

FINAL DRAFT

September 15, 2020

Responding to Possible Impacts of COVID-19 on Fall 2021 Admissions

Rackham Graduate School

The COVID-19 emergency has hampered the ability of prospective students to complete key components of graduate school applications. Quarantines and other public health measures have led to the cancellation of scheduled testing as well as the closure of some testing sites, limiting equitable access for prospective students across the globe. In addition, student transcripts will be different and may require more time to evaluate as many colleges and universities instituted Pass/Fail grading. As a result, the graduate admissions process will be significantly different this fall.

Below we outline the aspects of the application that are likely to be affected as well as recommendations for how to address each of them as part of your admissions process. In addition, Rackham will host two workshops on October 6 (3:00 to 5:00 p.m.) and October 7 (3:00 to 5:00 p.m.) to support graduate admissions committees in revising their processes for evaluating applications. These workshops will introduce evidence-based practices for holistic admissions and guidance for developing and implementing admissions rubrics that are responsive to these unusual circumstances. Interested faculty members can use the following link to register for one of the [2020 Faculty Workshops on Graduate Admissions for Excellence and Diversity](#). Information about registering for these workshops will also be included in the next newsletter for graduate chairs and directors.

(1) The GRE will not be available and/or will not reflect a student's test-taking ability.

Quarantines and social distancing measures have led to the cancellation of scheduled testing as well as the closure of some testing sites, limiting equitable access for prospective students. Additionally, many accommodations traditionally provided to students with disabilities are currently unavailable ([Burke, 2020](#)). While the Educational Testing Service (ETS) has offered an option to take the GRE at home in the United States and many other countries, issues such as the lack of stable internet access needed to complete the test and inadequate or invasive proctoring have been reported ([Hu, 2020](#)). **For these reasons, we anticipate that many prospective students will not be able to take the GRE and that many who do so may not be able to perform to their potential.** Numerous graduate programs, including those at Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Berkeley, UCLA, and UCSD, have decided to either suspend the use of the GRE or to make it optional for the 2020-2021 admission cycle.

In light of these developments, Rackham recommends that for the duration of the pandemic graduate programs suspend use of the GRE in making admission decisions.

Rackham also recommends that graduate programs use this moratorium to recommit to holistic admissions practices that exclude the GRE, as a growing body of evidence demonstrates that

the GRE is unable to predict student academic success outcomes in a variety of disciplines and has also been shown to have a disparate impact on underrepresented student populations ([Megginson, 2011](#); [Moneta-Koehler et al., 2017](#); [Sealy et al., 2019](#); [Steele et al., 1995](#)).

We encourage programs to announce the suspension on their website as soon as possible and to notify prospective students who otherwise will be making arrangements now to take the GRE. Some applicants who have already taken the GRE, or who have taken it because they are applying to other universities, may include scores with their applications. For equity reasons we encourage programs to mask these scores and not make them available to admission committee members.

(2) Student transcripts will contain Pass/Fail grades for the winter and/or spring 2020 terms.

The University of Michigan and many other U.S. colleges and universities adopted Pass/Fail (P/F) or other non-letter grading systems starting in March 2020. As a result, transcripts may not show letter grades for courses that are considered essential to adequately assess applicants and make admissions decisions.

Rackham recommends that graduate programs establish alternative methods for assessing the academic preparation of applicants in order to not penalize students who have faced significant disruptions during the COVID-19 emergency. We recognize that this may require additional work, but we expect that the benefits will be significant. Such strategies could include: 1) conducting Zoom or phone interviews with applicants in which one or more of the questions is focused on an important aspect of academic preparation, 2) requesting the syllabi of key classes from all applicants, 3) examine the full trajectory of grade trending prior to the pandemic, 4) and/or requesting assessment letters or more outcomes-focused evaluations from faculty who taught key courses. Care should be taken to mitigate the possible effects of implicit bias when evaluating letters of recommendation and engagement during interviews. This includes ensuring that any additions or changes to the application process are applied to all applicants.

(3) Research experience will be curtailed or absent.

Many undergraduate research experiences and opportunities were cancelled or dramatically reconfigured because of campus closures and restrictions on travel. For many prospective students, these cancellations affected completion of senior research projects and other opportunities to demonstrate readiness for research-based graduate education. Accordingly, graduate programs and departments may anticipate that research statements and letters of recommendation may have less depth and breadth than otherwise would be expected. This impact extends to summer research programs which often are the primary mechanism for students from under-resourced schools to engage in undergraduate research and receive guidance on the application process. Disruptions to conducting experiments or doing fieldwork could also have a disproportionate impact on some students. Unequal access to resources and opportunities for undertaking undergraduate research during the COVID-19 emergency could create significant disparate impacts in the admissions review process. Programs should expect

additional questions and concerns from prospective applicants who have been affected by these diminished opportunities.

Rackham recommends that programs establish alternative methods for assessing research experience and preparation of their applicants. This could include looking for engagement in discussion and analysis of a research interest in the statement, even though direct research experience may be absent. Other methods could include, for example, short online interviews in which applicants are asked to briefly describe the primary area of research they would like to pursue, how they understand the significance of this, and what they hope to learn and contribute. Providing an explicit framework of what the admissions committee expects in a research and personal statement will also make assessment of that work more straightforward.

Rackham gladly invites additional recommendations and evidence-based holistic admissions practices that have proved successful on our campus. These recommendations can be sent via email to RackhamADbiohealthsci@umich.edu.

Citations:

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