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## **Health Education Doctoral Degree Programs: A Review of Admission and Graduation Requirements**

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### **Abstract**

A study of university graduate bulletins was conducted to determine admission and graduation requirements for doctoral degree programs in Health Education. Thirty-nine programs were identified. From that list, programs were delimited to Ph.D. and Dr.P.H. degrees in Health Education or had required core courses in Health Education. Seventeen programs fit the inclusion criteria. Emails were sent to university program chairs to gather additional information not included on university websites. The most common degree offered was a Ph.D. in Health Education. Eleven of the programs required a GPA of a 3.0 in a master's degree program when applying. Thirteen required the Graduate Records Examination (GRE). No programs required CHES/MCHES certification for admission or graduation. Program credit hours ranged from 70-73 among institutions. All 17 programs required a dissertation be completed for graduation, although the dissertation processes varied. Overall, there was significant variation between the programs studied. Utilization of the information in this study can occur both in student advising about doctoral programs in Health Education and in the initial process of determining doctoral program course work for meeting national graduate level competencies.

### **Introduction**

Since the late 1990s, there has been increased attention to the quality of Health Education programs in higher education (Pope & Brookins-Fisher, 1999; Chaney, Eddy, & O'Rourke, 2004; McCormack Brown, 2013) The history of the Role Delineation Project leading to the current Responsibilities and Competencies have greatly shaped both the practice of health education and professional preparation programs (National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, Inc., 2015). These competencies are particularly important at the doctoral program level as they often guide curriculum and assessment of student learning outcomes given there is no professional accreditation for such programs in Health Education. Although standards have been utilized to rank doctoral programs in Health Education (Notaro, Eddy & O'Rourke, 2000; Chaney, Eddy, & O'Rourke, 2004), the entrance requirements for these programs have not been addressed in the literature in quite some time (Bensley & Pope, 1994; Pope & Brookins-Fisher, 1999). The information gathered in this analysis could further inform the rankings process for doctoral programs and provide a basis for all Health Education doctoral level programs in what is considered standard admissions requirements. Thus, the overall purpose of this study was to determine the names of the colleges and departments offering a doctoral degree in Health Education, the title of the degree, and overall admission and graduation criteria for these doctoral programs. Specifically, such criteria as pre-requisites, grade point requirements, Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, letter of recommendation, credit hour totals and dissertation requirements were reviewed, compared and summarized.

### **Methods**

The sample in this study consisted of 17 universities with a doctorate of philosophy in Health Education or similar title. Each program was carefully selected based on the type of program that was offered. The list of universities included was initially developed from the *2004 Ranking of doctoral program of health education: Methodological revisions and results* by Chaney, Eddy and O'Rourke (2004). However, this study was utilized for the list of programs and not for ranking purposes. Additionally, researchers used Google to identify doctoral programs that fit inclusion criteria. These represented universities that offered doctoral programs in health education (and/or health promotion), excluding any programs in public health that did not offer a concentration or track in Health Education or similar coursework (Health Promotion, Program Planning, Evaluation, and Theory), as these types of courses were utilized in previous studies and were used for replication purposes (Pope & Brookins-Fisher, 1999).

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Thirty-nine programs were originally identified as potentially offering a doctoral program in health education as a sample for this study. From that list, programs were limited to Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) and Doctor of Public Health (Dr.P.H.) only and had to be in health education or a related field that had the core courses of a health education degree. Many programs from the Cheney et al. (2004) study were no longer in existence. Twenty-four of the original programs still had a doctoral program available, while 15 programs had either completely dissolved or changed to another focus. Of the remainder of programs, 17 were found to fit the inclusion criteria. In relation to the Dr.P.H. programs, only one met the inclusion criteria related to health education courses. All of the universities had information regarding their programs on their university website. Emails were sent to all of the university program chairs to gather additional information not included on the websites. Of the 17 universities that were contacted, three did not respond. All three of those programs, however, had information on their websites about their respective program related to the needed information and were included in the study. A matrix instrument was designed to record information on individual programs listed in each graduate bulletin (see Table 1). Researchers and graduate students conducted the recording process and examined the doctoral programs that existed in Health Education, along with their admission and graduation requirements. Once all of the information had been collected, frequency distributions and percentages were determined for each category.

Curricular requirements such as core classes, dissertation requirements, and the comprehensive exam process were also tallied. The primary criterion for program inclusion were the core classes required for the program. In order to be counted in the sample, the program had to offer the following courses or a similar equivalent: Health Behavior, Program Planning, Community Organization, and Program Evaluation. Many of these courses focus heavily on professional competencies set forth for health education specialists. Some programs required a Master's of Public Health (M.P.H.) or similar degree for admission in which those primary courses would have been taught.

## Results

### Program Name

The first purpose of this study was to determine the names of the colleges and departments at universities offering a doctoral degree in Health Education, and the title of the degree. Seventeen universities/departments were included in this study (see Table 1). The most common names of the degree were Ph.D. in Health Education (n=5; 29.4%), and Ph.D. in Health Education and Health Promotion (n=5; 29.4%), followed by Ph.D. in Health Behavior and Health Education (n=4; 23.5%), Ph.D. in Behavioral and Community Health (n=1; 5.9%), Ph.D. in Community Health Education (n=1; 5.9%) and Ph.D. in Health Promotion, Education and Behavior (n=1; 5.9%).

### Admission Requirements

The second purpose of the study was to identify admission requirements to doctoral programs in Health Education. In order to determine this, specific categories were utilized. These categories included prerequisite hours and courses or degrees

required prior to admission, GPA requirements, references, entrance examination scores and any additional admission requirements listed.

**Prerequisites.** Of the programs analyzed, fourteen programs (82.4%) required a master's degree while three programs (17.7%) did not require a master's degree or the equivalent. Several required a master's degree that was related to public health, health education or a related field (n=12; 70.6%). The most frequently cited prerequisite courses were Biostatistics, Epidemiology, Anatomy and Physiology, and Theory and Evaluation of Programs. One program (n=1; 5.9%) reported that they didn't have prerequisite courses but did give students a packet of preliminary information they were required to know before entering the program.

**GPA Requirement.** Eleven of the programs (64.7%) required a GPA of at least a 3.0 in a master's degree level program when applying. Four of the programs (23.5%) required at least a 3.5 GPA for a master's degree to be admitted into the program. Two programs (11.8%) did not have a GPA requirement in their admissions catalogs.

**Required References.** Of the Health Education programs analyzed, 12 programs (70.6%) required three letters of recommendation, while five programs (29.4%) required three references and their contact information. Sixteen programs (94.1%) required the majority of letters of recommendation to come from faculty members or past professors. One program (5.9%) did not respond and this information could not be found on their website.

**Entrance Examination.** In the programs analyzed, 13 (76.5%) required Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores. Of these, four programs (30.8%) required a score at a 300 or higher. Three programs (17.7%) required the score to be in the 50th percentile or higher for all sections, and six programs (35.3%) did not have a required score for admission. One program (5.9%) allowed the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) to also be used in place of the GRE. Three programs (17.7%) did not require any type of entrance examination.

**Additional Admission Requirements.** In addition to the standard application form, fee, and previous transcripts required by all programs, a few other admission requirements are worthy of mention. One program (5.9%) required potential students to include a letter of intent, a writing sample and resume along with their application. One other program (5.9%) required a letter of intent with the application.

Interviews were required for admission in ten of the programs (58.8%), while interviews were recommended, but not required, for two of the programs (11.8%). Two programs (11.8%) did not require interviews for acceptance into their programs. Three programs (17.6%) did not participate, and therefore, this information was not indicated on their websites.

An important aspect of Health Education is the credentialing agency, the National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, Inc. (NCHEC). NCHEC offers nationwide credentialing to become a Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) or a Master Certified Health Education Specialist (MCHES). None of the programs studied required a CHES or MCHES certification for admission or graduation. Many programs, however, encouraged students to take the examination after graduation.

Table 1.

*Doctoral Program Requirements Matrix*

University	Degree	Is GRE required? Score? Quant/ Written	Entrance Composition Exams	Are a masters or alternative required?	Combined Master/ PhD?	Types of references required/ how many	Interviews	Any Prerequisites?
University of Michigan	PhD Health Behavior and Health Education	GRE required/ accepts MCAT- no score needed	No	Master's required related to public health, social science, psychology, medicine, health ed, or related fields	No	3 Letters from academic or professional sources	Yes- through skype or google hangout	No prerequisites but do prefer Biostats and Epi
University of South Carolina	PhD in health promotion, education and behavior	GRE required	No	Yes- Master's in a related field	No	3 Letters	Yes- either on campus, phone, or skype	No but they are given a packet of info they are expected to know
University of Alabama	PhD in Health Education and Health Promotion GRE required/ accepts MCAT- no score needed	GRE (300 combined score)	No	Yes	No	Contact information for 3 persons	Unknown	Unknown
Texas A&M	PhD in Health Education	GRE- no specific score required	No	No- Can come in with a Bachelor's but must have exemplary regard of achievement and significant preparation.	No	3 letters- 1 must be from a past professor	Not required but recommended	No
University of Maryland	PhD in Behavioral and Community Health	GRE (50th percentile for all sections)	No	Yes- Masters	No	3 letters	Yes	6 credits of social science and 3 credits of A&P
University of Toledo	PhD in Health Education	GRE Required	No	Yes	No	3 letters	Yes	No
Southern Illinois University	PhD in Health Education	None required	No	Yes	No	3 references minimum	Unknown	Unknown
University of Florida	PhD in Health Education and Behavior	GRE Required (300; 4.5 on writing)	No	No but most come in with a MS.	Yes-MS/ PhD	3 letters from faculty members	Yes but not required	Letters; letter of intent; research writing sample; resume
University of Georgia	PhD in Health Promotion	GRE required  300 combined	Unknown	Yes- Master's from an accredited institution	No	3 letters	Yes	No MPH- prereq biostats, epi, theory and eval

University	Program Credit Hours (core vs. elective)	Type of Institution	Required Dissertation Style	Required Dissertation Data Collection Style	Types of Research permitted (qual, quant, mix)	Is meta-analysis permitted?
University of Michigan	50 hours if they enter with an MPH	Campus only	Traditional or alternative- 3 publishable papers	Most complete secondary analysis but can do primary	Any Type	Unknown
University of South Carolina	60 credit hours	Campus	Alt only- Two manuscripts- can be chapters or appendices	Primary or secondary- but if they are doing secondary, they have to have experience doing primary prior	Any type- most students use mixed methods	Yes
University of Alabama	72 hours	Unknown	Alternative or Traditional- 2 article minimum	Primary or secondary	Unknown	Unknown
Texas A&M	64 hours	Campus	Alternative or Traditional- 2 article minimum. Most plan for 3	Primary or secondary	Any type	Yes
University of Maryland	75 ( 48 core/27 individually directed)	Campus	Alternative- 3 paper or Traditional	Primary or secondary	Any type- Multivariate statistics preferable	Yes
University of Toledo	70 hours	Campus and Online	Alternative or Traditional	Primary or secondary	Any type	Unknown
Southern Illinois University	73 hours	Unknown	Traditional	Primary or secondary	Unknown	Unknown
University of Florida	90 hours	Campus	Traditional or Alternative- 3 article; most complete trad.	Primary or secondary	Any type	Yes
University of Georgia	48 core credits	Campus	Traditional or Alternative (2-3 articles)	Primary unless the student has access to a unique database that faculty approve	Any type	Yes

### Graduation Requirements

The third purpose of this study was to determine the graduation requirements for each of the doctoral programs. This included analyzing requirements for semester hours, institution type, comprehensive examinations, and dissertation expectations.

**Core Semester Hour Requirements.** In each of the programs analyzed, the number of required semester hours was between 70 and 73 credit hours. Six programs (35.3%) fit between the 70 and 73 credit hours' marker. Five programs (29.4%) required between 60 and 70 credit hours. Three programs (17.7%) required less than 60 credit hours total and three programs (17.7%) required 90 hours or above. In total, core course hours ranged between 15 hours and 48 hours.

**Institution Type.** There has been a change in culture to offer more online programs, as well as blended online and

campus courses. Seven programs (41.2%) reported to be on campus only. Seven other programs (41.2%) offered both campus and online courses in their program. Three programs (17.7%) did not respond and this information could not be determined from their graduate bulletins.

**Comprehensive Examinations.** Of those that were sampled, all seventeen (100%) programs required comprehensive exams. Fourteen programs (82.3%) required a written exam, one program (5.9%) required a multiple choice exam, and two programs (11.8%) did not specify their program requirements. The written examinations were mainly testing the core curriculum of each program, and were not based on a specified number of course hours (n=9; 53%). Two programs (11.8%) included a preliminary and final examination, and four programs (24%) were based on a total number of hours tested (e.g., testing over nine credit hours of the student's

University	Degree	Is GRE required? Score? Quant/ Written	Entrance Composition Exams	Are a masters or alternative required?	Combined Master/ PhD?	Types of references required/ how many	Interviews	Any Prerequisites?
Kent State University	PhD in Health Education and Promotion	Yes (Greater than 50th Percentile)	No	Yes	No	3 (Academic and letter of intent)	Yes (skype / Phone)	GPA over 3.5
Loma Linda University	DrPH Health Education	Yes (Greater than 50th Percentile)	Yes, Writing Sample	Yes	No	3 (letters of recommendation)	Yes	3.2 GPA & Anatomy and Physiology.
University of Utah	PhD in Health Promotion and Education	Yes (300+ & 4.0 writing)	No	Yes	No	3 (letters of recommendation)	No	3.0 GPA
University of Texas at Austin	PhD in Health Behavior and Health Education	300+ combined score	No	Master's degree with completion of a thesis or publication	No	Letter of application to the HE faculty with statement of career goals and research interest; 3 rec letters	No	Completion of either Statistics or Behavioral Science course
University of Massachusetts-Amherst	PhD in Community Health Education	No	No	Yes	No	3 (Academic PhD references)	Yes (skype / Phone)	Yes, 3/5 Core PH Courses
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	PhD in Community Health	Yes (4.0 Writing)	No	No (Straight from BS or Masters)	No	3 (Advisor, Instructor, Teachers)	Yes	3.0 GPA
University of Alabama-Birmingham	PhD in Health Education/ Health Promotion	Yes (No cut off)	No	No	Yes	3 (letters of recommendation)	Yes	3.0 GPA
University of Cincinnati	PhD in Health Education	No	No	Yes	No	3 (letters of recommendation)	Yes	No

choice). Eleven of the programs (65%) also required oral examinations, while four programs (23.5%) did not require any type of oral examination. Two programs (11.8%) did not respond and this information could not be determined from their graduate bulletins.

**Dissertation Requirements.** All seventeen (100%) programs required a dissertation be completed for graduation. Specifics of the styles and dissertation processes varied among all of the programs that were analyzed. Four of the programs (23.5%) required a traditional style for the dissertation. The traditional style includes five chapters in one main topical area. Twelve of the programs (70.6%) offered a choice between the traditional dissertation and an alternative dissertation option. One program (5.9%) required the alternative option only. The alternative option differs between the programs. The majority of the alternative options (n=13; 76.5%) required 2-3 articles be written for publication.

Fourteen of the programs (82.4%) offered a choice between primary or secondary data collection. Two of the programs (11.8%) required primary data collection unless the student has access to a unique database to complete secondary analysis. All programs allowed for the students' choice of research methods, but most (n= 14; 82.4%) preferred multivariate statistics be used.

## Discussion

Although the Pope and Brookins-Fisher (1999) study on doctoral graduate bulletins was completed nearly 20 years ago, there has been surprisingly few changes in the current findings. First, many of the program descriptions were brief and only provided a snapshot of information to prospective students. During analysis, it was difficult at times to determine the information requested, as the websites did not provide information in a clear and concise manner for the reader. Second, while some admissions requirements such as GPA and GRE scores were rigid, there was much subjectivity in other areas. In all of the programs reviewed, no grading criteria was provided so those applying for admission may not know what the minimum or average admission requirements would be. Third, many programs had flexibility in both prerequisites required and core courses to be completed for the doctoral degree. It was particularly interesting that many of the programs studied did not require an undergraduate degree or master's degree in health education or related field for admission. Many other similar disciplines (e.g., Social Work) require a master's degree for admission to their doctoral programs. It should be noted that in a sampling of related programs, (Social Work, Health Administration, Public Health)



University	Program Credit Hours (core vs. elective)	Type of Institution	Required Dissertation Style	Required Dissertation Data Collection Style	Types of Research permitted (qual, quant, mix)	Is meta-analysis permitted?
Kent State University	72 (24 core)	Campus and Online	Traditional	Primary	Any	Yes
Loma Linda University	95 (28 core)	Campus and Online	Traditional	Primary or Secondary	Any	Yes
University of Utah	72 (31 core)	Campus and Online	Traditional and Alternative	Primary or Secondary	Any	Yes
University of Utah	69 (15 core)	Unknown	Traditional	Primary or Secondary	Unknown	Unknown
University of Massachusetts-Amherst	57 (39)	Campus and Online	Traditional and Alternative	Primary or Secondary	Any	Yes
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	64	Campus and Online	Traditional and Alternative	Primary or Secondary	Any	No
University of Alabama-Birmingham	72 (36 core)	Campus	Traditional and Alternative	Primary or Secondary	Any	No
University of Cincinnati	90 (15 core)	Campus and Online	Alternative Only	Primary or Secondary	Any	Yes

many were found to require similar elements to that of Health Education doctoral programs.

In analyzing other admissions requirements, most health education programs did not require a screening examination upon admission to identify competency deficiencies. Thus, someone could enter many of the doctoral programs in Health Education with little skills or knowledge of the profession. This appears to be an issue that may need to be addressed within programs. Additionally, most programs did require an interview with potential candidates prior to admission either in person or via technology. Interviews can provide the candidate ample time to meet with faculty and to showcase personal characteristics not otherwise noticed on an application. There also appeared to be significant variability in the dissertation component of these programs. Some programs required the traditional dissertation document to be completed while others required smaller manuscripts, or an alternative style, to be submitted. These could include either primary data, secondary data, or even literature reviews. This information may be of particular interest to potential doctoral students as they are considering various programs.

Last, and perhaps most important, was the absence of Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) certification for admission into doctoral programs. There was not one Health Education program that required CHES certification

for admission, although it might be highly recommended to students. This was a similar finding in the Pope and Brookins-Fisher (1999) study, although at that time, certification was in its infancy. It would seem that since the importance of certification has been stressed in the profession over the last two decades that this criterion would be adopted by many of the doctoral programs. Moreover, given that many of the programs do not require a master's degree in health education, having CHES or even MCHES certification could help ensure that candidates at least have enough course work in Health Education to be prepared for their doctoral program. In other professions, credentialing is not an option, but requirement. On the other hand, while some may argue that the CHES/MCHES is an entry-level requirement for doctoral level programs, many doctoral level degree seeking students come from various backgrounds that would prohibit them from qualifying for the CHES/MCHES exam until coursework is completed. Therefore, one recommendation would be that health education doctoral programs consider the CHES/MCHES certification exam as a graduation requirement. Moreover, it should be encouraged that faculty be credentialed and be required to maintain certification. If the profession and culture of health education is to be solidified, those that are creating curriculum and mentoring students need to be credentialed as role models.

Because there is no accreditation for doctoral programs

in Health Education, it is clear there is no “gold standard” for program name, admission criteria, or even curriculum assessment and outcomes. The authors of this study encourage professional health education organizations to consider creating such an accreditation that would be in line with other similar disciplines. Since the Society for Public Health Education (SOPHE) has recently taken on the responsibility of school health program accreditation, it might consider accrediting doctoral health education programs. If this is outside of their scope of practice, perhaps the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) might consider accrediting health education doctoral programs as a sub-division of public health programs.

While this study did not attempt to rank doctoral programs as studies such as Chaney et al. (2004), the variables included here may be useful in providing additional future rankings. Also, while some programs are using comprehensive assessment tools, such as portfolios and comprehensive exams, it can only be speculated at this point that the health education roles and responsibilities have been measured in these assessments. It is recommended that doctoral programs consider these competencies. Additionally, future research may also want to examine how doctoral programs are actually demonstrating proficiency in the various graduate health education competencies. Covering the health education competencies would be important in reaching the suggestion of having all students complete the CHES/MCHES certification exam for a graduation requirement.

#### Limitations

This study was limited to only doctoral programs in Health Education. While the programs that were used for this study have been used in other articles of doctoral programs, there may be some programs that were incorrectly included or excluded in this analysis. Additionally, three other programs were contacted and did not provide additional information that was not on their website. This may impact the external validity of the study. Lastly, the information used was mostly gleaned from program websites and it is possible that this information may not be current for that program.

#### Conclusion

Overall, there was significant variation between the programs studied. Because there is not an accrediting body for doctoral programs in Health Education there is a wide latitude of admission and graduation requirements. This study suggests that there may be a need for more standardization in doctoral program admissions, curriculum, dissertations, and other graduation requirements. In the future, professional organizations in Health Education should look to the success of other disciplines and consider making curricular recommendations and accreditation available for doctoral programs in Health Education, much like MPH and undergraduate Public Health Education programs. Lastly, doctoral programs may want to consider how the professional competencies are being integrated into curriculum and professional preparation.

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**This article may provide one  
Continuing Education Contact Hour Opportunity for CHES (Approval Pending)  
Instructions and self-study questions may be found on page 30**

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