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# Holistic Review of Applications for Admission to Graduate Degree Programs

## The Value of Holistic Review of Applications

In the holistic review process—also known as full file review—readers give careful consideration to all the credentials presented by the student as they assess the application materials for indicators that the applicant possesses qualities known to contribute to successful completion of the degree program. Such a review seeks to determine if the applicant has not only the academic qualifications for admission but also the skills and experiences that facilitate degree completion and a successful research career.

Holistic review ensures that no single factor leads to either accepting the student or excluding the student from admission. One of its key values is the opportunity to recognize that an applicant's strength in one area might offset a weakness in another.

By carefully weighing strengths, achievements, and the ways in which an applicant might contribute to educational environment of the graduate degree program, evaluators increase the likelihood that they offer admission to those most likely to succeed.

The more limited mode of assessing applicants for admission uses only a few attributes which are numerically quantified, often into grids of grades and test scores. This approach is based on the belief that standardized tests are the best indicators of academic ability and achievement. However, this practice is sharply discouraged by Educational Testing Service (ETS) in its *Guide to the Use of Scores*. In essence, the GRE does not and cannot measure all the skills strongly associated with academic and professional competence. The ETS *Guide* urges those who use the test scores to recognize the limitations of any single measure of knowledge and ability. The use of a cut off score to sort applicants and/or deny admission is particularly problematic. This practice ranks applicants based on a sharply truncated understanding of his/her full range of abilities, and overlooks valuable indicators of preparedness, potential for degree completion, and the contributions the applicant could make to the degree program.

## How to Measure the Applicant's Qualifications

The credentials considered in holistic review include, of course, academic qualifications that can be gauged by indicators in multiple parts of the application. Such measures include the caliber of curricular rigor in prior institutions attended; cumulative grade point average in the wider context of the academic record; the maturity and sophistication of the statement of academic purpose; the extent and quality of prior research experience; recommendations from faculty; standardized test scores; and correspondence between research interests and available faculty expertise.

Moreover, the process of holistic review places the applicant's academic skills and achievements in the wider context of other factors known to effect the student's ability to successfully complete the graduate degree program. This ability can be indicated by leadership experience; the nature and progression of extracurricular involvement; a demonstrated passion for and commitment to the disciplinary interests; sustained community engagement; research activity both on and off campus; and special talents shown to be employed effectively.

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## Use of Holistic Review in Higher Education

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A wide range of higher education organizations use holistic review because positive outcomes, such as higher completion rates and shorter time to degree, are seen when academic achievement as well as related skills and experiences are taken into account during the admissions process. The application and review process for National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowships use this holistic approach. Similarly, the Gates Millennium Scholars Program uses full file review to select students for both the graduate and undergraduate awards. Even ETS and its GRE Board decided to use a Personal Potential Index (PPI) as an optional part of the test beginning in July 2009. With the PPI professors or supervisors will evaluate students on a six-point scale in the areas of knowledge and creativity, communication skills, teamwork, planning and organization, ethics and integrity, and resilience.

Examples of peer institutions that encourage holistic review in the admissions process for graduate degree programs are the University of California at Los Angeles, University of Minnesota, and University of Texas at Austin. Similarly, at the University of Michigan, admissions committees for many Rackham graduate degree programs take a holistic approach: among them are Applied Physics, Creative Writing, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, History, Program in Biomedical Sciences, Psychology, Public Policy, and Romance Languages & Literatures.

## Factors to Consider In the Holistic Review Process

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The admissions process is rigorous and individualized. It requires faculty to make fine distinctions among large numbers of highly qualified applicants, and so the ability to assess consistently all information presented in the application is vitally important.

The applicant's merit is evaluated on the basis of both achievement and potential in light of how these factors have been influenced by the opportunities and challenges experienced by the individual. Essentially, the components in holistic review fall into three categories. These are the applicant's:

- academic performance to date;
- potential for contributing to research;
- persistence in and commitment to educational success.

Each category is assessed by a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures found in different parts of the application.

The examples included in the list below are not definitive, nor are they given in any order of importance.

### Academic Performance

- Rank in class
- Overall GPA and GPA in major
- Written communication skills
- Curriculum in prior degree programs
- Progression of academic performance over time
- Standardized test scores
- Foreign language fluency

### Research Potential

- Research activity on and off campus
- Relevant work experience
- Creativity in problem-solving
- Aptitude for planning and organization
- Scholarly engagement outside of coursework

### Persistence and Commitment

- Indices of leadership
- Recognition of achievements over time
- Extracurricular activities
- Community involvement or service
- Special talents or skills
- Personal and professional ethics
- Learning differences

## Academics

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- Programs of Study
- Department Information Guide
- Programs Statistics
- Rackham Interdisciplinary Initiatives
- Michigan Meetings

## Get Connected

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- Educational, cultural and geographic background

## Locating These Qualifications in the Rackham Admissions Application

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The application for admission to Rackham graduate degree programs has been designed to facilitate holistic review so that admissions committees easily can identify indicators of the applicant's academic abilities and potential for success. Many sections of the application are useful for locating information about all three categories described above.

The applicant's past academic performance and potential for continued achievement are evident in the responses to sections in the Rackham Admissions Application with questions asking for:

- Official (M-Pathways) and self-reported (Rackham Application) GPA
- Official (M-Pathways) and self-reported (Rackham Application) transcript
- Language proficiency
- Postsecondary institutions attended
- Awards/scholarships
- Recommendations
- Academic statement of purpose
- Curriculum vitae/resume

Research potential, though not so easily quantified as some aspects of academic achievement can be, is reflected in responses to some of these same sections of the application. In addition, there are a number of research programs, included in possible responses to the question about programs encouraging graduate education, that specifically focus on providing undergraduate research opportunities.

- Awards/scholarships/activities
- Volunteer activities
- Work experiences
- Recommendations
- Participation in programs such as Big Ten Academic Alliance-SROP, MARC, McNair Scholars
- Academic statement of purpose
- Curriculum vitae/resume

The Rackham Admissions Application also prompts prospective students to provide a wide spectrum of personal information that may well indicate the applicant's persistence in and commitment to educational success, as well as his/her potential for contributing to the life of the academic community. These may be seen in responses to questions about:

- Parents' educational levels attained
- Citizenship and parents' citizenship
- Race/ethnicity (for U.S. citizens)
- Native language
- Demonstrated commitment to diversity in academic and civic realms
- Personal statement
- Curriculum vitae/resume
- Volunteer activities
- Work experiences
- Financial assistance and family hardship
- Recommendations that address the context of student's achievements
- Educational background that is underrepresented in graduate education, such as tribal school, single-gender college, or community college.

## Examples from U-M Graduate Programs

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### Applied Physics

Applied Physics provides an opportunity for interdisciplinary training and research which is not readily accommodated by single-focus graduate programs. The admissions committee is most interested in research experience, letters of recommendation from advisors, and undergraduate and graduate academic performance. GRE scores are typically the last aspect of the application to be examined as they have not been found to be terribly accurate predictors of success in

research. Applied Physics is committed to providing an opportunity to a diverse range of students whose research interests falls within its niche.

### **Creative Writing**

The MFA Program in Creative Writing selects fiction writers and poets with demonstrated talent who intend to prepare for a lifetime of writing and professional publication. At the heart of the program are writing workshops, where students assemble as a community to read and comment on one another's work in progress; the MFA Program is committed to bringing together writers who will enrich one another's work with their diverse perspectives and aesthetics. A holistic application review with particular attention to the applicant's writing portfolio, statement of academic purpose, personal statement, and letters of recommendation best allows the admissions committee to identify applicants with the maturity, passion, and persistence necessary to be effectual classmates and successful writers.

### **Ecology and Evolutionary Biology**

The Admissions Committee is most interested in research experience, letters of recommendation, the academic statement of purpose, undergraduate and graduate academic performance, and GRE scores. The academic statement should demonstrate the applicant's ability to discuss his or her research interests, and show a depth understanding, as well as a passion for the larger questions relating to the applicant's area of interest. Unusually promising students whose backgrounds are substantially deficient in either the biological or physical sciences may receive special status for one or two terms in order to enable them to acquire a suitable background. In addition to the quality of the application, the admissions committee takes into account the abilities of program faculty to mentor additional students in their labs.

### **Program in Biomedical Sciences**

PIBS places emphasis on the student's previous research experience (hands on in a research laboratory rather than in lab courses), academic statement of purpose (in which the applicant describes his/her research experience in detail), letters of recommendation (at least one recommendation, and preferably three, from a research mentor who can speak to the applicant's motivation and experience), science course grades and GRE scores, the interview weekend experience (an applicant interviews with four or five faculty who look for more than book learning; faculty look for an understanding of what it means to be a researcher, look for passion for research, commitment to complete the degree), and personal statement (the statement allows faculty to identify something special about the person and the faculty obtain information about applicants who meet the RMF criteria).

### **Psychology**

Psychology is committed to providing an opportunity to a diverse range of students. The holistic review of applications allows the faculty to select the best students who fit the research areas offered within the department. Application information that highly influences the decision to offer admission includes the previous institution, research interests, grade point average, GRE scores, recommendations, statements and the experience or qualities that make the applicant eligible for the Rackham Merit Fellowship.

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

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Hardigan, P. C., Lai, L. L., Ameson, D., & Robeson, A. (2001). Significance of Academic Merit, Test Scores, Interviews, and the Admissions Process: A Case Study. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 65, 40-44.

Micceri, T. (2002, June). *Evidence Suggesting We Should Admit Students Who Score Extremely Low on GRE Subsets or the GMAT to Graduate School Programs*. Paper presented at meeting of the Association for Institutional Research, Toronto, Canada.

Sedlacek, William E. (2004). *Beyond the Big Test: Noncognitive Assessment in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sternberg, R. J., & Williams, W. M. (1997). Does the GRE predict meaningful success in the graduate training of psychologists? *American Psychologist*, 52(6), 630-641.

## For Prospective Students

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Program Statistics

## For Current Students

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Academic & Professional Resources  
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## For Faculty and Staff of Graduate Programs

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## Mentoring

Mentoring Guide for Students  
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MORE (Faculty Committee on Mentoring)

## For Postdoctoral Fellows

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## For Alumni & Friends

Discover Rackham  
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## About Rackham

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## The Rackham

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