Personal Health Informatics, PhD

Northeastern's Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Personal Health Informatics (PHI) is a transdisciplinary doctoral program focused on educating top researchers in the theoretical underpinnings, design, evaluation, and dissemination of consumer- and patient-focused health systems. Personal health technologies are those that non–health professionals interact with *directly*, both in and out of a clinical setting and in various life stages of illness and wellness.

Examples include:

- Assistive technologies that aid persons with disabilities
- Consumer wellness promotion technologies
- Patient education and counseling systems
- Interfaces for reviewing personal health records
- Advanced ambulatory monitoring for supporting health
- Automated elder care systems that monitor health and support independent living
- Social networking systems connecting families and their social and medical support networks

Developing personal health interface technologies requires that professionals have skills and experience designing systems for individual patients and consumers with a wide range of backgrounds in different contexts using a variety of media, while ensuring that fielded technologies are effective, reliable, and responsive to the needs of at-risk and patient populations. Critical skills and knowledge include needs assessment, theories of interface design and health behavior, rapid prototyping and implementation, experimental design with human subjects in challenging settings, and statistical data analysis and validation. Moreover, these skills must be deployed while working with, or leading, transdisciplinary teams.

The interdisciplinary nature of the program targets students who are interested in improving health and wellness using novel technologies that directly impact the lives of consumers and patients. This is a program for students who are not only technically strong but also socially conscious, design oriented, and interested in rigorously evaluating the technologies they imagine and build. The program provides a path for technical students to acquire more experience in the deployment and evaluation of health technologies in the field but also a path for students with health backgrounds to develop the technical skills needed to prototype and assess creative ideas they envision for improving care. The expected length of study is five years after the bachelor's degree.

Admission Requirements

Students will be accepted with either of the following:

- A bachelor's or higher degree in a technical discipline (e.g., computer science or information science, computer systems engineering) with either academic or work experience demonstrating a commitment to working in health.
- A bachelor's or higher degree in a health science discipline (e.g., nursing, medicine, physical therapy, pharmacy, public health) with either some academic course work in technology, such as a course in programming or design, or work experience where the applicant participated in the development, adaptation, or evaluation of consumer- or patient-facing health technology. (Otherwise outstanding applicants without programming skills may be advised to take an introductory programming course prior to entry, and otherwise outstanding applicants without any formal experience working in health settings may be advised to spend some time volunteering in a medical or community health setting prior to entry.)

Applicants will be expected to have:

- A minimum 3.000 undergraduate grade-point average (GPA)
- A minimum total GRE score of 300 or equivalent
- A minimum GRE academic writing score of 3.5
- For international applicants, a minimum TOEFL score of 105

Minimum Academic Standards and Requirements

RESIDENCY REQUIREMENT
The residency requirement will follow the University Graduate Council By-Law policy.

DISSERTATION ADVISING
Each student will have one primary advisor from the personal health informatics doctoral program faculty.

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE
The committee will consist of at least three members: the dissertation advisor, one additional personal health informatics doctoral program faculty member, and one member external to Northeastern who is an expert in the specific personal health informatics topic of research. The dissertation committee shall include experts with both health and technology backgrounds. The dissertation advisor must be a full-time member of the Northeastern University faculty.

QUALIFYING EXAMINATION
The qualifying examination consists of a three-part exam conducted by a committee of three personal health informatics doctoral program faculty members, each overseeing one part of the exam. The research core of the exam is fulfilled with submission of a high-quality paper to a strong peer-reviewed conference or journal. The health component of the exam is fulfilled when the student passes a written exam developed by a faculty member with a health sciences background, and the technical component of the exam is fulfilled when the student passes an exam developed by a faculty member with a technical background. The content of the written exams and the paper topic are developed in consultation with each faculty member.

DEGREE CANDIDACY
A student is considered a PhD degree candidate upon meeting these conditions:

- Completion of core courses with a minimum GPA of 3.000 overall on the core courses
- Completion of the qualifying examination

COMPREHENSIVE EXAM
A PhD student must submit a written dissertation proposal to the dissertation committee. The proposal should identify the research problem, the research plan, and its potential impact on the field. A presentation of the proposal will be made in an open forum, and the student must successfully defend it before the dissertation committee.

DISSERTATION DEFENSE
A PhD student must complete and defend a dissertation that involves original research in personal health informatics.

Curriculum Requirements

REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE COURSES

The curriculum is designed to provide all PhD students with a strong foundation in principles critical to the design and evaluation of personal health interfaces. All students take six core courses (24 semester hours) and the user-interface practicum (1 semester hour). All students must also fulfill the programming fundamentals requirement (4 semester hours) and the statistics fundamentals requirement (4 semester hours), where some flexibility in course selection allows tailoring based on background and experience. Two additional research electives (8 semester hours) are selected based on research interests from the personal health informatics electives list. Students are also expected to participate in the personal health informatics seminar series each semester.

Program Assessment

LEARNING OUTCOMES

This program seeks to produce graduates who are capable of leading and performing independent, new research projects related to personal health informatics and who are well prepared to enter into a number of potential career paths, including industrial research positions, government consultants, or postdoctoral or junior faculty positions in academic institutions in either technology programs or schools of health science, public health, or medicine.

DEGREE OUTCOMES

The dissertation committee evaluates whether the student has produced a significant contribution to personal health informatics research. The process used by the dissertation committee is based on an assessment of the goals and objectives described in the written PhD proposal. Student success can also be measured in the number and quality of publications generated by the research.

IMPROVING EFFECTIVENESS

Publication venues will provide a means to assess the quality of the program, as well as the research projects. External research funding and incoming student quality will be used to measure program strength. In addition, graduates will be asked for feedback concerning their training and program preparation.

Program Requirements

Complete all courses and requirements listed below unless otherwise indicated.

Milestones

Qualifying examinations (3)
Annual review
Dissertation proposal
Dissertation committee
Dissertation defense

Core Requirements

Code	Title	Hours
Foundations		
HINF 5200	Theoretical Foundations in Personal Health Informatics	4
Program Design and Development		
CS 5010	Programming Design Paradigm	4
CS 5340	Computer/Human Interaction	4
HINF 5300	Personal Health Interface Design and Development	4
Methods and Statistics		
CS 6350	Empirical Research Methods	4
PHTH 5210	Biostatistics in Public Health	3
Evaluation		
HINF 8982	Readings	1-8
HINF 5301	Personal Health Technologies: Field Deployment and System Evaluation	4

Electives

Code	Title	Hours
Complete 6 to 8 semester hours in the following subject area:		6-8
(Note: Please see faculty advisor for other acceptable elective courses.)		
HINF		

Dissertation

Code	Title	Hours
Complete the following (repeatable) course twice:		
CS 9990	Dissertation	

Program Credit/GPA Requirements

48 total semester hours required
Minimum 3.000 GPA required

Plan of Study
Sample Curriculum

Year 1

Fall	Hours	Spring	Hours
HINF 5200	4	CS 5010 or 5520	4
CS 5340	4	CS 6350	4
		Additionally, students should participate in the Personal Health Informatics Usability Evaluation Practicum	1
	8		9

Year 2

Fall	Hours	Spring	Hours
HINF 5300	4	HINF 5301	4
PHTH 5210 (or PHTH 6210 or CAEP 7712 or CAEP 7716)	3	PHI elective	3-4
	7		7-8

Year 3

Fall	Hours	Spring	Hours
HINF 9990	2-4	HINF 9990	2-4
HINF 8982	1-8	PHI elective	3-4
	3-12		5-8

Year 4

Fall	Hours	Spring	Hours
HINF 9996	0	HINF 9996	0
	0		0

Year 5

Fall	Hours	Spring	Hours
HINF 9996	0	HINF 9996	0
	0		0

Total Hours: 39-52