
Hiring and/or Admissions Policies for The Smithsonian Institution, NMNH

These materials are based on the understanding of NMNH pod members and may not accurately reflect the official policy of the Smithsonian Institution. Always refer to official policy documents and handbooks for the most accurate information about hiring and admission processes.

Below are the findings of the NMNH Geosciences Pod on Hiring and/or Admissions Policies, as well as what the pod would propose to change and improve.

Unlike a university setting, the Smithsonian NMNH is part of the Federal government and federal law dictates how the Smithsonian is funded and operated. Smithsonian is not a degree-granting institution and does not have “admissions,” though Smithsonian does host fellows, interns, and other academic appointments. The following terms are used to refer to the different kinds of hires and appointment categories:

Federal: Official positions that are part of the US Government on the GS payscale, funded through Congressional appropriations. Applicants must be US citizens and must apply through the USAJobs web portal.

Trust: Positions that are funded through endowments, grants, or contracts. These can be short term positions (postdocs, contractors) or permanent positions. Permanent trust hires are generally treated the same as Federal positions with respect to duties, pay grades, etc. There is no citizenship requirement and applications are not processed through USAJobs.

Curator: Research scientist/curator hybrids. Ph.D.-level expert in their field of study. Generally PAEC-reviewed (Professional Accomplishment Evaluation Committee, similar to a tenure-track evaluation at a university).

Scientific Staff: All other geosciences positions besides curators, including, but not limited to, collections managers, specialists and technicians and laboratory staff.

Contractors: Individuals or companies contracted for a finite period or dollar amount to work on specific projects. Can be funded in many ways.

Postdoctoral Fellows: “Postdoc” scholars (recently matriculated with a PhD) appointed through the Office of Fellowships and Internships (OFI). Typically funded by the institution through a competitive process. Doctoral Fellowships for PhD students are also included in this category, since they go through a similar selection process. Post-docs brought on to work on awarded grant projects are trust employees, not fellows, and are hired at the discretion of the principal investigator (PI).

Interns: High school and undergraduate students engaged in a learning experience that can be either a formalized, competitive and structured program (NHRE--Natural History Research Experience, YES!---Youth Engagement in Science) or an informal opportunity customized to an individual. Mechanisms of selection are specific to the opportunity and range from very formal

committee processes to informal selections made ad hoc by staff members. Paperwork for these appointments is processed through OFI.

Below is a list of commonly used acronyms throughout this document:

NMNH: National Museum of Natural History

REU: Research Experiences for Undergraduates

NSF: National Science Foundation

SACNAS: Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science

YES!: Youth Engagement through Science

NHRE: Natural History Research Experiences

DEI: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

EEO: Equal Employment Opportunity

OHR: Office of Human Resources

ESB: Evolutionary and Systematic Biology

EASCI: Earth and Space Science

- **What EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) statement is included in a standard job or admissions advertisement? Are there other inclusion statements and resources publicly available?**

Federal: This is the standard language included in/linked to Smithsonian Job ads posted on USAJobs for Permanent Federal Positions:

The United States Government does not discriminate in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy and gender identity), national origin, political affiliation, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, genetic information, age, membership in an employee organization, retaliation, parental status, military service, or other non-merit factor.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission enforces Federal laws prohibiting employment discrimination. These laws protect you against employment discrimination when it involves:

- Unfair treatment because of your race, color, religion, sex (including gender identity, sexual orientation, and pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information.
- Harassment by managers, co-workers, or others in your workplace, because of your race, color, religion, sex (including gender identity, sexual orientation, and pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information.
- Denial of a reasonable workplace accommodation that you need because of your religious beliefs or disability.
- Retaliation because you complained about job discrimination, or assisted with a job discrimination investigation or lawsuit.

In addition to laws that EEOC enforces, there are federal protections from discrimination on other bases including sexual orientation, status as a parent, marital status, political affiliation, and conduct that does not adversely affect the performance of the employee.

Reasonable Accommodation Policy

Federal agencies must provide reasonable accommodation to applicants with disabilities where appropriate. Applicants requiring reasonable accommodation for any part of the application process should follow the instructions in the job opportunity announcement. For any part of the remaining hiring process, applicants should contact the hiring agency directly. Determinations on requests for reasonable accommodation will be made on a case-by-case basis.

A reasonable accommodation is any change to a job, the work environment, or the way things are usually done that enables an individual with a disability to apply for a job, perform job duties or receive equal access to job benefits.

Under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, federal agencies must provide reasonable accommodations when:

- An applicant with a disability needs an accommodation to have an equal opportunity to apply for a job.
- An employee with a disability needs an accommodation to perform the essential job duties or to gain access to the workplace.
- An employee with a disability needs an accommodation to receive equal access to benefits, such as details, training, and office-sponsored events.

You can request a reasonable accommodation at any time during the application or hiring process or while on the job. Requests are considered on a case-by-case basis.

Trust: “The Smithsonian Institution is an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer. Candidates of all backgrounds are encouraged to apply.”

Contractors: “The Smithsonian Institution is an Equal Opportunity Employer.”

Postdoctoral Fellowships: “The Smithsonian Institution is an Equal Opportunity Employer.”

Interns: There is no EEO SI or NMNH policy governing the appointment of interns.

Recommendations: With the understanding that Federal policy cannot be easily changed, we would still suggest that in the future we adopt language that encourages the hiring and/or selection of applicants from underrepresented backgrounds. It is more likely that SI-policy could be changed to include this.

To facilitate soliciting DEI-type documents for curatorial hires in the future, add language to the initial job posting under the category of Responsibilities similar to: “We expect the successful candidate to uphold the mission statement of the Smithsonian Institution with regards to equity, inclusion and diversity, and to have a demonstrated record of doing so in the past.”

- **Where are advertisements posted or sent? Are there other strategies for reaching applicants for hiring and/or admissions, e.g. job fairs, showcases?**

The only requirement for federal positions is that they be advertised on USAJobs (<https://www.usajobs.gov/>). There are no requirements for Trust positions, Academic Appointments, or Contracts.

The following reflects how our departments have handled advertisements for all types of positions:

- Focus on listservs (free, common practice) for specific scientific and collections communities (many of which are not particularly diverse). When possible, we try to open advertisements before large national meetings in relevant fields.

- Targeted emails and word-of-mouth to geoscience department chairs and individuals, including requests to post to job boards and websites. Departments have reached out to candidates from underrepresented groups. There were not many people to reach out to, but in general, the people that were invited applied for the position.

- For academic appointments there are no standardized practices and the following are used for at least some fellowships and internships in the geosciences: NSF REU Sites webpage, SACNAS, National Association of Black Geoscientists, Twitter.

Recommendation: invite speakers from minoritized groups to build a connection and increase the diversity within the pool of applicants in future hires.

- **What are the requirements for an applicant, e.g. letters of recommendations, fees/test scores/grades? Is providing any of these a potential barrier that could be further lowered or removed? Are there any problematic questions asked?**

Curators: For Federal employees, a CV and a USAJobs application are required. For Trust positions, applicants submit a cover letter, a CV, and list of recommenders to the Search Committee. If minimum requirements are met, the Institution requests additional material from the applicant (e.g. statements of research, collections, and education/outreach). Applicant does not know ahead of time which materials will be requested and the applicant may have only one week to provide additional documents. Transcripts are required once the offer is tendered.

Recommendation: To allow enough preparation time, job announcements should indicate which additional documents will be requested.

Recommendation: Historically, a Diversity Statement has not been requested from applicants. The NMNH should work with its HR office to allow such a document to be requested.

Scientific Staff: For Federal employees, CV's and a USAJobs application are required. The USAJobs application includes an evaluation tool, which is a standard part of the Federal hiring

process to determine if an applicant is highly qualified, qualified, or not qualified. A poorly designed evaluation tool could result in qualified applicants not being considered; hiring managers work with OHR staff to ensure evaluation tools meet Federal hiring guidelines and are well designed.

Postdoctoral and Graduate student fellowships: Requires a research proposal and abstract, a project description, two letters of recommendation, and a time table and budget for the work. For the Deep Time Fellowship, an Education & Outreach Statement is also requested. It is strongly suggested that applicants contact potential advisors beforehand, however many successful applicants have felt that a connection beyond an email exchange with the SI advisor (in-person or a connection through their Ph.D. advisor) is critical. Postdocs supported by external research grants are hired as Trust employees and can be appointed ad hoc with a process at the discretion of the PI.

Contractors: Typically requires bid, resume/CV, cover letter, and contact information for three references. Contractors must also be registered as Federal contractors.

Barriers and recommendations:

1) Federal positions are posted in USAJobs, which screens applicants through Smithsonian central HR for minimum qualifications. Those qualifications are revealed to the applicants, although the rubric for scoring them is not. This initial screening process is notorious for accidentally removing qualified candidates who do not have the background “scoop” on how to navigate the USAJobs system. Scientific technical terms are often misunderstood or misinterpreted by OHR, but OHR may allow a pre-elimination screening.

Recommendation: Create guidelines to help applicants navigate USAJobs.

2) During in-person interviews, candidates have been asked illegal questions (e.g. marital status) by external members of the search committee and visiting scholars have made inappropriate comments to the candidates in informal settings.

Recommendations: Require interview etiquette/objectivity training, or hold the search committee chair more responsible for properly briefing all members of the search committee and the department on what questions/comments are inappropriate. Have the search committee members or people making hiring decisions take implicit bias training.

3) Job advertisements are often recycled over the years.

Recommendation: The language should be reviewed often to detect and remove biases.

● **How are applicants/applications evaluated? Is that process and/or rubric public? What kind of biases are introduced in this process and what strategies are used to address these, e.g. removing applicant names?**

Curators – Federal and Trust positions have a “selecting official” with the final authority to choose the candidate. The selecting official is generally advised by a committee of 3-4 staff

members and one person external to the department and often the institution. For Federal hires, only applications that appear on a Certification list produced by HR can be reviewed by the committee. Only information submitted through USAJobs can be considered. Recommendation letters and personal statements are requested for a smaller group determined by the committee, and interviewees are then selected after the letters arrive.

Applicants are ranked on each of the identified competencies for the position (ie. research, outreach, etc.). From these rankings, aggregate rankings are formed from good to best. Short-list candidates are selected from the list of aggregate best candidates and invited to interview. The interviewee spends one full day in the department presenting a research lecture and meeting various members of the department and museum administration. The questions asked of each candidate and meeting schedules are identical. Post-interview input is solicited from all who met with the candidate and the committee makes a recommendation to the selecting official. The selecting official/Chair can deviate from the recommended selection of the selection committee, as can others up the line, but this is seldom done.

Recommendation: Doing a blind evaluation is challenging because the field is small, but it is a possibility. Additional consultants could be invited from other departments to rank specific documents. For example, staff from the Education department could read the outreach statements, etc.

Ask that final selection official rely on the recommendation of the selection committee, since it would reflect the thoughts of several people dedicated to the particular search.

Scientific staff - Federal and Trust positions have a “selecting official” with the final authority to choose the candidate. The selecting official is generally advised by a committee of 2-3 staff members and one person external to the department. For Federal hires, only applications that appear on a Certification list produced by HR can be reviewed by the committee. Only information submitted through USAJobs can be considered. Depending upon the position, and particularly for “cluster hires”, a rubric might be developed to assist in the evaluation and ranking process, but that rubric is not shared beyond the hiring committee. Interviews are conducted by the selecting official and all committee members for the final set of candidates - the same questions are asked of all candidates, and all interviews must be conducted in the same manner (all by phone or all in person); in practice this means that the interviews are generally done by phone. References are requested for a smaller group determined by the committee, after the interviews have been conducted. The committee recommends the candidate to be hired to the selecting official.

Contractors - There is a detailed nine step process of evaluation presented in the training for Contracting Official Technical Representatives (COTR). (1) Receive quotes. (2) Committee convenes. (3) Tool developed. (4) Remove prices. (5) Rate technical abilities. (6) Evaluation of price. (7) Evaluation of qualifications and price combined. (8) Reach consensus. (9) Create selection document that serves as the basis of the award. Interviews can be conducted by phone to remove some bias (race, ethnicity, age). As above, all interviews must be conducted in the same manner (if they are conducted at all). The Procurement Officer does the initial evaluation, and can request that the Office of Contracting (OCON) remove candidate names and bid amounts, or remove that information themselves, prior to sharing the quotes with the rest of a

committee (and the committee can be just one person, the COTR, if the project is small). Experience with working with museum collections is the most important requirement, but applicants with such experience are often those who had time and financial resources to volunteer. *Paleobiology*: There is no general rubric to evaluate candidates as each contract opportunity is different; the review committee develops a new evaluation tool and criteria that is tailored to each contract opportunity (request for quotes) per Federal contracting guidelines. *Mineral Sciences*: The evaluation tool is not shared beyond the hiring committee.

Postdoctoral Fellows - Postdocs include in the application the curators that they would like to work with (sponsors). Curators read and rank the applications that concern them. Then the fellowship committee made up of curators from different departments gets together to read and rank all applications. Curators may or may not use the rubric provided by OFI; some don't think the rubric is well-developed. Recently, a new question has been added for Fellow applicants to answer about DEI.

Recommendation: Curators should jointly develop a standardized rubric that they believe is well-designed, fair, and successful at selecting candidates. This rubric should also be reviewed from time to time. Overall, the pod agrees that rubrics have to be created thoughtfully to reflect values and reviewed periodically.

Interns - There are no institutional requirements for intern selection or compensation. Staff may work with any intern they select through whatever process they choose and have the option to pay the intern nothing. OFI suggests a weekly stipend value.

Some internship programs follow much more stringent guidelines. The NSF REU site states: Natural History Research Experiences (NHRE) has a very well-developed and formal process. NHRE has a selection committee that first evaluates applications holistically – considering the whole candidate's narrative without numericizing data about test scores, GPA etc. This holistic round is used to select finalists who have high promise for future leadership in the field. Finalists so identified enter a round-robin scoring rubric wherein at least 5 committee members rank each application. Ranked finalist applications are discussed by the entire committee in a holistic way. Final placements are made by the program co-Directors who also consider the match between an intern's stated interests and the staff and projects available for that particular summer's program.

- **Who is on selection committees and who makes the final decisions? Who interacts with the applicants?**

Selection committee composition is determined internally within the department, based on who has the most relevant skill set and knowledge for the position being hired, and who the successful candidate will interface with most frequently in their duties. Typically, the committee is composed of at least one internal member, a member from another department and (for curatorial hires) a member from another institution. The selecting official (generally the department chair for curatorial hires) has the final say, regardless of committee recommendation, but usually their decision follows the recommendation of the selection committee. Diversity is not always considered and the committee may lack, especially, racial and ethnic diversity.

Curators: All members of the department who are interested have an opportunity to interact, plus the hiring committee and various members of administrative and executive staff. Curatorial selection committees receive reports from sub-groups representing collections management and education on the interviewed candidates. These reports are taken into consideration by the committee when making their recommendation.

Scientific staff: Applicants interact only with the hiring committee members. Some interviews are only done by phone, while others may be in person or via videoconference, but all interviews for a single job ad are conducted in the same method.

Fellowships: The selection committee is composed of the associate director for science (ADS), the heads of the ESB, EASCI, and Anthro committees, and Head of Office of Academic Services. The final decision is made by the ADS. The applicants typically only interact with the potential advisor.

Recommendations: Strive to have a diverse selection committee and seek outside members from minoritized groups if necessary. Insist that the selection official follow the recommendation of the search committee.

- **Has your hiring and/or admissions process been evaluated by outside consultants? What is the process for changing it?**

Changing the Federal Government hiring process would be well above the authority of anyone at the Smithsonian. To our knowledge, no outside evaluation of the hiring or admissions process has been done. Such an evaluation would have to be at a level higher than the individual departments or the museum (i.e., institutional). Search committees for curatorial hires may include a member from an external institution, but that member is not charged with evaluating the process and there is no formal mechanism for feedback. Recently, a Visiting Committee reviewed the NMNH and spent some time discussing Hiring, Promotions, and Retentions and how this relates to DEI.

The interview process for curatorial candidates

The interview process is very rushed and feels more stressful than the typical two-day interviews conducted at universities. The interview day is quite busy, without open slots for the candidate to talk to other people of their interest or an opportunity to explore the institution's culture. The focus is almost solely on the job itself and there is very little time for the candidate to ask questions (about living in the DC area, for example). There are very few moments for bathroom breaks. Lunch is during one interview, which essentially means that the candidate does not get to eat. Dinner with the search committee is the only less-formal interaction. Candidates pay for accommodations upfront and request reimbursement.

Recommendations: The certification list is only active for a very short period of time, so interviews are limited to one day, however, our departments could do a better job at giving the candidate a heads-up so that they are not taken by surprise by the very fast interviews. We also recommend that the departments schedule more bathroom breaks and downtime as well as a

more informal lunch. Essentially, more opportunities for the candidate to get to know the department in a more informal setting. Build in blocks of time when the candidate can make requests of the institution (i.e. interviews with specific faculty members, collection visits, etc.). This would allow the candidate more control in assessing the culture and strengths of the department directly. Remove the financial barrier of interview by paying expenses upfront. Establish equity checks at several steps of the recruitment and hiring process.

The Onboarding process

Members of the NMNH community agree that the onboarding process is not straightforward. As a result, the Senate of Scientists is reviewing the onboarding process at all levels to make recommendations for improvement, including creating official onboarding documents.

For international hires—particularly those who have never lived/worked in the United States before—the onboarding process represents a significant and potentially insurmountable barrier. When a non-US citizen is awarded a postdoctoral fellowship at the institution, the following is required before the individual can be paid: (i) US bank account; and (ii) social security number. Whilst these items are often trivial to US citizens, obtaining these items requires the person to be present in the United States. Moreover, there is an 8-week (often more) delay between submitting the bank transfer forms to the Smithsonian Institution and receiving the stipend for the first time. Consequently, prior to getting paid, international fellows new to the US have significant expenses, including (but not restricted to): (i) visa application fees; (ii) domestic travel to US embassy; (iii) international flights; (iv) accommodation in Washington DC for at least 2 months; and (v) eight weeks of living expenses. Combined, these items cost thousands of dollars.

This up-front cost of starting a postdoctoral fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution is potentially insurmountable for many fellows (both international and domestic). This is felt particularly acutely by fellows who have recently finished poorly-paid PhD programs, where there is little-no opportunity to save. This burden is also acutely felt by those from less wealthy nations, and by those who have no access to familial financial support. Ultimately, this set of circumstances encourages participation from researchers who hail from wealthy backgrounds, or those willing and able to take on additional debt, and is a barrier to developing a diverse, equitable and inclusive environment.

Recommendation: Adjust and improve the OFI payment schedules to provide upfront salary to fellows to offset startup costs, as has been done in the past. Provide special guidance to international fellows.

- **Has your university or company implemented or considered strategies like cohort hiring, mentoring, dual career support and partner hires, re-visioning your work culture, or other considerations outlined in “Leveraging Promising Practices?”**

Cohort hiring: This is becoming increasingly common as multiple hires on a single job action (called a cluster hire in the federal system) can reduce OHR workload and speed hiring. However, no attempt is made to create a cohort with unifying characteristics.

Dual hires: Dual career support and partner hires are not allowed in the Federal Government, partially as a result of federal anti-nepotism laws. That being said, dual-career strategies are extremely attractive and can play a huge role in hiring and retaining underrepresented groups.

Mentoring of early-career scientists: The supervisor provides most of the mentoring and perhaps another senior staff member might contribute. In paleobiology, all incoming curators are assigned a more senior curator within the department as a mentor. They further have regular meetings with the department chair to ensure that their needs are being met, and to ask questions. Cross departmental mentoring is often discussed and seldom implemented. There isn't currently a formal mentoring process for new curatorial hires. The NMNH Senate of Scientists has formed an Onboarding Committee that will produce a formal mentoring protocol and recommend its implementation. This committee will also tackle the issue of work culture and provide guidelines for revisioning the culture in order to have a welcoming and inclusive workplace. Informally, early career researchers meet for lunch monthly. This is an opportunity for them to get to know each other, bond and talk about their concerns.

Non-curators currently do not have an early-career mentorship program.

Recommendations: Develop a training program for mentors to strengthen their effectiveness. Encourage cross-departmental mentorship so that the relationship between mentor and mentee is more neutral. The department could offer the mentee the choice between two possible mentors. Build a program to allow for mentoring among all levels of scientific staff.

Mentoring of fellows and interns: Advisors do not go through formal training (except in the case the advisee is a minor) but do receive a guidance packet from the Academic Resources Center for the following instances: arrival/orientation, access/badging, email/network access, accident/injury reporting, prevention of workplace harassment, international appointees, export compliance, and exit protocol. Recently, the SI instituted a professional development program for postdocs.

Recommendation: Postdocs often work in isolation and instead would benefit from more collaboration with curators and other research staff. Encourage cross-departmental cohorts and infrastructure for postdoctoral mentoring/socialization.

Collection positions: The collections community at the museum is supportive and welcoming. But these positions are generally filled by overqualified people that are underpaid, promotions are not quick enough to retain employees, and mentorship is lacking.

Recommendation: Formal mentorship for new collection personnel.

- **Additional comments**

The place we probably do the worst job is in attracting qualified candidates from underrepresented communities, in part because we don't build strong relationships with those communities and, in part, because our salaries relative to our cost of living are no longer competitive with what many other universities and organizations can offer. Promotions are also very slow for all positions across the museum and leads to a lack of retention. This is a museum-wide issue that is being addressed.

In a recent meeting with an external search committee, several POC (and non-POC) staff across the museum mentioned that a big reason why they were still at the institution was because they were Trust hires and their supervisors were able to promote them in a timely fashion/they were offered competitive salaries to match offers from other institutions. These accommodations may not be possible or timely for Federal hires. Despite the amazing work opportunities at the Smithsonian, unfortunately the cost of living in the DMV has made it more difficult to attract and retain qualified candidates with the pay that is typically offered.

Buck language added this year: "How does your perspective, experience, and/or project contribute to a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable discipline?"

The pod discussed explicitly using demographic info to make selection decisions. HR tracks demographics at the following stages of the hiring process:

- Voluntarily Identified Applicants
- Qualified External Applicants
- Interviewed Applicants (no data for this one in FY2019 for some reason)
- Referred Applicants
- External Selections

EEO law (not Smithsonian policy) forbids releasing demographic data on individual employees. This may or may not include applicants, but many parts of EEO law treat employees and applicants the same. Applicant pool sizes for individual positions may be too small for OEEMA to release statistics that can be used to inform hires, although they do report on pools as small as 9 people in their FY2019 report to the EEOC and the first few stages for any given position should easily exceed that.

Allowed uses of demographic data from the EEO law: "The agency may use the data only in studies and analyses which contribute affirmatively to achieving the objectives of the equal employment opportunity program. An agency shall not establish a quota for the employment of persons on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin."