

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

Christopher Smith, Ph.D.
Postdoc Program Manager

2 September 2021

Dr. Sui, Dr. Miner, Ms. Burks, and members of the search committee:

I write to you to apply for the Postdoctoral Affairs Program Administrator position (Job #: 517212) within the Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). I am a neuroscientist by training, obtaining my Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2014. Over the past several years, I have become increasingly interested and involved in supporting the scientific workforce, specifically postdoctoral researchers, first as part of the Vanderbilt Postdoctoral Association leadership and recently as the Postdoc Program Manager at North Carolina State University. In January 2020, I began serving a three-year term on the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) Board of Directors and in August of 2020 started my role as Communications Chair with the Graduate Career Consortium (GCC; re-elected to serve another one-year term beginning August 2021). Serving in these roles simultaneously have pushed me to handle multiple projects and deadlines efficiently and work with a diverse group of volunteers to drive key initiatives forward. In addition, these leadership experiences have allowed me to observe trends in graduate student and postdoctoral career and professional development and provided me opportunities to learn best practices in this space.

In my current role as the Postdoc Program Manager at NC State, I have functioned in a variety of administrative areas including the review and approval of postdoc position descriptions, hire actions, and policy oversight. I helped finalize our [Postdoctoral Grievance Policy](#) that was approved by the Provost's Office in June 2020 after incorporating a variety of recommendations from campus stakeholders. In addition, I currently liaise with departments, centers, and colleges across campus to support them in postdoc HR and policy matters. Furthermore, I oversee several initiatives related to postdoc onboarding and communication including co-facilitating our bi-monthly [new postdoc orientation](#) with a member of the NC State Benefits Office. Through new postdoc orientation and other communication efforts, I seek to empower NC State postdocs with information relevant for their career & professional development.

Faculty buy-in is obviously critical to support many of the efforts around postdoctoral affairs, including increased trainee engagement with career & professional development. In Fall 2020, I worked to leverage [NC State postdoc climate survey](#) data collected earlier that year to craft a [faculty supervisor letter](#). This message is sent to each new postdoc and their faculty supervisor and has the goal of encouraging greater awareness of career and professional development resources on campus. The letter also emphasizes the vital importance the creation of a written training plan has on postdoc satisfaction and confidence in their future career prospects. We hope to improve the utilization of individual development plans and other career development resources through this messaging in addition to increasing faculty awareness of the value of these resources. In the Virginia Tech Postdoctoral Affairs Program Administrator role, I hope to leverage data and insights gained from a similar climate survey to more effectively liaise with faculty and department administrators around efforts to improve the postdoctoral experience at Virginia Tech.

Beyond these various administrative and policy roles, I have also worked to develop new initiatives to improve the postdoctoral scholar experience at NC State University. This included launching a new Slack group for our postdocs and [developing resources](#) to help them engage with the platform in an effort to build community and peer support within our postdoctoral population. In addition, based on responses to both a postdoc entry survey and a professional development needs assessment sent to graduate students in my first year in this role, I led the development of a new career exploration series that launched in Fall 2020, [Career PACKways](#). This 5-week series was well received with 80% of those completing the course evaluation giving me highest marks (5 out of 5) on my effectiveness as an instructor and 90% of respondents indicating they felt more confident in their ability to explore their career options in a systematic

way after taking part in the course. After surveying existing campus resources, I look forward to strategically creating relevant career & professional development programming for Virginia Tech postdocs (and potentially graduate students) based on their needs.

I am data-driven and have worked to report postdoc career outcomes at NC State in an effort to catalyze conversations around diverse career pathways (see our OPA [2019](#) & [2020](#) Year in Review documents). In addition, I have collaborated with a cross-institutional team of faculty and postdocs to analyze data on the faculty job market, which we have reported on in [eLife](#). As we continue to collect data on the academic job market, I see this work as an important resource for educating postdocs and their faculty supervisors on what it takes to successfully land a faculty position as the landscape is rapidly changing. In addition, faculty job market data can serve as a starting point to conversations around other career paths available to Ph.D. students and postdocs, empowering them to explore a variety of career options during their training. I hope to continue this faculty job market survey work at Virginia Tech and find ways to integrate the insights gained into programming around navigating the academic job search for Virginia Tech postdocs.

I also have experience leading a variety of communication efforts which I hope to leverage in this role as we seek to recruit exceptional postdoctoral scholars to Virginia Tech, share valuable career & professional development resources with them, and connect them to opportunities to enhance their training. I founded and manage a career and professional development blog, [ImPACKful](#), launched on the NC State Graduate School website in August 2019. Our Professional Development Team leverages the blog to communicate not only resources and tips around career and professional development topics to our trainees but also to amplify the work of our amazing graduate student and postdoctoral researchers. In January 2021, I launched a new initiative to highlight graduate student and postdoctoral [alumni](#) in our ImPACKful blog via an [informational interview program](#) that seeks to connect current trainees with alumni professionals working in career areas of interest to them. Specifically, our online tool walks trainees through the [informational interview process](#) and empowers them to [share our alumni's career stories and insights](#) with the NC State community. So far, we have connected 32 trainees with 86 alumni professionals. Creating a similar initiative at Virginia Tech, potentially in partnership with the Graduate School, would help build both alumni engagement as well as career preparedness for your graduate students and postdocs. An [alumni insights](#) initiative could also help us highlight the value of pursuing postdoctoral training at Virginia Tech as we compete to recruit the best postdoctoral talent in a competitive global marketplace.

In addition to managing these NC State communication efforts (including the [OPA website](#)), I currently serve as Communications Chair for the GCC, where the Communications Committee and I have worked to increase GCC brand awareness over the past year, including a 180%+ growth in followers of our [GCC LinkedIn page](#). I believe my extensive communications experience will assist me in the Postdoctoral Affairs Program Administrator role at Virginia Tech as we seek to tell success stories from the perspective of current and past postdocs and generally promote the postdoc experience at the university.

I am excited about the opportunity to work with a variety of Virginia Tech stakeholders to establish the new Postdoctoral Affairs Office and build a robust postdoctoral training experience at the university. My experience working in postdoc affairs at the institutional and national (NPA) level and network of contacts working in the space will allow me to bring best practices in postdoctoral training to Virginia Tech. In addition, my 2.5+ years working to support postdocs at a large, land-grant university has helped me understand and address some of the unique challenges in supporting postdocs stationed across a statewide network of research centers, including leveraging technology (Slack, Zoom, etc...) to drive engagement and connection. To close, I look forward to developing programming and strategies to boost postdoc recruitment, deliver exceptional career & professional development in an accessible and equitable manner, and leverage our postdoc alumni and career outcomes to demonstrate the value of postdoc training at Virginia Tech. Working with stakeholders across campus, the state, and beyond, I believe we can build an exceptional training environment to prepare our postdocs for the next stage in their careers.

Sincerely,

Christopher J. Smith