



Hiring and/or Admissions Policies for Princeton University AOS/GEO URGE Deliverable #5

This is what was found by Princeton University AOS/Geo pod on Hiring and/or Admissions Policies, as well as what the pod would propose to change and improve.

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Audit of AOS/GEO postdoc and researcher hiring processes

Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) statement and other inclusion statements:

Included on all postdoc/researcher advertisements: *Princeton University is an equal opportunity employer and all qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment without regard to age, race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, national origin, disability status, protected veteran status, or any other characteristic protected by law.*

Postdoc ads are written by the PI, subject to university oversight, so other inclusion statements vary. The annual open CIMES-AOS postdoc (known as the Visiting Scientist Program postdoc, VSP from hereon) announcement contains the following: *We would like to broaden participation in earth system scientific research and therefore encourage applications from groups historically under-represented in science.* An optional “diversity statement” is requested as follows: *Applicants are also encouraged to submit an optional (700 word limit) statement describing past contributions, current activities and/or future plans to enhance equity and diversity in academia and/or earth system science.*

The Harry Hess Postdoctoral Fellowship within the Department of Geosciences uses only the required University EEO statement and does not require an additional “diversity statement”. Application materials include a research statement, CV, and email addresses of three (3) letters of reference (only a subset of candidates have letters requested). The Hess Fellowship has not been advertised since 2019 and will likely include a DEAI statement requirement the next time it is advertised.

In 2019, Princeton University introduced the Future Faculty in the Physical Sciences (FFPS) Fellowship for “scholars who can contribute to the University’s diversity, broadly defined, including members of groups that have been historically, and are presently, underrepresented in the academy or in particular disciplines, such as racial and ethnic minorities and women in STEM.” In 2020, the Department of Geosciences successfully nominated two (2) individuals to the FFPS fellowship for the 2021-2023 cohort.

Advertising:

All GEO/AOS postdoc advertisements are posted on the following online listings: AGU eos, Earthworks, Institute for Broadening Participation, es-jobs, and SACNAS, as well as the Princeton job openings and AOS program website. In addition, PIs are encouraged to send advertisements to their networks, and directly to promising candidates, particularly from under-represented groups.

Requirements for postdoc or researcher applicants:

For all postdocs/researchers: CV, contact details for 2-3 letters of recommendation.



For the open VSP postdoc (AOS): For the annual open VSP call: a research proposal of about 3-5 pages in length. No fees, test scores or grades are required. We do not require the candidate to ensure the reference letters are submitted; we contact the referees directly, thereby lowering a potential barrier. The VSP research proposal is a potential barrier, since the most successful proposals require the applicant to have some understanding of the scope of research carried out at GFDL/CIMES. We attempt to mitigate this barrier by including wording in the job listing stating: “Applicants are strongly encouraged to contact potential hosts at GFDL and/or Princeton University prior to application to discuss areas of possible research.” as well as links to information about Princeton AOS and GFDL, to attempt to facilitate this process. We also include instructions on the website for the research proposal, i.e. “*This proposal should clearly outline the research the applicant wishes to conduct in collaboration with Princeton and NOAA-GFDL scientists, and should list the proposed collaborators, as well as having a clear explanatory project title.*” The inclusion of the research proposal should be a mechanism to increase dependence of the application on the applicant’s own research abilities, and reduce dependence on letter-writers, but currently, the applicant pool for the VSP postdoc (with research proposal) tends to be less diverse than the applicant pool for other postdocs (without research proposal). This suggests that applicants from marginalized groups may have received less encouragement and/or mentoring in independent proposal writing, or have had their confidence in their ability to develop such a proposal diminished. We could further reduce this barrier by having an informational webinar on the application process, and in particular the proposal writing process.

How are postdoc or researcher applicants/applications evaluated:

PI-led projects (AOS): For PI-led projects, the CV and references of the applicants will be examined by the PI and collaborators to determine if they have the skills and motivation needed for the particular project; an interview short-list is developed, and candidates give a research seminar, and are interviewed by the PI and collaborators. Finally, the PI selects the candidate best suited to the particular project requirements. In AOS, the PI then presents the package for the leading candidate to the AOS program Visiting Scientist Committee, which reviews the application package and makes a recommendation to the AOS program director for appointment.

PI-led projects (GEO): In GEO, the PI presents the package to the Department Chair who forwards the recommendation along to the Dean of the Faculty. For the Harry Hess Postdoctoral Fellowship, the long list of initial candidates is whittled into a short(er) list by the Fellowship committee (current faculty volunteers) and letters of reference are requested. From this list, an interview list of 5-6 candidates is generated that encompasses the breadth of research in the department and the strength of candidates in the application pool. These candidates are interviewed, either with an in-person visit and seminar (up until 2020), or a remote visit/seminar (2020-onwards). Final decisions for the Hess Postdoctoral Fellowship are made by vote of the full faculty.



For the open VSP postdoc (AOS): Based on evidence from the CV, reference letters, and research proposals, each division within GFDL selects their top few candidates, with broad criteria of research excellence and relevance of their proposed project to GFDL/CIMES's research mission. These candidates are then discussed together at a meeting of the Visiting Scientist Committee (VSC). A short-list of candidates are invited for an interview: candidates give a research seminar, and are interviewed by their potential advisor and other members of VSC. At a second meeting of the VSC, the short-listed candidates are reviewed again, with particular attention to their seminars and interviews. Additional information, such as publications and work in diversity and equity may also be taken into consideration. This meeting ends with a recommendation on a list of candidates to appoint, taking into account financial and other constraints. The VSC recommendations are communicated to the AOS program director for approval.

Is the process and/or rubric for approval of postdocs public?

(AOS) The process for approval of postdocs on PI-led projects and the VSP postdoc is documented in a memorandum agreed by the AOS director, the GFDL director, the CIMES director and the VSC.

(GEO) This process is governed by the University and we follow their guidelines to the letter. GEO has no latitude for individual approval or other processes.

Potential avenues for bias in hiring a postdoc or researcher (AOS):

There are several potential avenues for bias.

1. "Unconscious" bias against people from particular groups based on name, institution etc - We do not remove names from applications, because in a small field, this would not be sufficient to anonymize the application, especially as candidates usually contact potential advisors prior to submitting applications, to discuss potential research areas. Instead, we examine the interview short-list for evidence of systematic bias (e.g. gender imbalance compared to the applicant pool), and adjust the short-list accordingly. The university-appointed search officer can also recommend the committee take a closer look at certain applications, to ensure that candidates from marginalized groups get full consideration. This process could be improved by having the search officer (the only person in the program with access to demographic information on the candidates) approve all interview short-lists, to ensure candidates from marginalized groups are not being overlooked.
2. Structural bias associated with seminar presentations: In the past, short listed candidates within the US often gave in-person seminars, while these were more difficult to arrange for short-listed candidates based overseas, so they sometimes gave webinars instead. This practice puts overseas candidates at a disadvantage; this year all short-listed candidates have given webinars, putting them on an equal footing. Webinars however have their own issues: someone giving a webinar with poor internet connectivity and while looking after family members at home is at a disadvantage compared with someone with good internet and no distractions.



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3. Biases in recommendation letters resulting from the biases of the writer. The VSC discusses and attempts to take into account this potential bias, especially if a letter for an otherwise strong candidate (based on proposal, CV, seminar) is unusually short or dismissive.
4. Bias toward particular PhD institutions: Members of VSC may have preferences for candidates previously advised by colleagues, or trained in a program they are familiar with. Having a committee discussion and decision for the VSP postdoc may help to mitigate individual biases, but may reinforce biases held by the whole group. For PI-led postdoc hires, the VSC can ensure that a consistent process is followed, but has few other options to reduce bias. Other options could include removing institutional identification from the application, and removing the names of referees, but given the small field, when postdoc applicants have likely published with their referees, anonymity is difficult to achieve.

Potential avenues for bias in hiring a postdoc or researcher (GEO):

Many of the barriers listed for AOS also apply to GEO, including the following:

1. “Unconscious” bias against people from particular groups based on name, institution etc. Similar to the AOS scenario, the short-list process could be improved by having the search officer (the only person in the program with access to demographic information on the candidates) approve all interview short-lists, to ensure candidates from marginalized groups are not being overlooked.
2. Structural bias associated with seminar presentations.
3. Biases in recommendation letters resulting from the biases of the writer.
4. Bias toward particular PhD institutions. Members of the selection committee may have preferences for candidates previously advised by colleagues, or trained in a program they are familiar with. As mentioned above, this is challenging given small fields when applicants will have published with referees etc.

Who is on the postdoc or researcher selection committee and who makes the final decision:

(AOS) The AOS/CIMES Visiting Scientist Committee consists of all AOS faculty, as well as Division leaders from GFDL. For PI-led proposals, the PI makes the initial decision, which is reviewed by the VSC. For the VSP postdoc, the VSC makes a consensus decision. In both cases, VSC provides a recommendation to the AOS program director who makes the final decision. The applicants interact with potential advisors, members of the VSC, other members of the research divisions, and current postdocs.

(GEO) In GEO, individual PI’s (for most postdoctoral appointments) or the full faculty (for the Harry Hess Postdoctoral Fellowship) in consultation with the Dean of the Faculty.

(AOS) The AOS postdoc selection process has not been evaluated by outside consultants. The process for changing it involves reaching an agreement within the VSC, and obtaining approval



from the directors of CIMES, AOS, GFDL, as well as final approval from the Dean of the Faculty.

(GEO) The GEO postdoc selection process has not been evaluated by outside consultants. The process is mandated by the University once the short list has been identified.

Postdoc hiring strategies:

(AOS) Partner hires and remote working: AOS does occasionally consider partner hires, and remote working arrangements.

Mentoring: Currently mentoring is primarily the role of the advisor, but the VSC does review progress of the postdoc after 1 year, and make recommendations to the advisor if needed.

Postdocs may enroll in other mentoring programs, such as Princeton Women in Geosciences mentoring, if eligible.

(GEO) Mentoring: Mentoring is primarily the role of the advisor. Additionally, the Princeton Women in Geosciences group has a mentoring program where incoming postdocs regardless of their gender can be paired with a faculty mentor.

Audit of AOS/GEO graduate student admissions processes

EEO statement and other inclusion statements:

From the graduate school website: *Princeton University does not discriminate on the basis of age, race, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, religion, national or ethnic origin, disability, or veteran status in any phase of its admission or financial aid programs, or other aspects of its educational programs or activities.*

AOS program webpage statement: *The AOS program believes that equity, diversity and inclusion are intrinsically valuable, and an essential element of ethical research and educational practices. We also understand that they magnify the educational and research potential of us as individuals, our program, the University, and our global scientific disciplines. We seek and appreciate contributions from all members of our community, without regard to race, ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, physical ability, age, socioeconomic status or nationality. We desire and celebrate diversity, and we know that a more diverse and inclusive community is stronger, more resilient, and better able to produce fundamental scientific advances and to effectively communicate to the global community.*

Optional diversity statement for AOS applicants: *Applicants may submit a statement with their application, briefly describing how their academic interests, background, or life experiences would advance Princeton's commitment to diversity within the Graduate School and train individuals in an increasingly diverse society.*



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GEO program webpage statement: *The Department and the University are actively committed to increasing **graduate student diversity** on campus. We welcome tigers of all stripes to apply for Graduate Studies in the Department of Geosciences. For students who may find the application fee a burden, we draw your attention to the **fee waivers** offered by the Graduate School, see [here](#).*

Additional links:

GEO Diversity Committee: <https://geosciences.princeton.edu/people/diversity>

Advertising:

(AOS) The webpage https://aos.princeton.edu/phd_program/overview has historically been the main route to advertise the graduate program. More recently, AOS faculty and students have participated in open houses at conferences serving historically marginalized groups, e.g. SACNAS, NSBP. We intend to continue to expand our outreach to these conferences, and others. A virtual open house organized by Princeton graduate school in December 2020 shortly before applications were due was also a successful advertising mechanism, which we intend to continue in future years. Internships are another way to advertise our graduate program: NOAA Hollings scholars, working at NOAA-GFDL for a summer, have long been a source of AOS program students. More recently, the CIMES internship, which brings students from historically marginalized groups into Princeton/GFDL for summer research, with a goal of broadening participation in climate science, has occasionally been a mechanism for recruitment to the AOS graduate program. We could expand our advertising and increase access to our program by directly reaching out to a wide variety of undergraduate institutions, including minority serving institutions and regional universities.

(GEO) The webpage (<https://geosciences.princeton.edu/graduate/applications>) is again the main route to advertise the graduate program in addition to word-of-mouth. More recently, GEO faculty have participated in open houses at conferences serving historically marginalized groups, e.g. SACNAS, NSBP. We intend to continue to expand our outreach to these conferences, and others. We could expand our advertising and increase access to our program by directly reaching out to a wide variety of undergraduate institutions, including minority serving institutions and regional universities.

Requirements for graduate student applicants:

Application requirements are largely determined by the graduate school. Applications consist of a Statement of Academic Purpose, a CV, 3 recommendation letters, academic transcripts, and an optional diversity statement. Neither the AOS nor GEO programs require the GRE, and there are no minimum requirements for grades. Applicants are not required to contact a faculty member prior to application, although applicants are encouraged to do so, to determine if their research interests are a match for those of potential advisors. To reduce barriers to application, a checklist and guidelines are given on the AOS/GEO webpage, with further information on the graduate school webpage.



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The application fee set by the graduate school is \$95. Fee waivers (link provided on the graduate website) are available based on either participation in an approved program (e.g. McNair scholars) or (for US-citizens and permanent residents only) financial hardship. The application fee is therefore a barrier to application particularly for non-US citizens of limited means.

English language tests (e.g. TOEFL or IELTS) are required for all applicants whose native language is not English, unless they have studied for an undergraduate degree for a minimum of 3 years, in the USA, UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand or Anglophone Canada. Note that studying for an undergraduate degree in English in one of the many other countries where English is a national language (e.g. India, Nigeria etc), does not exempt an applicant from the English language requirement. This requirement presents a financial and logistical burden, and discriminates against one group of English-speaking countries compared to another (majority white) group of countries. This testing burden could be eliminated by using interviews to determine a candidate's fluency in spoken English.

How are graduate student applicants/applications evaluated (AOS):

AOS graduate student applications are evaluated by the whole AOS faculty, using a holistic evaluation. There is a rubric, which provides guidance as to qualities to look for in the application material, but does not assign scores. (We could revisit the rubric to make it more detailed, encouraging evaluators to write their assessment in every category). The evaluation process examines the personal statement, the reference letters, coursework and grades from the transcript, as well as CV and diversity statement, for evidence of creativity, originality, grit, perseverance, communication skills, and sufficient academic background to succeed in the AOS program. For short-listed candidates, the interview provides additional detail and in depth examination to round out the evaluation.

Initially, the 3-person Graduate Work Committee examines every application, and sorts the applications into 3 groups, depending on likelihood of admission. These lists are shared with the rest of the faculty prior to the first faculty meeting, and faculty are encouraged to prioritize reading the applications from the top 2 groups, as well as any applications listing that faculty member as a potential advisor, but may read all applications if they choose. At the first faculty meeting, the faculty will discuss all candidates in the top 2 categories, as well as any additional candidate where a faculty member advocates for their file to be kept active in discussion. At this meeting, a short-list of candidates for interview is drawn up, with at least one faculty member assigned to each of these candidates as a potential advisor. Following this first meeting, all short-listed candidates are interviewed, with the interview conducted by the potential advisor(s) and other faculty in the relevant subject area, following a set interview rubric based on the Fiske-Vanderbilt Bridge program toolkit. Interview transcripts are shared with all faculty. The interview questions aim to both understand further the interests and motivation of the applicant, as well as giving the applicant an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of research they have conducted as well as how they have overcome challenges.

Following all the interviews, a second faculty meeting discusses all the candidates for whom there remains strong interest, with an identified potential research advisor. At this second



meeting, or occasionally at a third meeting if more information is needed, faculty make a rank ordered vote on all the candidates remaining in the shortlist. The candidate rankings following this vote provide guidance as to the list of candidates to be admitted, given the constraints on admittance numbers (financial and otherwise).

Potential avenues for bias in selecting graduate students (AOS):

1. “Unconscious” bias against people from particular groups based on name, institution etc We do not currently remove names from applications. This could help to reduce bias in the initial review of all applications. However, some applicants may be known to faculty members as prior Hollings or CIMES interns, or through other interactions including emailing/calling to find out more about the program/research, so removing names may not be sufficient to provide anonymity. Currently, the interview short-list and the final rankings are both examined for evidence of systematic bias (e.g. gender imbalance compared to the applicant pool), and may be adjusted accordingly. The self-identified demographic information of all candidates is known to all the faculty. While this could potentially be another initiator of bias, we use this information to make sure all candidates from under-represented groups are given a close look, and included on the interview short-list, to ensure they are not overlooked. Since biased decisions are more likely when rushed, the discussion and decision process is spread out over several meetings, with plenty of time to evaluate all information in between.
2. Structural bias associated with access to research opportunities. Since GRE is no longer considered in applications and academic grades are understood to be less useful as a guide to research ability, the opinion of reference letter writers and the applicant’s own communications (via statement of purpose and interview) regarding their research skills have become very important for admission. However, we recognise that not all applicants will have had the opportunity to engage in research, or to have their research abilities assessed by an advisor. We attempt to mitigate this by providing the CIMES research internship, which is available to just-graduated students as well as undergrads, in order to provide that experience. However this is insufficient, and access to research opportunities therefore remains a barrier. A bridge-to-PhD program, providing a year of supervised research prior to PhD program application, could be another partial solution.
3. Biases in recommendation letters resulting from the biases of the writer. The faculty discusses and attempts to take into account this potential bias, especially if a letter for an otherwise strong candidate (based on statement of purpose, CV, interview, transcript) is unusually short or dismissive.
4. Bias toward particular undergraduate institutions: Faculty members may have explicit or unconscious preferences for candidates from particular undergraduate institutions, or who have worked with particular colleagues. Having the full faculty rank candidates may help to mitigate these individual biases. Could we remove the institutional information from the application?
5. Structural bias associated with the focus of the program: The AOS program has historically emphasized a more theoretical approach to climate science, looking for a



sufficient quantitative and mathematical background for candidates to succeed. This however may exclude candidates coming to climate science from less physical science backgrounds, such as environmental science or geography. Since physical sciences tend to have lower representation of students from historically marginalized groups than biological sciences (evidence: SACNAS research areas, backgrounds of students applying to CIMES internships), our program's emphasis on physical science backgrounds may therefore exclude students who came to climate science from these other pathways. A solution would be to provide a greater array of tracks in the AOS program, as well as foundation level courses for those who wish to switch tracks, or summer bridge programs to address any missing prerequisites before grad school enrollment, following the example of undergrad programs such as the Meyerhoff Scholar Program <https://meyerhoff.umbc.edu/13-key-components/>.

6. Bias associated with interviews: Interviews can allow biases based on appearance, voice, speaking manner, internet connection, background space/noise, etc to enter the process. Some people are more confident than others speaking to strangers about themselves. We try to give the applicant as much control (e.g. choice of time, video v. phone) and concentrate faculty discussion on items recorded in the transcript. We could provide the questions in advance to further reduce stress on the candidate.
7. Bias associated with prior knowledge of how to write the statement of purpose. Some students get coaching in writing statements of purpose. Others write statements that miss the mark in terms of not containing the information we want, due to lack of guidance. Possible mechanisms to address this could include: providing a list of questions we want addressed in the SoP (if the grad school will allow us to provide program-specific prompts) and a virtual workshop to guide students in writing statements of purpose.

Who is on the graduate student selection committee and who makes the final decision (AOS):

The whole AOS faculty decides who to recommend for admission. The Dean of the Graduate School makes the final decision. Unlike some programs, there is no input from a graduate student Diversity, equity and inclusion committee on admissions. Applicants may be put in contact with current or former students before or after admission, to learn more about the program and allow them to ask questions of their peers.

The AOS admissions process has been discussed in broad terms with the Princeton University Senior Associate Director for Institutional Diversity and Inclusion, Shawn Maxam, who has provided guidance in interrupting bias in the admissions process. Many aspects of the applications themselves are however set by the Graduate School, not by the program. As an example of how changes are made, the decision to allow individual programs to drop the GRE requirement was first made by the Graduate School, following which the AOS faculty voted to make the GRE optional.



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How are graduate student applicants/applications evaluated (GEO):

Graduate student applications are first evaluated by the Graduate Work Committee (GWC), a faculty committee made up of ~4 individuals of any rank. The full list of applicants is split up according to the number of GWC members and each member then reads a proportional number of applications in full. Based on this initial read of the application potential faculty advisors are identified (either from direct statements in the materials or based on inferred interest) and candidates are ranked as either 1 – likely admit, 2 – for consideration, 3 – likely decline. This information (potential advisor, preliminary ranking) is combined with other information from the application (e.g. GPA, University attended, etc.) into a single spreadsheet that is then shared with the full faculty. Faculty are then encouraged to look at all applications affiliated with their name/field. Faculty are then left to evaluate applications as they see fit (some invite students to visit, others conduct phone interviews). Potential URM students are flagged both by the University and by the GWC and faculty are encouraged to give these candidates additional consideration. Final selection of the admitted students is limited in number by the Graduate School but each admitted student is agreed upon by the full faculty.

There are several potential avenues for bias in selecting graduate students (GEO):

There are several examples of potential barriers and avenues for bias. Potential barriers include access to field experience or field work, which have financial and accessibility barriers (e.g., Abeyta et al. 2021 [EarthArXiv](#) quantifying the costs for field-based education). Other barriers include a lack of peer mentoring and ‘cohort hire’ practices, as a community of peers with similar background and/or identity promotes enhanced learning and also increases the retention of scholars from underrepresented groups in Geosciences (e.g., [Griffin 2020](#)). Potential biases include unconscious bias against applicants based on name and institution, structural bias against applicants with limited access to field or research experiences, and bias toward particular selective undergraduate institutions on the part of the GWC and faculty. Other biases include in recommendation letters, and faculty should undergo training to be aware of the pitfalls of biases in letter writing (both in reading letters, and in writing letters of recommendation). The GRE is no longer considered in applications, which will likely place more emphasis on research opportunities, letters of recommendation which may have their own biases (e.g., access to research opportunities or implicit biases in the letters themselves). As described in the AOS section above, individual faculty and department-level interests will also bias the selection process (e.g., toward theoretical or fundamental research as opposed to applied research, based on the expertise and research interests of the faculty).

Who is on the graduate student selection committee and who makes the final decision (GEO):

Final selection of the admitted students is limited in number by the Graduate School but each admitted student is agreed upon by the full faculty as described above. Individual applicants are admitted under the advisorship of specific PIs. Applicants may be put into contact with current or



former graduate students before or after admission, to learn more about the program and allow them to ask questions of their peers.

Audit of GEO faculty hiring processes

Once a search is approved by the University, the position is advertised on our website, in major publications and on their websites, and at every society we can find that might reach out to URM or other historically excluded groups. GEO applications are reviewed by the search committee (made up of faculty chosen by Dept. Chair). The search committee also contains a search officer who oversees compliance with university policies. Independently, the DEAI statements (anonymized) of all applicants are reviewed and ranked by the GEO Diversity Committee. This ranking is shared with the faculty search committee. The faculty search committee selects candidates for whom letters will be obtained, then makes a short list of candidates to be interviewed. The short list must be approved by the DOF and at this stage the list is reviewed for representation - i.e. they could reject the list if it only contained white males for example.

The short listed candidates are invited to interview. A full interview consists of a public seminar and individual meetings with any faculty who sign up, with individual and groups of graduate students and postdocs, faculty from other relevant departments, etc. The department chair always meets with each candidate and asks a similar set of questions of each, regarding research area, collaborators, space and instrumentation needs, teaching interests, etc.

The entire GEO faculty discuss each interviewed candidate, usually both individually after the visit, and then comparatively at the end of the process. When all discussion is complete, a secret ballot vote is taken at a faculty meeting. A second secret ballot vote is taken at the next faculty meeting. This usually results in unanimous approval of one or two candidates, sometimes leading to a request for a second position (sometimes a Target of Opportunity position) or simply an agreement to move to the second candidate if the first declines.

Application materials required include a research statement, a teaching statement, a DEAI statement, a complete CV and list of 3 or more potential references. There is no rubric. These materials are made available to all members of the faculty.

Audit of AOS faculty hiring processes

There are no faculty hired directly by AOS--hiring is conducted either by the Geosciences Department or by GFDL.



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