible for further study, they will be terminated from the program at that point. If the decision is positive, the student will be permitted to take the Specialty Examination.

For students enrolled in cross-disciplinary training programs, this evaluation is conducted separately by each program. If the student is passed by the Biological and Health Psychology Program faculty, but not by faculty of the other program, a decision will be made as to whether they may continue towards the doctorate in the Biological and Health Psychology Program alone. However, if a student does not pass the Biological and Health Psychology Program's preliminary evaluation, they will be terminated from the Cross-disciplinary training program.

2. SPECIALTY EXAMINATION (COMPREHENSIVE PAPER)

As a Ph.D. requirement, all students must pass a Comprehensive Paper Examination. The Comprehensive Paper Examination consists of a review paper and an oral defense. To be eligible to write the Comprehensive Paper, students must have completed the program's core courses and the Master's thesis. Students cannot form a dissertation committee until the Comprehensive Paper is successfully defended.

The Specialty Examination has two major purposes: One is to enable the faculty to evaluate the student's mastery of a specialized topic and preparedness for the dissertation. Students will have acquired a general knowledge of various health psychology subjects through the prior program of core courses and research seminars. However, they also need to demonstrate their mastery of a specific set of topics within the general domain of health psychology. That mastery implies an in-depth knowledge of a particular research literature and the problems associated with it. Thus, passing the Specialty Examination demonstrates that the student knows the theories and research methods that have developed around a set of related problems and can articulate the issues that are central to these problems.

The second major purpose of the Specialty Examination is to provide the student with a specific training experience. Students need experiences that exemplify the kind of sustained, elective, problem-oriented scholarship that is consistent with their professional development goals. Writing a paper critically reviewing the research on a particular topic can serve this purpose and provide background for the dissertation. Thus, the basic format for the Specialty Examination is a scholarly paper written on the student's specialty interests. The paper may be envisioned as a review article of the kind published in the Psychological Bulletin or as a grant proposal that would be submitted to a funding agency.

In either case, the paper should contain a critical review of an area of research, where such review does not currently exist in the published literature. In reviewing that research, the paper should aim to be integrative (more than just a description of a field) and should comment on the unsolved problems and

methodological issues that have characterized work within the area. Furthermore, the paper should propose various modes of approach in studying those problems (as in a Psychological Bulletin paper) or a particular program of research, e.g., a set of experiments that can solve those problems (as in a grant proposal). Meta-analytic approaches will often be relevant but are not required. Although it may be helpful, consultation with University Librarians concerning meta-analytic methods is not required and should be considered carefully in consultation with one's advisor to avoid expanding the scope of the review beyond the requirements of the comprehensive paper examination. There are disciplinary differences in terminology between psychology and library science. Specifically, library science often defines a "systematic review" very rigorously, whereas a comprehensive paper would be a "literature review or scoping review" using their terms.

Comprehensive Examination Committee: The specialty paper committee is composed of at least four faculty members and is chaired by the student's academic advisor. At least two members of the specialty paper committee must be formally affiliated with the Biological and Health Psychology program, and at least two must have their primary appointment in the Department of Psychology. One committee member may be a faculty member at another university, who could participate in proposal and defense meetings remotely. Exceptions require permission of the Program. Committee membership must be approved by the Biological and Health Psychology Chair. After identifying potential committee members in consultation with their advisor(s), the student sends a list of the proposed committee members to the Biological and Health Program Chair for approval. After receiving approval of the program, a proposal meeting should be scheduled as soon as possible.

Comprehensive Examination Proposal: The proposal for the Comprehensive Paper should be developed in consultation with and approved by a student's faculty advisor(s). The proposal can be no longer than 8 double-spaced pages including references and should include as part of the text the central question of the paper and the review and integrative strategy that will be used to address it. Proposals should also include as accurate an estimate as possible of the number of articles that will need to be screened and the number to be included in the review. Generally, the number of articles to be included in the review should range from 20 to 200, depending on the topic. Screening and summarization of the articles should take no more than three of the six months permitted, to allow sufficient time to evaluate the evidence, draw appropriate inferences, and propose future directions. The proposal should be structured to include text (2-3 pages), an outline (2-3 pages), and a brief, selected reference list (1 page). Proposals over the page limit will be returned to the student.

After being approved by the advisor, the written proposal should be circulated to the committee members at least one week prior to the proposal meeting. Comprehensive paper proposal meetings are typically scheduled for 2 hours. It is customary for the student to present a brief overview (approximately 15 minutes) of their proposal or defense prior to responding to questions. After the meeting or approved revisions, contact the Graduate Administrator to have the Comprehensive Paper Proposal Form signed by the committee and filed.

Comprehensive Examination Paper: After the proposal is approved by the committee, students should work independently on the paper. Discussion with faculty advisors about the Specialty Paper is encouraged, but written drafts should not be exchanged. Substantial deviations from the original approved outline based on a more complete literature review should be discussed with the faculty advisor(s) and committee (e.g., by email). Discussion with other students is also encouraged, but written

drafts should not be circulated. The page limit for the Specialty Paper is 40 pages of text (double-spaced, 1 in. margins, 12 pt font), excluding references and tables.

Comprehensive Examination Defense: The completed paper must be distributed to all members of the specialty paper committee at least one week before the oral defense. Oral defense meetings are typically scheduled for 2 hours and should be attended by all committee members. It is customary for the student to present a brief overview (approximately 15 minutes) of their paper prior to responding to questions. Based on both the written paper and the oral defense, the comprehensive paper committee will decide among three grade options: fail, pass, or pass with honors. Students will have two chances to pass the requirement. If the defense is not passed initially, the committee may recommend changes and, if necessary, schedule a second meeting to be held within two months. After successful completion of the requirement (including any revisions), the Department Graduate Administrator will circulate the "Report of Examinations for the Doctoral Degree" card to committee members to be signed and filed. Following any needed revisions, a copy of the final specialty paper should be provided to the Graduate Administrator for archiving. If the specialty paper committee does not approve the second defense, the program faculty will make the final decision, based on the Specialty Examination and other performance, concerning the student's status in the program. Even if the Comprehensive Paper is passed, the Clinical Program faculty may terminate the student from the Program based on other performance.

Timeline: The Comprehensive Paper proposal meeting must be held after the defense of the Master's thesis. Once the proposal has been approved, the student has six months to complete the paper. See section on "Satisfactory and Timely Degree Progress" in the [Department Graduate Student Handbook](#).

The Comprehensive Examination in other programs in the Department serves much the same goals of scholarship, but may differ in their procedural details. Students are responsible for ensuring that they are meeting the requirements of each of the programs in which they are enrolled, or that any compromises necessitated by fulfilling requirements of more than one program are appropriately approved prior to the examination defense.

3. DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Upon passing the Specialty Exam and with the approval of the Biological and Health Psychology Program, the student can proceed with their doctoral dissertation. The doctoral dissertation is meant to be a scholarly document reporting on an empirical contribution to the knowledge base in the student's area of expertise. It should be of publishable quality. For the dissertation, students are expected a) to play a significant role in the development of an important question or set of questions in their selected area of research; b) to be actively involved in the process of designing a study, collecting data, and/or developing measurement/analytic procedures to address the question(s). Under most circumstances, data collection will be designed specifically for the dissertation project, but it is understood that time and monetary constraints frequently do not permit students to plan dissertations of a scope that could meaningfully address questions that are at the forefront of the student's field of interest. In such cases, use of pre-existing data from large scale or longitudinal studies may be appropriate. When students use data from a pre-existing data set, they are still expected to play an independent role in formulating the questions (e.g., the hypotheses drawn from the advisor's grant application do not constitute an appropriate dissertation topic), and in designing or facilitating new measurement or analytic procedures

appropriate to the topic (e.g., the project must involve more than a simple data analysis involving existing variables). Dissertation candidates have an added responsibility in undertaking a study involving existing data, as they must demonstrate to the committee that their ability to address the question of interest is not compromised by using available data, as opposed to using a de novo data collection.

Because candidates for research positions will be evaluated in terms of their projected ability to develop a laboratory and to design new projects, it behooves them to move beyond involvement with pre-existing data sets at some point in their graduate career. Faculty advisors are encouraged to create opportunities for trainees to design and carry out novel studies during their graduate training (if not during the dissertation) and work with existing data sets. In some cases, this may involve collaboration with other faculty and research laboratories affiliated with the program. Toward this end, all students are encouraged to develop experience in a) writing grant and IRB (Institutional Review Board) proposals, b) collecting data or conducting relevant measurements or assays that reflect the current state of the art, c) developing new measures, and d) involvement in all stages of a project from start to finish if feasible. As part of all research experiences during graduate training, of course, students are also strongly encouraged to present and to publish their work.

Committee: The dissertation committee consists of at least five faculty chaired by the student's major advisor(s), who must be a core or affiliated member of the Biological and Health Psychology Program. The committee must include at least two members of the Biological and Health Psychology faculty (one may be the advisor and committee chair), with at least one of the two Program faculty having a primary (i.e., tenured or tenure-stream) academic appointment in the Psychology Department. At least three committee members must have primary appointments in the Department of Psychology and be members of the Graduate Faculty (<https://www.gradstudies.pitt.edu/graduate-faculty-dashboard>). The committee must also include at least one member of the Graduate Faculty from another department. The Departmental Graduate Administrator can assist with additional committee requirements from the Dean's office. Committee membership must be approved by the Program and the Graduate Administrator to assure that all member requirements are met.

Dissertation Proposal: The dissertation proposal must be presented for approval to the student's dissertation committee before they begin to conduct the research. Following advisor approval, the written proposal should be circulated to the committee members at least one week prior to the proposal meeting. The proposal meeting is typically scheduled for 2 hours. It is customary for the student to present a brief overview (approximately 15 minutes) of their proposal prior to responding to questions. A proposal may be approved, disapproved, or major or minor revision may be requested. In the case of major revision, a second meeting may be necessary before approval is granted. If a proposal is not approved, the student will be permitted to write and defend a new proposal. Upon approving the proposal, the committee recommends to the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies that the student be admitted to candidacy. After final approval of the proposal (including any revisions), the Department Graduate Administrator will circulate the Application for Admission to Candidacy for Doctoral Degree form to members of the committee for signing. An approved dissertation proposal is required before beginning the dissertation research.

Admission to Doctoral Candidacy: Formal admission to Doctoral candidacy does not actually occur until the student has a successful dissertation proposal meeting and the Application for Admission to Candidacy for Doctoral Degree form is signed and processed. This form must be signed and processed at

least eight months before the final oral defense. The Office of Graduate Studies considers the date of the student's admission to candidacy as the date on which it is approved, not the date on which the meeting was held. Once admitted to candidacy, it is required that students meet with their dissertation committee at least annually to assess progress, discuss objectives for the following year, and discuss a timetable for completing degree requirements. A record of each committee meeting must be maintained in the student's departmental file. The student is responsible for ensuring these meetings are held and that notes from them are placed in the student's departmental file.

Dissertation Defense: After completion of data collection, analysis, and write-up, the dissertation must be defended before the committee at an oral examination. The Department Graduate Administrator should be notified at least one month before the dissertation defense date so that it can be publicized to the Department and University community. After being approved by the advisor, the dissertation should be circulated to committee members at least one week in advance of the defense meeting. The dissertation meeting is typically scheduled for 2 hours. Dissertation defenses should take place in the Martin Colloquium Room in Sennott Square when possible, and all departmental faculty and students are invited and encouraged to attend. Students will make a formal presentation (no more than 30 minutes) of their dissertation aimed at those who have not read the written document, followed by a general question period (no more than 15 minutes). Following this, non-committee members will be excused and questions from committee members will be taken. Again, major or minor revisions may be requested by the committee, or the dissertation may be approved, or in rare cases, disapproved. In most cases, at least minor revisions will be required before the degree is granted. After successful completion of the defense (including any revisions), contact the Graduate Administrator to have the "Report of Examinations for the Doctoral Degree" form signed by the committee and filed.

Ph.D. Degree: To receive a PhD, students must successfully defend their dissertation and all department and program-level requirements. They will need to submit a formatted Electronic Thesis to the Office of Graduate Studies and apply for graduation before the Ph.D can be awarded.

See the [Departmental Student Handbook](#) for guidelines and procedures for Timely Progress for Milestones and a chart of Green/Yellow/Red Zone deadline requirements and consequences.

ANNUAL STUDENT EVALUATION

At the beginning of each summer, students will be asked to provide a report to the Graduate Administrator describing their accomplishments during the year. About the same time, students will meet with their advising committees to review progress, and an annual program faculty meeting will be held to update the program on each student. Continued growth and development into an independent scientist will be the Program's main basis for evaluation.

Also, at the beginning of each summer, and in conjunction with these events, students will be sent a standardized letter by the Director of Graduate Studies documenting progress through the program milestones, with recommended milestone goals for the coming year. Shortly thereafter, students will receive a more extensive annual letter of evaluation from the Program Chair, recognizing specific accomplishments of the student, identifying any potential problems, and recommending goals and/or potential remedies, if relevant, for the following year. This annual evaluation letter is based on the

student's annual report, with accomplishments and challenges identified in student discussions with the student's advising committee and in the program faculty meeting described above. Together, these two letters are designed to provide clear feedback to students, to facilitate communication between students, their advisors, and the program, to identify problems early so that they can be remedied, and to assist with successful and timely completion of each student's training and professional goals.

PROGRAM AND DEPARTMENTAL SERVICE

Students are expected to be active members of our community, for example, by helping prospective students learn about the program during Admissions Weekend, by assisting undergraduates in their projects in the lab, by offering constructive input about training policies and procedures, and by assisting in program and department governance. Joining a committee and/or serving as a student representative not only helps influence and better our community, but such roles allow students to build valuable experience in collaborating toward shared goals, navigating the interests of multiple stakeholders, and helping develop and implement policies that promote both excellence and equity. Such experiences may offer students insight into the functioning of academic departments, and, as such, they may be particularly valuable for students who anticipate future employment in an academic setting.

Research Experience/Professionalization

The major goal of the Program in Biological and Health Psychology is to train research scientists. To this end, students will be expected to enter the laboratory of participating faculty at the beginning of their first year and become involved in an ongoing research project. Since the Program is highly interdisciplinary and collaborative in its orientation and makeup, students are expected to develop these perspectives once a firm foundation in basic research methodology and an area of specialization have been established. Because successful research careers require more than laboratory skills, students are expected to give frequent program presentations (e.g., proseminar presentations of their research progress, journal club presentations), and are encouraged to submit papers to academic journals, to attend (and present at) professional meetings, and to submit fellowship applications as ways of developing communication and professional socialization skills. Students should present a first-authored poster or talk at a national forum at least every other year and their initial first-authored publication before the end of their third year.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

All graduate students in the Department of Psychology are expected to uphold the standards of ethical behavior, academic and research integrity, and professional conduct as instantiated in the published policies of the University of Pittsburgh, the current Ethical Principles of Psychologists, the Code of Conduct and related policies of the American Psychological Association and policies of the federal Office for Human Research Protection.

In cases of suspected infraction of these policies, established university procedures will be followed. See the [Departmental Student Handbook](#), Academic Integrity Violations section for details.

10/29/2025