Responsibilities of Rackham Graduate Admissions Committees

Faculty and university goals for access, opportunity, and excellence in graduate education are strongly impacted by the work of faculty serving on graduate admissions committees. In evaluating applications and making admissions recommendations on behalf of their programs and the Rackham Graduate School, graduate faculty are responsible for:

1. safeguarding the privacy of student information in admissions applications;
2. understanding the role of Michigan's Proposal 2 in admissions decisions;
3. using holistic admissions practices to admit graduate cohorts that are both excellent and broadly diverse;
4. exercising care and caution in any use of Generative AI tools in the evaluation of applications for graduate admission.

Rackham Graduate School distributes this guidance to all faculty involved in graduate admissions decisions on an annual basis.

Safeguarding the Privacy of Student Information in Admissions Applications

While serving on graduate admissions committees, you will have access to confidential admissions files that contain sensitive information about prospective students, including grades, academic records, and demographic data. These files may also include information about prospective students' race, ethnicity, gender, age, marital status, veteran status, disability status, etc. It is imperative to maintain ethical and professional standards when reviewing applications, including safeguarding student privacy. You should refrain from disclosing the contents of application files outside the graduate admissions committee. In addition, personal information about the application that is irrelevant to the criteria for admission should not be included in either the admissions committee discussions or in the documentation of the committee meetings.Your actions on a graduate admissions committee are governed by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records, including graduate admissions. Please be reminded that admitted students have a right of access to their records, including admissions files. Rackham recommends that you complete the university's online FERPA training course. U-M Information and Technology Services (ITS) has also developed a safe computing guide for how to protect sensitive student data.

Understanding the Role of Michigan's Proposal 2 in Admissions Decisions

While serving on graduate admissions committees, graduate faculty are obligated to understand and comply with state and federal law as you seek to admit graduate students who contribute to both the excellence and diversity of your graduate programs.

Michigan's Proposal 2 was adopted by the state's voters in 2006. This constitutional amendment prohibits public colleges and universities in Michigan from discriminating against or giving preferential treatment to groups or individuals based on their race, gender, color, ethnicity, or national origin in public education, public employment, or public contracting. The scope of the recent Supreme Court SFFA decision focuses only on the use of race and ethnicity in admissions. For this reason, the university's existing practices for complying with Proposal 2 are already in compliance with this Supreme Court decision.

Therefore, as a member of a graduate admissions committee, you cannot admit students or provide financial aid, in whole or in part, based on race, ethnicity, sex, or national origin; however, you can continue active efforts to increase broad diversity in your applicant pools, which will then increase the depth and quality of your applicant pools. Moreover, graduate admissions committees can also consider a broad range of factors of a student's background and experience in performing holistic review and making admissions decisions. For example, Rackham has developed a set of race-neutral evaluative criteria for the Rackham Merit Fellowship (RMF) Program, including factors such as first-generation status, family income, geographic underrepresentation, and commitment to advancing diversity in the U.S., which can serve as an instructive model for evaluating graduate school applicants who contribute to both the excellence and diversity of your program.

In addition to Rackham resources, the graduate school also recommends that you consider taking advantage of other campus resources, such as the U-M Human Resources Unconscious Bias Learning Suite; ADVANCE STRIDE; and, Equity, Civil Rights & Title IX (ECRT). Better understanding unconscious bias will help mitigate its potential impact on graduate admissions decisions.

Using Holistic Admissions Practices to Make Admissions Decisions

Holistic admissions practices provide a more comprehensive understanding of a prospective graduate student's potential for successful degree completion by considering a wider range of factors, assessing an applicant's unique experiences, and evaluating traditional measures of academic readiness within their broader context. These practices provide useful tools for making fine distinctions among large numbers of highly qualified applicants, assessing all information presented in an application in a way that complies with federal and state law, and mitigating potential unconscious bias.

Rackham recommends that graduate faculty serving on graduate admissions committees participate in the Faculty Workshop on Holistic Graduate Admissions for Excellence and Diversity offered each year by the graduate school to support faculty in their efforts to admit graduate students who contribute to the excellence and diversity of their programs. Additionally, the Holistic Admissions Consultation team supports the needs of graduate faculty interested in implementing and/or improving the use of evidenced-based, race-neutral holistic admissions practices in their programs. To request an initial consultation, the admissions committees of graduate programs can complete this online form.

Using Generative AI in the Evaluation of Applications for Graduate Admissions

Rackham appreciates that graduate programs may have interest in exploring the use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools at different stages of the graduate admissions process. As the potential impacts of these technologies on the evaluation of applications remain largely untested, Rackham recommends care and caution before incorporating any GenAI tools in graduate admissions. These developments are rapidly evolving; Rackham will organize discussions to explore the use of GenAI in graduate admissions in the coming academic year. New this year, applicants for graduate admission must certify responsible use of any Generative AI tools used in the preparation of their applications, as described in this guidance.