



COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Christopher T. Smith
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
Dept. of Psychology, Vanderbilt University
XXXX@gmail.com **cell: ###-###-####**

To the Graduate School at North Carolina State University:

I am writing to apply for the Postdoctoral Affairs Program Manager position (#: 00100440).

Currently, I am an NRSA-funded postdoctoral fellow at Vanderbilt University. Over the past 2 years, I have been a member of the [Vanderbilt Postdoctoral Association \(VPA\)](#)'s Executive Board serving as Treasurer (2016-17) and Vice-President (2017-18). During my first year on the Board, I helped the VPA navigate a move from the Vanderbilt University Medical Center to the Graduate School with a mission of increasing our services and support to a broad community of postdocs across seven schools/colleges at Vanderbilt. We have increased our attendance at VPA events in both raw numbers (from ~300 to over 500 attendees at all events in 2016-17 versus 2017-18) and diversity (now ~34% of attendees are from outside the Medical School, and an average of 18 departments are represented at any VPA event). This transition also entailed myself and other Board members learning how to work with a newly-formed Office of Postdoctoral Affairs (OPA) on initiatives to increase postdoc engagement at Vanderbilt. This included the creation of a master email listserv containing all postdocs based on HR records and the institution of a postdoc orientation program to inform newly arrived postdocs of resources available to them, including the VPA. We also created a VPA website which the association controls and which I have served as co-webmaster since 2017. My experience in managing website content will be useful in maintaining NC State's postdoctoral resources website. An effective postdoc association website at Vanderbilt has allowed us to reach our large (~550) postdoc community and serves as a central hub for resources and upcoming events information for postdocs.

One key goal of the VPA is to identify the needs of our postdoctoral community, which we have facilitated with bi-annual surveys that allow our programming to adapt to the needs of this ever-changing community. We have used this feedback to create more social opportunities including the installation of monthly Happy Hours starting in January 2017 that have proved hugely popular (average attendance ~25). Requesting feedback and using it to improve is critical to the growth of a service organization. I anticipate my experiences working with the VPA and OPA to improve programming for postdocs will translate to assisting the postdoctoral community at NC State.

The VPA's largest annual event is our [Postdoc Symposium](#) which serves as a showcase of postdocs' research as well as an opportunity for them to learn more about career options. I served for the past 2 years on the VPA Symposium Planning Committee which involved arranging programming for ~150 postdoc attendees (including organizing a new faculty panel each year) and arranging and coordinating ~50 faculty from 30+ departments across campus to judge posters at the 2018 Symposium. One key component of this work is conveying to both postdocs and faculty the value of attending this event and having them go back to their labs and departments to encourage more to attend next year. Given the growth from 2017 to 2018 (100 to 150 postdoc attendees), we moved to a new, dedicated conference venue on campus and held two poster sessions for the first time. We expect this event to continue to grow in the coming years as >50% of our postdocs have yet to attend the symposium. I see NC State's postdoctoral association also holds an annual research symposium and I think my experience in this area will assist them in growing their local symposium. Leveraging the large number of scientific research enterprises in the Research

Triangle area could lead to added program offerings in career exploration either at the symposium or via standalone seminars at NC State.

Through twice attending the National Postdoctoral Association's annual meeting and writing for the association's newsletter, *The POSTDOcket*, I have met and learned about great examples of trainee support and enrichment programs at [UC Berkeley](#) and [Medical College of Wisconsin](#) and the fabulous resources available at [NIH](#) including their [Train the Trainer](#) program. I have talked to individuals who have made the transition to faculty positions at [predominantly undergraduate institutions](#) and R1 research institutions ([see pg 3](#)) and understand the skills needed to secure these positions. I have also attended a variety of professional development programming at both UNC ([TIBBS program](#)) and Vanderbilt ([BRET Office & ASPIRE program](#)). I plan to take the best practices from all these personal experiences and programs to further enhance the training environment at NC State.

Beyond my background in working with postdoctoral fellows and learning about best practices in career development, I possess many of the leadership, project, and time management skills required to succeed in this position. Throughout my 10 years as a PhD and postdoctoral trainee, I have successfully performed studies as part of a collaborative team featuring researchers at a total of 7 different universities, mentored 20 undergraduate students (receiving UNC Psychology Department's 2014 Graduate Student Mentor Award), and published 9 first-author peer-reviewed [manuscripts](#) (15 total). In addition, I have worked with the BRET office at Vanderbilt to coordinate speakers (from academia, government, and industry) at the past two [Career Symposia](#), helped identify and liaise with judges for Vanderbilt's 2018 [3-Minute Thesis Competition](#) (which featured 49 presentations from across the university) and serve as a mentor in the [Fisk-Vanderbilt Bridge Program](#) (helping individuals make the transition to graduate school). My experiences in these areas illustrate that I can work successfully with teams to accomplish goals, manage multiple projects/responsibilities simultaneously, and effectively mentor trainees. All these skills will be useful as a postdoctoral affairs program manager at NC State.

I am acutely aware of the variety of challenges postdoctoral fellows face including uncertainty in their job prospects, issues of work/life balance, and social/professional isolation: no longer students, not yet "independent" investigators. Both NIH and the National Academies are aware that a new training infrastructure is needed to help postdocs and other trainees transition to meaningful independent careers more quickly. I look forward to utilizing my passion for mentoring, communication, and PhD trainee support to help the postdoctoral community at NC State achieve their career goals. The Research Triangle area is unique in the number of scientific research organizations present to draw on for speakers and panels focused on career opportunities for PhD trainees and NC State's very successful A2i program illustrates the power of developing strong ties with area companies.

I believe my background prepares me well for managing a postdoctoral affairs office. Working with the Graduate School and other partners at NC State, I am confident we can meet the professional development needs of the postdoctoral community. Postdocs will be the future drivers of scientific and biomedical research (at industry and academic levels) in the 21st Century and I look forward to helping those at NC State achieve their full potential.

Thank you for your consideration,

Christopher J. Smith