How to choose between a PhD and a DrPH degree in Epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health: Frequently asked questions and a comparative table.

PhD Program. The overarching goal of the Columbia University PhD program in epidemiology is to train students for careers in scientific research, particularly in academia. The PhD offers a rigorous methods sequence of advanced courses designed to prepare PhD students for a career in which they develop, implement, and disseminate epidemiologic research. The PhD program also prepares graduates to assume teaching roles and to secure funding to support their research as independent investigators. Our graduates have achieved prominence as faculty in academic institutions, in national and local public health institutions, as clinical epidemiologists, researchers in national and international NGOs, and in industry.

DrPH Program. The Columbia University DrPH program in epidemiology is an advanced degree for working professionals designed for public health practitioners and clinicians to develop leadership and management skills to support public health practice and solid expertise in epidemiologic research. The DrPH students and graduates work in any of a wide range of public health settings (governmental, not-for-profit, clinical, academic and private sectors). The DrPH program in epidemiology offers a core curriculum shared across the Mailman School departments offering the DrPH degree as well as requirements specific to epidemiology. The core curriculum and an advanced practicum provide training in the skills and expertise important to advanced public health professional development that is required by the US Council for Education in Public Health (CEPH). The Mailman Department of Epidemiology also requires additional training in epidemiologic approaches.

Here are some frequently asked questions about the DrPH and PhD programs in Epidemiology:

1. **How do I choose between a DrPH and a PhD in Epidemiology?** *This depends on your future career goals (please see FAQ #3) and what skills you would like to develop during your training. Either degree can be a route to a career in academic public health, clinical epidemiology or public health leadership. The PhD is oriented towards preparing students specifically for academic research careers in epidemiology, while the DrPH provides professionals with experience in public health or a clinical field with the skills and competencies to excel as effective leaders in public health practice and applied research. Both degrees are grounded in rigorous coursework focused on evidence-based, epidemiologic research.*

2. **Can I apply to both the DrPH and the PhD in Epidemiology at the same time?** *No, you may only apply to one of the two programs. If you are admitted to the PhD, you may not switch to the DrPH (and vice versa).*

3. **Does having a DrPH vs. PhD degree in Epidemiology limit my future career choices?** *If you are set on pursuing an academic research career, the PhD degree is more appropriate. If you would like to work in implementation research or public health practice at a leadership level (for example, in departments of health, NGOs), then the DrPH is more appropriate to pursue. However, our graduates have gone into a whole range of careers that use epidemiologic skills regardless of what degree they pursue.*

4. **Are mentorship opportunities limited to DrPH faculty committee members or PhD faculty committee members depending on what degree I choose to study?** *No. Both our DrPH and PhD students work with a wide range of faculty mentors.*

5. **Can I work with faculty mentors outside the epidemiology department for my Integrative Learning Experience (ILE) and/or dissertation?** *Yes, given the specific requirements within the [DrPH guidelines](#) and the [PhD guidelines](#).*

6. **Can I switch to the DrPH program if I start in the PhD program or vice versa?** *No. This is not possible.*

7. **What represents a strong applicant for the DrPH program and the PhD program?**

   PhD: Successful applicants to the PhD program will have
   - *Demonstrated commitment to public health with a clear understanding of what epidemiology entails, and research interests and career goals appropriate to a career linked to epidemiology.*
   - *Explained how their background experience qualifies them for admission to the program in their Statement of Purpose*
   - *A strong academic record, particularly in epidemiology and biostatistics, relevant work or trainee experience. This must be supported by persuasive recommendations from their academic or work supervisors and mentors, documenting their capacity to undertake the challenging courses and research engagement required for independent thinking and leadership in research. Coursework in mathematics (e.g., algebra, calculus) and/or statistics and prior courses in epidemiology is required. A strong background in the natural and/or social sciences is highly recommended.*
   - *The ability to write clearly and persuasively as demonstrated on the statement of purpose and the required writing sample*

   DrPH: Successful applicants to the DrPH program will have
   - *Documentation of initiative and leadership in PH programs or projects, policy development, research (Resume and persuasive recommendations from academic and work supervisors and mentors).*
   - *At least 2 years Public Health related work including service, research whether compensated or voluntary. Part time work while a student is acceptable.*
   - *Successful completion of an MPH degree with at least two methods courses in epidemiology and two in biostatistics.*
   - *Demonstrated evidence of writing ability (in the statement of purpose and the required writing sample).*
   - *Demonstrated clear interest in further training in Epidemiology as part of a public health professional career (in or outside the University).*

8. **How long will the DrPH and PhD program take to complete?** Both degree programs are *expected to be completed within 5 years of matriculation, with a maximum of 9 years of matriculating.*

9. **Am I required to have worked in the field of epidemiology or public health to be accepted into the DrPH or PhD program?** *The DrPH program requires prior work experience in the field of epidemiology or public health. The PhD program does not require prior work experience, however, a strong applicant will have worked in the field of epidemiology or public health prior to applying to the program. Both degrees would expect applicants to have prior coursework in epidemiology and biostatistics. See the answers to question 7.*

10. **Is my degree in epidemiology at Columbia Mailman School of Public Health funded?** *In accordance with MSPH and CU policy, the Epidemiology Department covers tuition, fees and insurance costs for PhD students for 5 years. In addition, the Department provides PhD students annual stipend/salary support at the Student Workers of Columbia union-mandated level for all 5 years of guaranteed funding. For the DrPH students, who are full-time working professionals, partial departmental scholarships are available. For more specifics, please consult the guidelines or discuss with the program directors.*

11. **Is the degree part or full time?** *The PhD program is a full time, in-person program, while the DrPH program can be completed as full-time or part-time.*

Table Delineating Differences in the PhD and DrPH degrees in Epidemiology*

	DrPH Degree in Epidemiology	PhD Degree in Epidemiology
Program Directors	Parisa Tehranifar, DrPH pt140@cumc.columbia.edu	Jeanine Genkinger, PhD jg3081@cumc.columbia.edu
Director of Academic Programs	Elizabeth Ferrari Ef2109@cumc.columbia.edu	Elizabeth Ferrari Ef2109@cumc.columbia.edu
Student Representatives	Samuel Packard Sp4032@cumc.columbia.edu	Adam Whalen Amw2275@cumc.columbia.edu Sara Wallach Sew2216@cumc.columbia.edu
Application to Program	SOPHAS	SOPHAS
Prior Degree Requirement for Acceptance into Program	MPH	Master's degree in epidemiology or public health with prior coursework in epidemiology or biostatistics. Individuals who have earned a doctoral degree in a program that does not confer a master's degree (e.g., MD, JD) are also eligible, although prior experience or training in epidemiology is expected
Credits	36 credits	6 Residence units**

Requirements	Core Curriculum and requirements outlined in the DrPH Handbook section 4 *	Methods Sequence
Cross Departmental Core Requirement	Yes	No
Practicum Requirement	Yes	No
Qualifying Exams	Portfolio development Oral Exam	Methods Exams Foundation Essay
Culminating Project	Integrative Learning Experience (ILE)	Dissertation

*Please see the Epidemiology DrPH guidelines and the PhD guidelines for further details
*Information current for 2024-2025
** We give two residence units of advanced standing for the MPH/MS degrees and three units of advanced standing for an MD or prior doctoral degree