

# A Holistic Approach to Graduate Admissions

Physics-education researchers have found that a rubric-based evaluation method is an easy and practical way to help fight inequities in the physics-graduate-admissions process.

By **Katie McCormick**

It's no secret that university physics departments have a diversity problem. Women, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students are underrepresented at all levels of physics, with a steep drop-off at the graduate level. To try to combat the inequities of graduate admissions, the physics department at Michigan State University (MSU) implemented a candidate-review process called rubric-based holistic review. After analyzing the academic and demographic data of physics students admitted over the past three years, Nicholas Young and his colleagues at MSU conclude that the method is a promising path toward a more equitable admissions process [1].

Finding an unbiased way to evaluate prospective graduate students is a notoriously thorny problem. Undergraduate grades can vary widely based on where a student studies. Additionally, the scores of a test commonly taken by US students when they apply to graduate schools skew higher for

male students.

Rubric-based holistic review factors in the traditional metrics, such as grades and test scores, but does not weigh any of them too heavily. Rather, it places the emphasis on evaluations of “noncognitive” skills, such as conscientiousness and perseverance, that are essential to success in graduate school. Young *et al.*'s study shows that rubric-based holistic review is a practical alternative to test-based evaluation methods for graduate admissions. The holistic review appears not to introduce new inequities into the process, and it requires no extra work for the admission committee members. Young hopes to see rubric-based holistic review adopted by other institutions, but he notes that it is only part of the process. He says that other factors, such as the diversity of the committee itself, must also be addressed to create a truly fair admissions process.

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## REFERENCES

1. N. T. Young *et al.*, “Rubric-based holistic review: A promising route to equitable graduate admissions in physics,” *Phys. Rev. Phys. Educ. Res.* **18**, 020140 (2022).



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