

URGE

Unlearning Racism in Geoscience

Hiring and/or Admissions Policies for University of South Florida College of Marine Science (USF CMS)

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

- **What EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) statement¹ is included in a standard job or admissions advertisement?**

From the 2018 simultaneous Geological and Chemical Oceanographer searches: “...At the heart of USF is a vibrant, diverse and engaged student body... The University of South Florida is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action/Equal Access Institution. To request disability accommodations in the application and interview process call According to Florida law, applications, and meetings regarding them, are open to the public.”

From the CMS website r.e. grad admissions: “We recruit graduate students from our region, across our nation and around the world. We are committed to maintaining a diverse and highly qualified graduate student population and enabling their success.”

- **Are there other inclusion statements and resources publicly available²?**

<https://www.usf.edu/marine-science/education/diversity/our-plan.aspx>

<https://www.usf.edu/marine-science/education/diversity/index.aspx>

<https://www.usf.edu/admissions/graduate/admission-information/index.aspx>

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

From the 2018 Chemical Oceanographer and Geological Oceanographer Searches: OCB newsletter (Chem), EOS, GEOTRACES listserv (Chem), USF employment site, USF CMS website, Association of Women in Science, Chronicle of Higher Ed, Research Gate, Nature Jobs Online, Science Online, AGU Career Center, Consortium of Ocean Leadership, Academic Careers Online, Diverse Issues in Education, Earthworks (Chem), National Association of Black Physicists (Geo), Isogeochem mailing list (Geo)

Student recruitment: AGU, OSM, SACNAS and Emerging Researchers National Conference in STEM (ERN). Some professors have pipelines that they have built through the years.

We regularly populate a table at AGU and OSM, and attended SACNAS in 2019 and ERN in 2020. In Fall 2018, faculty members from five minority serving institutions (MSIs; Morehouse College, Spelman College, University of the Virgin Islands, Xavier University of Louisiana, and Savannah State University) were invited to visit CMS for a Faculty Visitation Program. The goal of the Faculty Visitation Program was to establish new research collaborations between USF and

¹ R. Kelley, 10 Samples of an Effective EEO Statement, blog.ongig.com/diversity-and-inclusion/eeo-statement-samples, (2017).

² <https://careers.who.edu/opportunities/diversity-inclusion/>

³ K. Cobb, #GRExit Resources, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.13215461.v1>, (2020).

⁴ J. Posselt, Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjghw8s>, (2016).

⁵ <https://www.brandeis.edu/diversity/dei-recruitment-hiring/rubric-for-evaluating-diversity-statements.html>

⁶ K. Griffin, J. Bennett, T. York, Leveraging Promising Practices, Washington DC: Aspire Alliance, (2020).



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MSIs and build recruitment pipelines. Faculty members from these institutions recommended students for CMS' first NSF REU supplement program in Summer 2019. CMS is currently working on a proposal to fund an NSF REU site that will invite students from MSIs. Three CMS faculty also gave science talks at three MSIs from the Faculty Visitation Program.

Locally, we've attended USF career fairs (Sarasota Manatee campus and virtual).

We also have funds for recruitment of BIPOC students – enough to fly them to St. Petersburg with the group of invited students and pay their hotels. This differs from our standard procedure of potential advisors covering the costs of recruitment travel individually.

- **What are the requirements for an applicant, e.g. letters of recommendations, fees/test scores³/grades?**

For faculty applicants - Teaching statement, Research statement, Cover letter, Names/contact info for 3 Letters of Recommendation. No DEI statements required by university to date. System is designed to give a lot of freedom to faculty hiring committees.

For grad applicants -

<https://www.usf.edu/marine-science/education/prospective-students/how-to-apply.aspx>

- **3.0 or better GPA from undergraduate degree, preferably in a STEM field**
- **Transcripts of courses and grades from all colleges/universities attended (\$\$ varies)**
- **Application and fee (\$30)**
[Fee waivers](#) available to those participating in qualified programs (usually regional or national URM-focuses programs)

Application Info & Research Essay Template

- **Personal Statement**
Added by recommendation of the Fall 2020 committee, no guidance or prompts given Fall 2021 committee discussed adding prompts for future cycles, requires faculty vote
- **Three Letters of Recommendation**
We recommend that these be academic and/or professional references.
- **GRE Scores from test taken within five years**
We removed minimum required scores for GRE in 2019. Faculty debated moving towards a GRE-optional model, but ultimately voted to keep the requirement. For Spring 2020 and Fall 2021 cycles, GRE requirement was waived due to pandemic access restrictions. Consequently, admissions committee evaluated applications without GRE scores. We'll be looking at the data to see how this impacted process and outcomes.
- **Priority Deadlines:** For Fall cycles, we have a priority deadline to be considered for endowment and internal funding. Applicants may apply after the priority deadline. We are moving the application deadline earlier to allow more time to review applications.



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Is providing any of these a potential barrier that could be further lowered or removed? Are there any problematic questions asked?

For faculty applicants - Faculty recommendation letters submitted on behalf of candidates in our college are subject to [Florida Sunshine laws](#). These laws make those documents publicly discoverable. In several cases, this has made it slightly more difficult to obtain letters of recommendation from some listed references because we must inform them that their letters will be part of the public record.

For grad applicants -

- GRE scores are still required outside of the pandemic. Faculty voted on the issue two times, both votes had narrow margins.
- We require a “personal statement” and a “research essay” with open essay prompts (see below), which leads to widely varied responses and may end up biasing against students without experienced mentors. These were the prompts for Fall 2021 essays, written by the admissions coordinator as an interpretation of conversations with faculty:
 - o Research Essay: *This essay should address the research interests that you hope to pursue if accepted into a degree program the College of Marine Science. Please also include which faculty members or labs you are interested in joining. Use this linked MS Word template to create your essay. Save it as a PDF and upload it in the “Essay” section of the Admissions Application. We encourage all applicants to review the CMS faculty pages ahead of time to learn more about their research. Please list all the faculty members that you are interested in on your Research Interest Essay. All applications will be reviewed by the admissions committee after the deadline to determine admissibility and to match student’s interests with available professors. Making direct contact (phone/email/skype) with faculty members of interest is mandatory.*
 - o Personal Statement: *Where the research essay should focus on your research interests, the personal statement is where you may give a narrative context to your application. Tell us about your passion, background, skills, challenges, obstacles overcome, inspiration, and aspirations as a future scientist. There is no template for the personal statement, but please limit it to no more than three pages. Save it as a PDF and upload it in “personal statement” section of the online application.*
- The prompts are [listed here](#). Currently, discrepancies between application prompts here and on the actual application “app” are being resolved.



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- **How are applicants/applications evaluated?**

Faculty search committees – Open, holistic evaluations. Initial application materials without recommendation letters are reviewed by the committee, letters of recommendation (three each) are sought from approximately 10-15 applicants, which the committee reviews in a dedicated meeting to narrow down to 3-5 applicants invited for an on-campus interview. See discussion below on the use of a rubric for committee evaluations.

For grad applicants - Admissions Committee reviews only applications submitted by the priority deadline to evaluate and rank them for college funding and nominations for university funding. Individual faculty members review applications for their lab/workgroup on their own; faculty are given access to all applications and a summary spreadsheet. Some faculty wait to review applications based on the initial evaluation of the committee, others independently review applications themselves. The decision to admit a student ultimately lies with individual faculty members, but the likelihood of college/university support can weigh heavily on their decision.

Admissions committee – Admissions committee includes one faculty member from each discipline and discussions are led by the Associate Dean of Academic Programs and Student Affairs. Applicants from URM/BIPOC pools are eligible for deliberate funding opportunities, such as Bridge to the Doctorate fellowships, the Delores Auzenne fellowship, and the FEF McKnight Fellowship. The availability of these fellowships has increased the number of successful BIPOC Phd graduates from our program.

Is that process and/or rubric^{4,5} public?

Faculty search committees: Generally, we steer clear of rubrics due to [“FL Sunshine Laws.”](#) Any written score for a candidate that is used in grading, ranking, or comparing candidates must become part of the public record. Scoring rubrics can thus be a source of friction if they are discovered by applicants or other entities that may interpret them out of context. Any personal notes taken during assessment of the candidates are not deemed part of the public record. Although rubrics can standardize evaluations and reduce biases, there are cases where discovery of the rubrics could be harmful. We note that our past discussions have focused on the costs rather than the benefits of using these tools to standardize search criteria.

Admissions committees: For Fall 2021 admissions, the committee implemented a rubric that was not shared outside the committee. The committee’s scoring contained student information and, as such, is exempt from FL Sunshine Laws. The rubric totaled to 100 points: 15 for Research Essay, 15 for Personal Statement, 15 for CV/Research Experience, 15 for Letters of Recommendation, 10 for GPA, and 20 for Intangibles (overall impression, other materials). Faculty were free to



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implement their own scoring regimes within those categories as they saw fit. Applicants were ranked based on z-score and discussion. The ranking scheme used was *Priority for Funding, Back up for Funding, Admissible-Not Eligible for Funding, Recommend to Deny, and No Rank*. No rank was typically given to incomplete and late applications.

The committee did not have a threshold score to automatically deny applicants funding. A discussion of the lowest-scored applicants resulted in a recommendation to deny five applicants because they were underprepared for the program, (i.e. insufficient pre-reqs). Top-scoring applicants and applicants with the highest score deviations usually received the most conversation. GRE scores and race/ethnicity were omitted from committee scoring and ranking. URM status was considered after scoring and in the later stage of ranking when determining University fellowship nominees (some fellowships are diversity, hardship, or URM specific).

What kind of biases are introduced in this process and what strategies are used to address these, e.g. removing applicant names?

Faculty hiring process – Once a faculty search committee has listed the top candidates, these candidates are presented to the entire faculty. We strive for majority support of the entire faculty rather than consensus. However, achieving consensus on what defines excellence is a challenge for the full faculty membership. and . We have not had deliberate discussions of our hiring strategies in terms of both research excellence and identity of the college. Consensus has been obtained at the hiring committee level, however with full faculty involvement this can be difficult as everyone angles for different priorities.

Graduate admissions - GRE scores for grad applications are a well-documented source of bias, but faculty must vote to approve removing GRE scores from the admissions process entirely. GRE scores were redacted from application materials during the 2021 Admissions Committee review and not used in the rankings due to irregular reporting during the pandemic. That said, unredacted materials (including GRE scores) were made available to the wider faculty (including admissions committee members) before the final rankings were made. GRE scores are also considered by the Admissions Committee for a handful of top applicants to nominate one for the USF Presidential Fellowship. This is because, outside of the CMS, GRE scores are considered on that University-wide review panel.

As of 2021, a brief online training in implicit bias was offered to the admissions committee and shared with the broader faculty.

The applications are reviewed in a short period of time, typically less than 2 weeks. Due to volume and timing, the committee has received “batches” of files to review based on submission and completion dates. This introduces a few variables, some of which we cannot control.



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However, there is potential for recency bias and reader fatigue to affect the review of each application. Scores or rankings from “Batch 1,” which is usually the smallest batch, are adjusted once the rest of the applications are reviewed. For example, what looked very promising in an application in Batch 1 looks less impressive compared to an application submitted on the deadline. To help mitigate these issues, we introduced a rubric and z-scoring for the Fall 2021. The priority deadline for future admissions has also changed, which will allow the committee to receive all applications at the same time (no more batches) and gives the committee more time to review and discuss applications. The rubric and z-scoring process continues to be revised.

We’ve also tried to address order bias in the packaging of applications. Staff in the Office of Academic Affairs retrieve submitted materials from the application system and “package” them in a single PDF file. We have become more deliberate in the order of materials. For the Fall 2021 cycle the order was: Application info & research essay*, personal statement, CV, recommendation letters, GRE score sheet (if provided), TOEFL/IELTS score sheet (if provided), transcripts.*The App Info sheet contains test scores and self-reported grades. The test score area was redacted on all applications the committee reviewed (whether or not scores were reported so applications with scores were not obvious). We used this order to try to put essays first, but we will revisit this order, and the app info sheet, for future cycles.

While we as a College have discussed bias in the GRE at great length, we have not discussed how other admissions requirements, i.e. letters of recommendation or prestige of previous institutions, may introduce or reflect bias.

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

Faculty search committees –Faculty search committees are generally numbered at about 10-15 people, including at least 2 representatives from each branch of oceanography, a student, and a representative from the oceanographic community of St. Petersburg (USGS, FWRI, etc.). College Dean selects the Chair of the committee and approves members recommended by the Chair. Meeting scheduled between applicant and search committee during onsite interview process. Two roundtable meeting opportunities scheduled for faculty interactions, and a separate meeting with students. Tours of community collaborators (USGS, FWRI, etc.) are often arranged. The faculty provides their opinions to the committee in a dedicated meeting, then the committee votes to recommend candidate(s) to the Dean. Dean recommends to the Provost, Provost makes final decision. To our knowledge, the Dean has never overruled the committee. Conceivably, this could happen due to considerations that are outside the purview of the hiring committee, such as financial limitations to meeting the full start-up needs of the candidate or space issues. The hiring committees have no power to allocate funds or space to candidates.



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Graduate admissions committee – At least 1 rep from each discipline determined by the Dean and coordinated by the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs. This committee reviews applications, determines rankings for funding, and helps faculty identify applicants they may have overlooked. Final admissions decisions made by faculty advisors. Students are strongly encouraged to reach out to faculty in advance of admissions, and often engage via email and/or virtual meetings. The first formal interactions between faculty and applicants is during recruitment for those selected by faculty as targeted advisees.

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

Faculty search committees – No outside review going back to at least 2011 (and likely never), despite a program review in 2018. Many changes can be made by the search committee independently. University requires that applicants apply through USF Careers website, that at least 3 candidates are interviewed, and that reference checks are accomplished for all applicants. Requested materials from candidates (statements, etc.) are decided by each search committee after recommendation of the Chair and vote/consensus of the committee. *Last two searches did not require a diversity statement.* We have immense freedom to change the process within our college.

Admissions committee – Process was not covered explicitly during the last program review. Changes may be implemented following a faculty majority vote.

- **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”⁶?**

Whereas we have implemented some of these strategies opportunistically, we have perhaps not given real consideration to these practices in terms of achieving our goals for a diverse faculty.

We have made better gains in graduate admissions with active recruitment strategies (including development of a REU program for MSI students), implementation of a formal multidimensional mentoring program for URM students, and strategic discussion about removal of biases in the admissions process.