

**Vanderbilt University  
PhD Program in Health Policy  
& Health Services Research**

**Student Handbook  
2025-2026**

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## Introduction

Welcome to the Vanderbilt PhD Program in Health Policy & Health Services Research! We hope this handbook will be a valuable resource during your graduate studies.

This handbook is designed to supplement the *Vanderbilt University Graduate School Catalog* (<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/catalogs/kuali/graduate-23-24.php#/home>) and the *Vanderbilt University Student Handbook* ([http://www.vanderbilt.edu/student\\_handbook/](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/student_handbook/)). Students are expected to familiarize themselves with the information contained in each of these resources.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information presented in the handbook is accurate and complete. However, students should be aware that errors and omissions do sometimes occur. Direct communications from the program office supersede the content of this handbook.

## Overview of the Vanderbilt PhD Program in Health Policy & Health Services Research

The PhD Program in Health Policy & Health Services Research develops students' expertise in using interdisciplinary methods to address a wide range of health policy and health service challenges in the United States. The curriculum features classroom, computing, and experience-based teaching. The program integrates training in health policy, economics, biostatistics, informatics, and epidemiology. At the completion of the program, graduates will be prepared to work in elite academic, private sector, or governmental settings as part of multidisciplinary teams. Our goal is to train critical thinkers prepared to make fundamental advances using rigorous and cutting-edge approaches to research. Graduates will be able to contribute across a wide spectrum of content areas and research foci.

### Program Overview

The PhD Program in Health Policy & Health Services Research has the following requirements:

- Two years of foundational coursework
- Written and oral comprehensive exam during the summer following the two years of coursework
- Dissertation proposal development and oral defense
- Dissertation based on original research and an oral defense of the completed work

| Program Timeline       |                                                                                      |                                                                                 |                                                               |                                                                                 |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                        | Year 1                                                                               | Year 2                                                                          | Year 3                                                        | Year 4                                                                          |
| Research Assistantship | 15-20 hours/week                                                                     | 15-20 hours/week                                                                | 15-20 hours/week                                              | 15-20 hours/week                                                                |
| Coursework             | 12-15 credits/semester                                                               | 12-15 credits/semester                                                          | 3-4 credits/semester                                          | 3-4 credits/semester                                                            |
| Dissertation           | Working to gain background knowledge on dissertation topic area and dataset obtained |                                                                                 | Dissertation proposal completed and defended                  | Dissertation completed (monograph or 3-paper version)                           |
| Progress Assessment    | Annual IDP with mentor                                                               | Annual IDP with mentor; annual intradepartmental review (IDR)                   | Annual IDP with mentor; annual intradepartmental review (IDR) | Annual IDP with mentor; annual intradepartmental review (IDR)                   |
| Examinations           |                                                                                      | Qualifying/Comprehensive Exam (usually in June) dissertation committee selected | Dissertation Proposal Defense student becomes PhD candidate   | Final Dissertation Defense Oral Presentation of Dissertation (by end of year 4) |

## Training for the Profession

Skills to be developed through doctoral training include:

*Critical review.* Students will be able to assess published literature, proposals, and gray literature to determine the appropriateness of research questions and hypotheses; study design and analytic approach; and assertions made and their implications. Students will also be able to apply historical context from both published literature and relevant policies to their work and the work of others.

*Study design.* Students will be adept at identifying and addressing gaps in knowledge and advancing the field's current understanding of research topics and questions. Students will possess the skills to identify relevant data sources and apply various research designs to 'real world' questions and address issues such as sample size, power, data collection logistics, and human subject considerations. Additionally, students will be able to apply these differing approaches to health policy questions and understand their research and policy implications.

*Analysis.* Students will gain extensive hands-on research experience and will learn to accurately interpret the results and explain the limitations of analytic methods used. They will gain skills to understand various sources and types of data, and their respective uses and limitations. Students will become proficient in causal inference methods and will be able to conduct interrupted time series, difference-in-differences, and other regression modeling strategies. Additionally, students will be encouraged to develop more advanced methodology skills through courses in biostatistics, econometrics, epidemiology, or related disciplines, dependent on research interest.

*Content-area expertise.* Students in the Health Policy & Health Services Research PhD program will develop a deep understanding of how policies affect 1) population health; 2) the organization, financing, and delivery of health services; and 3) consumer behavior. They will understand the organizations, agencies, and structures that develop and implement health policy, and understand

previous literature that has examined various policy changes historically.

*Proposal development.* Upon graduation, students will have the ability to identify, develop, and submit relevant research and grant proposals to secure external funding. Students will gain experience writing proposals for external funders and will understand the stylistic and content differences for grants and contracts to the federal government and grants to foundations.

*Professional development.* Students in the Health Policy & Health Services Research PhD program will gain experience in reporting and presenting their research in multiple formats, including abstracts, papers, posters, and presentations. Students will also gain skills in translating their work into products for outreach aimed at the public, media, and policymakers. Students will gain experience leading and managing research projects and working on multidisciplinary teams.

### **Advising & Mentoring**

The PhD Program Director is responsible for overseeing all aspects of the doctoral program, with support from the Program Manager and the help of the PhD Advisory Committee. The PhD Program Director and assigned academic advisors are responsible for monitoring the progress of each student throughout their training. The PhD Program Director is responsible for outlining program requirements and serves as an advocate and resource for students.

The PhD Program Advisory Committee is composed of Health Policy faculty and advises the PhD Program Director on topics pertinent to student training, including recommendations related to coursework and program requirements, and monitoring student progress, performance, and welfare. The PhD Advisory Committee, along with the PhD Program Director and the student's assigned advisor, will assess each student's performance annually to ensure adequate student progression during an annual intradepartmental review (IDR) meeting.

The IDR is an opportunity to examine the student's course work and ensure that their remaining semesters are used to appropriately prepare them for graduation. The committee reviews the student's curriculum vitae (CV), course performance and progress towards program completion. They also ensure that the student has met or has a plan to meet all requirements of the doctorate, including teaching, ethics and writing training. The IDR will occur at the end of the Spring semester each year. Advisors will work with their students to compile the updated CV and an update on progress towards program completion, which the advisor will present to the PhD Advisory Committee.

Each student will be assigned a primary PhD Advisor (typically a primary member of the Health Policy Faculty) who will mentor the student in all aspects of their graduate education. The PhD Advisor will advise students regarding course selection and research project participation to help the student to develop the skills necessary to best meet their individual career goals and interests. The Advisor will also assist the PhD student in establishing an Individual Development Plan (described under program requirements) in the first semester of the program and will review progress towards the IDP goals each year. It is expected that the PhD student and their assigned Advisor will meet regularly throughout the graduate training program experience. Students can change advisors if desired, as long as the student has obtained agreement from the new advisor and the PhD Program Director.

### **PhD Program Leadership**

The following faculty and staff are responsible for management and administration of the program:

**PhD Program Director/Director of Graduate Studies** - Stacie Dusetzina, PhD  
**Senior Program Manager** – Melissa Krasnove, MEd

### **PhD Program Office**

Administrative offices for the PhD Program in Health Policy are located at:

Doctoral Program in Health Policy & Health Services Research  
Institute for Medicine and Public Health  
Vanderbilt University Medical Center  
2525 West End Avenue, 12<sup>th</sup> Floor, suite 1250  
Nashville, TN 37203-1738  
<https://www.vumc.org/health-policy/phd-program>

### **Vanderbilt University Graduate School**

The PhD Program in Health Policy & Health Services Research is an academic program of the Vanderbilt University Graduate School and is governed by the academic requirements established by the GraduateSchool located at:

117 Alumni Hall  
2205 West End Avenue  
Nashville, TN 37240  
Telephone: (615) 343-2727  
Fax: (615) 343-9936  
<http://gradschool.vanderbilt.edu/>

Vanderbilt University is committed to principles of equal opportunity. The university does not discriminate against individuals on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, color, national or ethnic origin, socioeconomic background, or disability.

## Progress Towards the Degree: Curriculum

Students must complete 72 credit hours, including 24 hours in formal, didactic course and seminar work taken for course credit. Students may take relevant courses for which they meet the prerequisites, in any Vanderbilt department. Students are expected to complete 56-60 credits during their first 4 semesters (12-15 hours per semester). Below we provide an example course schedule, which can be modified to fit individual student interests.

### Required Courses

EPID 8311\* Epidemiologic Theory and Methods I  
 LPO 8800\* Statistical Methods in Education Research  
 LPO 8851\* Regression Analysis  
 LPO 8852\* Regression Analysis II  
 HPOL 8225 Health Policy Research Seminar  
 HPOL 8520 Health Policy I (+ lab [HPOL 8521])  
 HPOL 8530 Health Policy II (+lab [HPOL 8531])  
 HPOL 8525 Health Economics (+lab [HPOL 8526])  
 HPOL 8538 Policy and Program Evaluation  
 HPOL 8539 Advanced Policy and Program Evaluation  
 HPOL 8540 Administrative Data Research  
 HPOL 8550 Decision Analysis I  
 HPOL 8995 Proposal Writing  
 HPOL 8999 Non-Candidate Research  
 HPOL 9999 PhD Dissertation Research  
 PUBH 5509\* Biostatistics II (PUBH 5502 or BIOS 6311/6311L also accepted)  
 \* Or other course approved by the DGS

### Recommended Courses

PUBH 5522 Qualitative Health Research Methods I  
 LPO 7810 Causal Inference  
 ECON 9540 Applied Microeconomics Research Designs & Methods  
 ECON9480 Health Economics  
 HPOL 8551 Decision Analysis II

### Sample Program of Study

| First Semester                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Second Semester                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Total Credits   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| <b>First Year</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                 |
| Epidemiology I – EPID 8311 (4)<br>Statistical Methods in Edu Research – LPO 8800 (3)<br>Health Policy I – HPOL 8520 & 8521 (3)<br>Health Policy Research Seminar – HPOL 8225 (1)<br>Research Hours – HPOL 8999 (0)<br>Electives (4) | Regression Analysis – LPO 8851 (3)<br>Policy and Program Evaluation – HPOL 8538 (3)<br>Health Econ – HPOL 8525 & 8526 (3)<br>Health Policy Research Seminar – HPOL 8225 (1)<br>Research Hours – HPOL 8999 (0)<br>Electives (5) |                 |
| <b>Credits: 15</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>Credits: 15</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>Year: 30</b> |
| <b>Second Year</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                 |
| Regression Analysis II – LPO 8852 (3)<br>Advanced Policy & Program Evaluation – HPOL 8539 (2)<br>Health Policy Seminar – HPOL 8225 (1)<br>Decision Analysis – HPOL 8550 (3)<br>Research Hours – HPOL 8999 (0)<br>Electives (6)      | Administrative Data Research – HPOL 8540 (3)<br>Health Policy II – HPOL 8530 & 8531(3)<br>Health Policy Seminar – HPOL 8225 (1)<br>Biostatistics II – PUBH 5509 (4)<br>Research Hours – HPOL 8999 (0)<br>Electives (4)         |                 |
| <b>Credits: 15</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>Credits: 15</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>Year: 30</b> |
| <i>Summer after Second Year - [Comprehensive Exam]</i>                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                 |
| <b>Third Year</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                 |

|                                                                                                 |                                                                    |                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Proposal Writing – HPOL 8995 (3)<br>Research Hours – HPOL 8999 (4)<br>Health Policy Seminar (1) | Dissertation – HPOL 9999 (4)<br>Health Policy Research Seminar (1) |                 |
| <b>Credits: 7</b>                                                                               | <b>Credits: 5</b>                                                  | <b>Year: 12</b> |
| <i>Fall of Second Year - [Proposal Defense - Qualifying Exam]</i>                               |                                                                    |                 |
| <b>Fourth Year</b>                                                                              |                                                                    |                 |
| Dissertation – HPOL 9999 (0)                                                                    | Dissertation - HPOL 9999 (0)                                       |                 |
| <b>Credits: 0</b>                                                                               | <b>Credits: 0</b>                                                  | <b>Year: 0</b>  |
| <b>Program Total: 72</b>                                                                        |                                                                    |                 |

### Modify Required Coursework

We have included a suggested program of study. However, there may be situations in which a student wishes to modify the required coursework to better fit their educational needs and schedules. For example, students may wish to pursue a methods sequence in epidemiology or biostatistics instead of through the leadership, policy and organizations track or they may want to replace a required core course with an alternative course covering similar content. Though we expect the above sequence to work for most students, exceptions to the courses above can be approved by the student's advisor and the PhD Program Director.

### Proposal Writing

Students should begin developing their dissertation aims with committee input by summer of their second year with the goal of taking the proposal writing class in the fall of their third year. Students who have well developed aims in advance of this timeline may take proposal writing in an earlier semester with their faculty mentor's approval. Often enrollment aligns with when a student plans to submit a grant application. Because this course requires students to work closely with their primary advisor(s) during the dissertation development phase and to present their work in the Department-wide seminar, it is critical for students to **notify their faculty advisors and the PhD Program Director and Administrator regarding their intent to take proposal writing** as soon as the student registers for the course. We expect most students to enroll in this course in the fall of their third year, after completing comprehensive exams.

"The Grant Application Writers Workbook" is required for this course and provided by the program. <https://www.grantcentral.com/workbooks/national-institutes-of-health/> This workbook provides a step-by-step guide to grant writing, including R36 dissertation grants. **Please notify the PhD program administrator in advance of the class start to have them order a copy of this text for you.**

### Research Hours

Students should register for research hours each semester. Typically, students will register for 0 hours, which is considered full time student status. The Program Manager will confirm the number of hours to register with students prior to each semester. Students should register for HPOL 8999 Non-candidate Research prior to proposal defense (qualifying exam). After passing the qualifying exam students should register for HPOL 9999 Dissertation Research.

### Course Descriptions

Recommended course descriptions can be found online: [Your Enrollment Services \(YES\)](#)  
The complete graduate school course catalog is available online.

## **Program Requirements**

### **Residence and Course Work**

The PhD Program in Health Policy & Health Services Research is a residential program. All students working full time toward the PhD must register each semester. When the required 72 hours of course work has been completed, registration for dissertation research without hourly credit applies; this reflects full-time effort on research and confers full-time student status.

### **Responsible Conduct of Research and Human Research Protections Training**

In accordance with Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board (IRB) policy, all students must complete either the human subjects protections or RCT for social sciences training using the online Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Course. Instructions can be found at [http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/irb/training/citi\\_instructions.php](http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/irb/training/citi_instructions.php). This training should be completed prior to beginning courses and must be completed before engaging in research-related activities and is required annually. Students must also complete the Graduate School's discussion based Responsible Conduct of Research requirement offered through the BRET office in May of the first year of study.

### **Individual Development Plan**

An IDP is a tool to identify professional goals, reflect on accomplishments, assess skills relative to career goals, and plan actions to achieve short- and long-term career objectives. An IDP can also facilitate communication between mentors and trainees. At the start of each year in the program, students should fill out the IDP to initiate a conversation with your advisor about your goals and aspirations for the upcoming year. Returning students may use their prior year IDP as a starting point. Students initiate the IDP process by creating a first draft of answers to this document, sending it to their advisor for review then discussion, editing as necessary, then signing the document with their advisor. Students should return a signed version to the PhD Program Director during the first few weeks of the semester.

### **Comprehensive Examination**

All students will take a comprehensive exam following completion of their second year of the doctoral program, after they have completed all didactic coursework. The purpose of this exam is to test the student's knowledge of health policy and to determine whether the student possesses critical and analytic skills needed for a scholarly career. The comprehensive exam will include a short-answer in-class exam, an in-class essay, and a brief oral exam. These components will be administered over the course of one week in May following the student's second year in the program. The exam is meant to assess the student's ability to critically evaluate health policy research studies, including their design, methods, policy relevance, and interpretation of study findings.

The possible outcomes of the comprehensive exam are: pass; conditional pass, where the student will have to meet specific conditions established by the committee with approval of the PhD Program Director; and fail. A grade of "Pass" indicates that the student's answers demonstrate an adequate and complete understanding of the competencies being evaluated, with no evidence of substantial weaknesses. A grade of "Conditional Pass" on a module indicates that the student's answers demonstrate an adequate understanding of the competencies evaluated, but that some answers are weak or deficient in a specific area. Students who receive a "Conditional Pass" on any component of the comprehensive exam must meet with the faculty member(s) responsible for evaluating the module(s) after receiving their grade. Remedial work will be provided to the student, and the student

must complete the remedial work within an established timeline provided by the overseeing faculty. If the remedial work is not performed in a satisfactory manner, or within the time prescribed, the grade on this exam module will convert to a "Fail". Students who receive a failing grade on the comprehensive exams must meet with the faculty member(s) responsible for evaluating the module(s) after receiving their grade, along with the Director of Graduate Studies and their academic advisor in order to determine appropriate steps for remediation and will be required to re-take the qualifying exam before moving forward in the program. Students who are unable to complete the comprehensive exam satisfactorily after a second attempt will be dismissed from the PhD program and granted a non-thesis Master of Science degree in Health Policy & Health Services Research from the Graduate School.

### **Appoint Advisor Form**

Beginning in the third year of study, students should finalize their primary research mentor(s) selection by completing the Appoint Advisor Request in [YES](#).

### **Dissertation Committee**

After passing the comprehensive examination, students will select their dissertation committee with the guidance of their primary academic advisor. The dissertation committee will consist of a core PhD Program faculty member as Chair (typically, these faculty members will have either a primary or secondary Health Policy appointment and are likely to be the student's primary academic advisor), two other Health Policy faculty members, and a fourth committee member who is from another department or program. Students will submit their request to appoint a PhD committee to the graduate school through [YES](#) at least two weeks in advance of their dissertation proposal defense. Any variation of the committee makeup must be approved by the Graduate School. After a student selects dissertation committee members, the student should meet with his/her committee at least once a semester. Students should keep committee members informed of their progress with respect to all areas of the dissertation writing process: data collection/acquisition, theoretical background, methodology and statistical work (etc.). Students are expected to consult with members of the dissertation committee at frequent intervals throughout the process of his or her research.

In addition to providing guidance, support, and assistance to the candidate on their dissertation, the committee will provide advice to students about professional and career development. The dissertation committee will also administer the oral dissertation defense and determine whether the candidate has submitted an acceptable dissertation. The candidate is responsible for providing a written summary of all committee meetings to its members, who will then approve this summary.

### **Oral Proposal Defense - Doctoral Qualifying Examination**

The dissertation proposal is a written proposal that consists of a comprehensive literature review of the dissertation topic, the proposed research aims, data sources, analytic approach, and description of the papers to be written in the dissertation. The proposal should be prepared in the format of an R36 Dissertation Award Grant Application. The student will present the dissertation proposal and their committee will be allowed to ask questions pertaining to relevant substantive or methodological issues. The student will provide their committee with the written proposal at least three weeks in advance of the proposal defense, and the dissertation committee will provide written feedback at least one week in advance of the defense. The student will also file a request to schedule a qualifying examination with the graduate school through [YES](#) once the date of the proposal defense is known (note: the graduate school uses the terminology "qualifying examination" when describing the dissertation proposal defense). The student should obtain approval from the dissertation advisor

before scheduling dissertation committee meetings, sending the dissertation proposal out for review to the committee, sending the final dissertation manuscript to the committee, and prior to scheduling any defenses. The proposal defense will typically be completed by the end of the third year in the program. For substantial deviations from this timeline, students should seek permission from their dissertation chair and the Director of Graduate Studies.

The proposal defense committee will consist of the student's dissertation committee. The possible outcomes of the proposal defense are pass; conditional pass, where the student will have to meet specific conditions established by the committee with approval of the Director of Graduate Studies; and fail. In the case of failure, students will be given up to one semester to make the necessary changes and present a revised proposal defense to the committee. The committee, in collaboration with the Director of Graduate Studies, will determine the date of the second defense, including consideration of any mitigating circumstances that might influence its timing. If the student fails the second qualifying examination, they will be dismissed from the doctoral program.

The [qualifying examination results form](#), signed by the committee members and the Director of Graduate Studies, shall be forwarded to the Graduate School immediately after the examination. When the student has passed the qualifying examination, the Ph.D. committee shall recommend to the Graduate School that the student be admitted to candidacy for the degree. Satisfactory completion of the oral proposal defense (qualifying exam) will move the student to the dissertation phase, provided other academic performance standards are met.

### **The Doctoral Dissertation**

Candidates for the PhD in Health Policy & Health Services Research will submit a dissertation that substantially adds to or amends the current knowledge base in the field of health policy or health services research. Dissertations must adhere to requirements prescribed by the Graduate School in the Graduate School Bulletin.

Essential elements of the doctoral dissertation include: 1) critical review of existing literature; 2) clear explanation of the data sources and analytic approaches used; and 3) discussion of the implications of the research for policy and practice. Data sources for the dissertation will depend on a student's specific aims: both primary and secondary data sources are acceptable. The dissertation may comprise of three publishable papers or one major monograph, although it is expected that the latter option will rarely be used. The dissertation committee must agree that students' dissertation papers make an original contribution to the field of health policy and are of sufficient quality to merit publication. Although the general expectation is that at least one of the papers will have been submitted for publication before graduation, it is not required for any of the papers to be accepted for publication at the time of completion. All graduates of the Health Policy & Health Services Research PhD program also must provide an oral defense of their doctoral dissertation.

Candidates should create a schedule for the completion of their dissertation and submit it to their dissertation committee for review and input. Items on this schedule should include deadlines for completed drafts that allow adequate time for review and feedback from the dissertation committee. The candidate should submit a copy of the completed dissertation to the dissertation committee at least three weeks prior to the dissertation defense, after approval from the primary faculty advisor / dissertation chair. The committee reviews the dissertation and conducts the final examination.

## **Research Expectations**

Students are expected to engage in research throughout their time in the PhD program to build technical skills and expertise in research design, translation, and dissemination. Students may engage in research with their primary advisor, other members of the Health Policy faculty, and members of the broader Vanderbilt research community. Typically, students would engage in 15-20 hours of research per week as part of this role, though hours will likely vary with course demands.

We also encourage students to develop skills at presenting research projects locally and nationally as part of the training program. All students admitted to the program receive a 12-month stipend that supports their work as a research assistant within the Department. Students will receive their stipend each month, including the summer, unless they take on alternative employment (e.g., full-time paid summer internship). The stipend is provided through the Department, rather than through a specific advisor. This allows students to engage broadly in research projects in the Department and to develop projects that are specific to their skills and interests.

Although students receive full funding, we encourage students to seek opportunities to obtain funding through pre-doctoral training programs and through dissertation grants. These opportunities are important for developing skills and are a significant achievement for any graduate student. Students who receive such external funds or who are admitted to pre-doctoral training programs at Vanderbilt will receive a stipend equal in value to that of the standard stipend (e.g., if the award is lower than the current stipend, students will receive supplemental pay to bring them up to the current stipend amount).

## **Program Issued Laptop**

When able, the program supplies newly admitted PhD students with a laptop through Vanderbilt University for usage during their doctoral training. Laptops are intended to be gifted to students upon completion of the program. The Senior Program Manager will coordinate with the student and VUIT to remove Vanderbilt and VUMC owned software prior to termination. All important information should be saved in an alternate location prior to this start of this process.

## **Computer Usage for Research**

Students should consult with their primary research mentor regarding data access and computer usage. Some research programs prefer the use of VUMC-issued computers when accessing data sources. If a VUMC-issued device is required, the department will provide a computer separate from the program-issued device. Only research should be conducted on the VUMC-issued device if issued one.

## **Conference Attendance and Travel Policies**

Students are required to review BRET Office and university travel policies well in advance of any work-related travel: <https://medschool.vanderbilt.edu/bret/guidelines-for-student-travel/>.

Presentation of research findings is an important skill to develop as a graduate student and is an excellent opportunity for networking. The Department expects graduate students to identify opportunities to present their work over the course of their training. Students must discuss with and receive approval from their advisor(s) prior to submission of abstracts. Funds are currently available for students to attend one domestic conference per year. Students are generally expected to present work (poster or podium) when requesting travel funds for conference attendance from the PhD program budget.

Because travel funds are shared among all students, before requesting travel support from the PhD program, students presenting work related to funded research projects should ask the project's PI if there are resources available from the grant to help cover travel and meeting related costs. Students should also consider opportunities to minimize costs where possible (shared rooms; booking travel in advance, etc.). The Graduate School also makes some travel awards [available](#), with similar expectations regarding efforts to secure funding from project PIs before seeking shared travel funds.

To request funding support for conference attendance, students must provide their PI with an estimate of expected travel costs to include registration, accommodations, travel (airfare or mileage), food, and other incidentals via e-mail, copying the Senior Program Manager. The email should include a breakdown of funding sources (mentor funds, travel grant, PhD program funds).

Once approved, students are required to register their travel with the BRET Office using the [Intent to Travel REDCap](#) which serves to collect travel details, travel funds, and signatures of involved parties.

Students are required to purchase airfare through Vanderbilt University's (not VUMC's) [Concur portal](#), even when the funding source is VUMC. Airfare not purchased through Concur will not be reimbursed.

Students who need assistance paying travel costs upfront should complete an [Itinerary Proposal](#) and contact Aaron Howard ([aaron.w.howard@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:aaron.w.howard@vanderbilt.edu)) in the BRET Office.

All reimbursements for travel must be submitted within 60 days of travel and are processed through the University's [SkyVU \(Oracle\) system](#). Please contact the Senior Program Manager for instructions and/or assistance.

### **Teaching Experience**

Students in the Health Policy & Health Services Research doctoral program are encouraged to gain teaching experience as a teaching assistant or guest lecturer during their time in the doctoral program, although there is no formal teaching requirement for the program. Students will work with the Director of Graduate Studies and their primary faculty advisor to identify teaching opportunities. This PhD program strives to produce not only excellent scholars, but also excellent teachers and mentors who are prepared to teach methodology courses at the doctoral level.

## **Program Regulations**

### **Honor System**

All work submitted as a part of course requirements is presumed to be the product of the student submitting it unless credit is given by the student in the manner prescribed by the course instructor. Cheating, plagiarizing, or otherwise falsifying results of study are specifically prohibited under the Honor System. The system applies not only to examinations but also to written work and computer programs submitted to instructors.

The student, by registration, acknowledges the authority of the Graduate Honor Council. The university's Graduate Student Conduct Council has original jurisdiction in all cases of non-academic misconduct involving graduate and professional students. Students are expected to

become familiar with the *Rules Governing the Graduate Honor Council of Vanderbilt University*, available at the time of registration. It contains the constitution and bylaws of the Graduate Student Honor Council, Appellate Review Board, and related regulations. Detailed descriptions of Honor System violations and procedures are also available at [www.vanderbilt.edu/gradschool](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/gradschool).

### **Freedom of Expression**

At Vanderbilt, we have a long tradition of free expression, which is one of our core principles. We believe in bringing together people of differing viewpoints for a common purpose. Learn more about [how we practice](#) free expression at Vanderbilt and read [Vanderbilt's Freedom of Expression policy in the University Student Handbook](#).

### **Communication**

Much of the communication between students, faculty, and other offices and individuals on campus will be through e-mail. Each student is provided with a Vanderbilt e-mail account on enrollment, and this address is made available to faculty, staff, and other students. Frequently students have other e-mail accounts; however, the Vanderbilt account is the one that will be used for all school communications. It is imperative that students check e-mail regularly because e-mail is frequently used to communicate information. Students are held responsible for information disseminated via e-mail.

### **Registration**

The normal academic, full-time registration is 9 to 15 hours per semester (0- 9 in summer). Students registered for 9 or more didactic hours per semester (6+ in summer) are defined as full time. Those registered for 6–8 didactic hours (3-5 in summer) are half time, and those registered for less than 6 hours (<3 hours in summer) are part time. After completing the hourly requirements for the degree, full-time students register for PhD (8999, 9999) research without hourly credit to reflect full-time effort on research.

Each semester, students meet with their advisors to plan their schedules for the coming semester. All students must later complete official registration at the appropriate time using [YES](#) (Your Enrollment Services). All full-time graduate students, including those receiving scholarship, assistantship, fellowship, or traineeship support through the university, must register each fall and spring semester with no breaks in registration to remain in good standing.

Changes in registration may be made through YES during the change period (the first ten class days of the semester) with consent of the program. A student is not permitted to add or drop a course, change the number of hours in a variable-credit course, or change from audit to credit status after the end of the change period. A student may formally withdraw from a course after the end of the change period with the permission of the department, and a grade of *W* will be given. After the mid-point of the semester, a student is not permitted to withdraw from the course except under certain circumstances. Failing the course is not considered one of the circumstances. Courses in which there is a significant change in subject matter each semester (e.g., specialtopics courses) may be repeated for credit within limits noted in the course listings of this catalog.

### **Grading System**

The grading system in the Graduate School includes the letter grades *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, and *F*. A student will not be granted graduate credit for any course in which a grade less than *C* is received. Grades below *C* may be repeated once at the discretion of the course director and the program. In this situation, the more recent grade will be calculated in the final grade point average. The letter *I* may be used at the discretion of the instructor when the student is not able to complete required work in the normal time. The notation *W* is entered onto the transcript when a student withdraws from a course or from the Graduate School. A grade point average of 3.0 is required for graduation. The following scale reflects grade point values by letter grade.

| Letter Grade | Grade point value |
|--------------|-------------------|
| A+           | 4.0               |
| A            | 4.0               |
| A-           | 3.7               |
| B+           | 3.3               |
| B            | 3.0               |
| B-           | 2.7               |
| C+           | 2.3               |
| C            | 2.0               |
| C-           | 1.7               |
| F            | 0                 |

*Satisfactory / Low Pass / Unsatisfactory (S/LP/U)* grades are given for all research courses (8999 and 9999), regardless of the number of hours registered. The accumulation of three (3) *U* grades over the course of study will lead to dismissal from the program and the Graduate School.

Students receive grades in all courses except those approved for credit/non-credit, audits, and some seminars. An *I* that is not replaced by a letter grade within one year may be changed to the grade *F* at the discretion of the instructor; otherwise, the *I* may become permanent and remain on the transcript as such.

Certain courses approved by the graduate faculty for credit/non-credit or Pass/Fail count toward total hours. Courses that are strictly no-credit, however, do not count toward total hours or in calculating grade point average, although grades for such courses are entered on the student's record. With the instructor's permission, students are permitted to audit certain courses. Students who audit are expected to attend the course regularly. Students must be registered for regular courses in order to audit. Audits are listed on the student's transcript. Audits are limited to two per semester.

### **Grade Change Policy**

For a student enrolled in the Graduate School, a grade recorded in the University Registrar's Office may be changed only upon the written request of the instructor, endorsed by the appropriate official (usually an associate dean) within the school/college that offered the course, and then the approval of the associate dean of the Graduate School. An instructor's petition to change a grade must include a brief rationale for the change. Changing a recorded grade is a serious matter and, in general, petitions will be approved only upon certification that the original

grade was in error or, in the case of an Incomplete, that the outstanding requirement(s) have been completed. Request for exceptions to this policy should be directed to the associate dean of the Graduate School and will be considered on an individual basis; these may require additional certifications and approvals.

### **Transfer Credit**

Certain graduate-level courses are transferable toward the PhD. To transfer, the course cannot be a required course used to earn a degree in another program. Elective courses taken that are relevant to the scope and training of the PhD program can be transferred at the discretion of the Director of Graduate Studies. Students may transfer up to 9 credit hours from previous coursework in lieu of required elective hours. These requests should be submitted through the Senior Program Manager. Additional credit hours transferred will be in lieu of research hours.

The program will also consider on a case-by-case basis alternative options or waiving of the intro level biostatistics and epidemiology courses for those who have extensive prior academic or work experience in those areas. These requests should be submitted through the Senior Program Manager.

### **Academic Performance**

All students must maintain an overall B (3.0) grade point average (GPA) in their didactic coursework. Student progress will be monitored by the primary advisor, the PhD Program Director, and the PhD Advisory Committee via the annual intradepartmental review. Students are to meet with an advisor each semester to review progress. If a student's GPA drops below 3.0, they will be placed on academic probation. They will be expected to work with their advisor and the PhD Program Director to identify resources and to create a plan to ensure program progression. If the student's GPA is still below 3.0 after two more semesters, they may be dismissed from the program.

### **Student Grievances and Appeals**

Students who believe their academic performance has not been judged reasonably or fairly, or who believe their intellectual contributions have not been fairly acknowledged, should discuss their concerns with the PhD Program Director. If the student's concerns cannot be resolved at the program level, the student may then request a further review of the issues in question by the associate dean for graduate studies or similar official in their school dean's office. The student may appeal the outcome of the school-level review to the Graduate School.

### **Remote Work Policy**

We encourage all students to work on-site in the Department's dedicated space for PhD students. Face-to-face interaction with students, faculty, and staff can enhance graduate education and create opportunities for new collaboration and community building. However, students in the research and writing phase of their training may desire to work remotely part or full time. This decision lies with the research teams. Students should have a discussion with their research mentor to determine feasibility and policies surrounding this option. All data privacy policies regulated by the university and the medical center must be followed.

If a student works remotely out of state for more than one week, they must notify the program as it could affect the university's legal responsibility to tax their stipend. International Students should consult with ISSS regarding policies related to their visa.

### **Additional/Outside Work Policy**

The Health Policy & Health Services Research PhD Program follows guidance from the NIH regarding student requests for additional/outside work. Per NIH Notice Number: [NOT-OD-17-095](#): "Beyond the full-time training, NIH recognizes that Kirschstein-NRSA fellows and trainees may

engage in part-time employment incidental to their training. Fellows and trainees may spend on average, an additional 25% of their time (e.g., 10 hours per week) in part time research, teaching, or clinical employment, so long as those activities do not interfere with, or lengthen, the duration their NRSA training. (See [NIH Grants Policy Statement](#), Section 11.2.10.2 and 11.3.10.2, for more details.)”

### **Additional Work for the Department**

Students who would like to conduct additional work for the Department of Health Policy should reach out to the Director of Graduate Studies for potential opportunities. Research work should be project management in nature and must not be research already conducted for a project the student is sponsored on or their dissertation research. The department hourly rate is \$25/hour for research project management. Teaching Assistant opportunities are negotiated with individual instructors.

Once a student confirms a position, they should email the Senior Program Manager, copying the sponsoring faculty member, with projected dates of the work, numbers of hours per week or agreed upon TA rate, and funding source to support the work. Payments are processed through the BRET Office and included with students’ monthly stipend payments.

### **Vacation and Sick Day Guidelines**

The Health Policy & Health Services Research PhD program follows NIH guidelines for NRSA trainees and suggests students receive 15 days of sick leave and three weeks (15 calendar days) of vacation leave annually, in addition to [University Official Holidays](#). It is also suggested that sick leave accrue from year to year. However, the graduate student should determine with their mentor(s) the accumulation, accounting and use of these leaves. Sick leave may be used for medical conditions related to pregnancy and childbirth.

### **Leave of Absence**

The Graduate School requires continuous registration except for summer sessions. Students who want to interrupt their graduate study must petition the department, who on their behalf apply to the Graduate School for an authorized leave of absence. Leave of absence is granted for a maximum of one year. Those without authorized leave who do not register are dismissed from the Graduate School and are not considered students. If they want to resume graduate study at Vanderbilt, they must petition for reinstatement. Students who need to take a leave of absence are encouraged to speak with their Advisors and the PhD Program Director as early as possible to ensure that they can do so with as little disruption as possible to their training.

### **Parental Leave Guidelines**

Following childbirth or adoption of a child, the primary care giver (female or male) is allowed to take 60 calendar days (equivalent to 8 work weeks) of parental leave with full stipend and continued health insurance coverage. This is in line with the [NIH Grants Policy Statement](#). In the event of a graduate student wishing to extend the leave beyond this period she/he has the option of leave without pay but can continue health insurance benefits by arranging with HR to continue payment of the employee contribution. Graduate student health insurance is purchased in academic year increments so students would not need to make extra payments for continued health insurance during an extended leave.

Students are not employees and thus are not subject to the provisions of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

### **Advance Notice and Approval**

The student must request a parental leave from their Director of Graduate Studies at least three months prior to the beginning of the anticipated leave or, in the case of adoption, as soon as the adoption is confirmed. The request must be made in writing and once approved by the Director of Graduate Studies, forwarded to the Senior Associate Dean of the BRET Office for approval and notification of the Graduate School. Students should also make appropriate arrangements as needed with their course instructors to make up any missed coursework during the leave period.

### **Intent to Graduate**

The Intent to Graduate form must be submitted via the [YES](#) system to the University Registrar. Students should check the University Academic Calendar each semester to determine deadline dates.

## Resources for Students

YES (Your Enrollment Services) Registrar and Student Records

<http://yes.vanderbilt.edu/>

Academic Record Access

<https://registrar.vanderbilt.edu/academic-records/index.php>

Graduate School Catalog

<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/catalogs/kuali/graduate-25-26.php#/home>

Graduate School Academic Forms

<https://gradschool.vanderbilt.edu/academics/forms/>

Brightspace (Course Websites)

<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/brightspace/>

The Eskind Biomedical Library

<https://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/biomedical/>

The Writing Studio

<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/writing/>

Thesis and Dissertation Guidelines

<https://gradschool.vanderbilt.edu/academics/thesis-dissertation-guidelines/>

The Institute for the Advancement of Higher Education (Center for Teaching)

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/>

Graduate and Postdoc Academic Success (GPAS) Program

<https://gradschool.vanderbilt.edu/student-resources/professional-development/gpas/>

Graduate Student Council

<https://studentorg.vanderbilt.edu/gsc/>

Student Recreation Center

<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/recreationandwellnesscenter/>

Student Health Center

<https://www.vumc.org/student-health/welcome>

Student Care Network

<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/studentcarenetwork/>

Center for Student Wellbeing

<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/healthydores/>

Additional resources can be found at: <https://gradschool.vanderbilt.edu/>