

2021 Coastal Management and Digital Coast Fellowship Refresh Team Recommendations

INTRODUCTION

The NOAA Office for Coastal Management's mission is to inspire and influence a broad base of leaders, citizens, and coastal management professionals to ensure healthy coastal ecosystems, resilient coastal communities, and vibrant and sustainable coastal economies. As a part of this mission, our office is committed to providing opportunities to cultivate emerging leaders in coastal management and provide professional development opportunities for the next generation of coastal management practitioners and environmental stewards.

To meet this goal, the NOAA Coastal Management Fellowship was established in 1996 to provide on-the-job education and training opportunities in coastal resource management and policy for postgraduate students and to provide project assistance to state coastal zone management programs. The two-year opportunity offers a competitive salary, medical benefits, and travel and relocation expense reimbursement. The program also provides fellows with professional mentoring and training. In addition, the Digital Coast Fellowship was established in 2012 to meet these same goals, but for our Digital Coast partners.

The Coastal Management Fellowship Program was paused in calendar year 2020 to allow NOAA

to consider ways to enhance this program, as well as the Digital Coast Fellowship, especially concerning diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ). An external team composed of program partners conducted a broad survey of fellowship hosts (both coastal programs and Digital Coast partners), former and current fellows, and Sea Grant directors and fellowship coordinators to gather input on all facets of the programs. The team analyzed the survey results and used their own personal experiences with the programs to draft recommendations for enhancement. Each team member then shared the draft recommendations with two or three additional partners to ask for feedback, especially about any red flags or major gaps. The recommendations were revised and refined based on that feedback.

The recommendations below represent the final ones from the team. They are organized by the various steps in the fellowship process, and the DEIJ-specific recommendations are pulled out separately. NOAA plans to implement many of these recommendations for the fiscal year 2022 round of fellows, and continue to work toward implementing others in the near future. The intention of incorporating these recommendations is to create a more diverse and equitable program for years to come.

TEAM MEMBERS

Margaret Allen, NOAA Office for Coastal Management

Janice Castro, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Coastal Program and former mentor

Mike Friis, Wisconsin Coastal Program and former mentor

David Green, Texas Coastal Program and current mentor

Julia Knisel, Massachusetts Coastal Program, former fellow, and former mentor

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Sam Lake, Virginia Sea Grant

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Mike Molnar, Coastal States Organization

Jenna Moran, Association of State Floodplain Managers and former mentor

Tricia Ryan, NOAA Office for Coastal Management

Bob Scarborough, Delaware Coastal Program and current mentor

Susannah Sheldon, South Carolina Sea Grant

Patty Snow, Oregon Coastal Program and current mentor

RECOMMENDATIONS

Project Proposal Requirements and Selection

DEIJ Recommendations:

- Allow the use of federal funds to meet the match requirements. This will allow more states and territories with limited funding options to participate. In the past, there have been states and territories that have not been able to apply due to the burden of identifying nonfederal matching funds, and this will remove that barrier.
- Add a requirement for project proposals to describe how the fellow's project will advance the principles of DEIJ (defined in the [fellowship project proposal template](#)). NOAA has adjusted the [guidance and review criteria](#) to address this addition. These principles can be addressed in one or more of the following areas of the project proposal: project partners, needs assessment, stakeholders, outreach, scope, targeted communities, outcome.
- Provide a template with sections and suggested information to include in the proposal as part of the project proposal instructions. Some applicants do not have as much experience in writing proposals as others, so this template will help "level the playing field" and make it easier for new hosts to apply.
- Encourage hosts to consider projects that require skill sets beyond marine, coastal, and environmental sciences, such as communications, public health, and the social sciences, including economics.
- Co-host a webinar with the Coastal States Organization (CSO) for state and territorial coastal programs and Digital Coast partners. The webinar will explain the new DEIJ focus in project proposals, the new proposal template, and other changes enacted beginning in 2022.

Other Recommendations:

- Add in a requirement for project proposals to describe the status of telework versus in-person work in the host office. Describe how staff in the office, including the mentor, are currently working (full time in the office, full time telework, or a mix), and describe the expectations for the fellow in terms of work location. Describe how and how often the mentor will communicate and meet with the fellow, and how the fellow will interface with other staff members in the organization. Describe how the host will provide networking opportunities for the fellow if the majority of the staff is teleworking. Describe what the host will provide to the fellow if they work from home, for example a computer, keyboard, mouse, headset, ergonomic desk or chair, or other accommodations that may help facilitate a successful work-from-home environment.

Program Marketing

DEIJ Recommendations:

- Develop marketing materials that are inclusive in their messaging, including images and wording. The marketing materials will include the fellowship DEIJ value statement on marketing materials (i.e., “Our office is committed to making coastal fellowships accessible to all interested and eligible candidates, allowing all fellows to be comfortable in their identities and participate fully in their fellowships, and removing barriers to becoming part of the next generation of coastal leaders.”).
- Conduct a two-step outreach strategy that first announces the program in late summer/early fall; and then announces specific projects in late fall/early winter to make sure more students are aware of the program. This will help to reach a broader audience, with the goal of diversifying the applicant pool.
- Broaden outreach to graduate programs in other disciplines such as the social sciences, communications, and public health.
- Develop and leverage existing relationships across NOAA with minority serving institutions (MSIs) that have the appropriate graduate degree programs to increase awareness of the fellowship programs. As a first step, develop a targeted strategy to engage with MSIs and begin to form personal relationships with graduate program faculty and administration.
- Develop relationships with minority-focused graduate and undergraduate internship and fellowship programs to raise awareness of our fellowship programs and create a pipeline into NOAA opportunities.
- Develop relationships with national organizations that represent underserved students or do work in equity to increase awareness of our fellowship programs, such as the Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) and Black in Marine Science.

Other Recommendations:

- Increase awareness of a program by hosting a virtual webinar for interested students to share information about the program. Include presentations by current and former fellows. Post the recording on the fellowship website.
- Increase efforts to highlight final fellowship products on the Office for Coastal Management’s website, as well as partners’ sites, such as CSO’s newsletter.

Candidate Review and Finalist Selection

DEIJ Recommendations:

- Minimize implicit bias in candidate reviews.
 - » Ensure a diverse candidate review panel. Diversity will include a mix of genders, ages, races, degree types, and first-generation college students.
 - » Explore the value and feasibility of blind resume reviews.
- To help ensure that candidate application packets are more equitably reviewed:
 - » Encourage candidates to share life experiences, such as working through graduate school or being a first-generation college student, in their goal statement. Adjust the guidance and review criteria for the goal statement to address these additions.
 - » Be clear in candidate application guidance that only the required documents will be accepted and reviewed.
- Continue to keep the eligibility open to master's and doctoral candidates who represent diversity in educational experiences.
- Extend the requirement of "recent graduate" from 1.5 years to 2 years post-graduation. This will allow more students who were not able to apply in 2021 due to COVID-19 to apply in 2022. In future years, this will open the opportunity to a larger number of candidates.
- Explore increasing the number of applicants that Sea Grant can submit to NOAA to allow for a specified number of applications from minority serving institutions in their state.
- Develop a process to gather optional demographic information on candidates applying to the fellowship, both at the state Sea Grant review level and the national review, so we can track the demographics of both the selected and non-selected applicants to establish a baseline to measure our progress.
- Explore providing training focused on understanding and eliminating bias to mentors and reviewers prior to the matching workshop.

Other Recommendations:

- Require all fellowship finalists, prior to the matching workshop, to submit a writing sample to allow hosts to better evaluate their written communication skills.

Matching Process

Recommendations:

- Keep the matching process generally the same as it is now with some modifications:
 - » Explore moving the timing of the matching workshop up by a few weeks to a month to avoid thesis defense and graduation conflicts.
 - » As needed, create a hybrid matching process with virtual and in-person sessions to accommodate larger candidate pools.
 - » Explore the logistics of matching candidates and hosts in the week following the workshop.
 - » Explore using meeting room space to hold interviews.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice during the Fellowship

Recommendations:

- Ensure that the fellowship culture allows for all fellows to feel supported, including being intentionally inclusive, celebrating differences, fostering mutual understanding and respect, and understanding and seeking to address people's concerns.
 - » Provide DEIJ training and speakers throughout the fellowship for mentors, mentees, and others involved with the fellowship. These trainings and webinars could include topics such as understanding bias, how to do culturally appropriate and responsive research and evaluation in Indigenous communities, and social justice.
 - » Allow and encourage fellows to work on other DEIJ projects at their organization to gain a broader experience.
 - » Work with fellows and mentors to ensure that the fellow is experiencing an inclusive workplace environment by checking in with the fellows and offering mentors resources for inclusive workplaces.
 - » Provide a mechanism for fellows to provide anonymous feedback on their fellowship experience, including aspects related to DEIJ.
- Continue exploring how to implement direct hiring authority for fellows for federal positions.
- Encourage fellows to seek out informal mentors in their professional network who may align more closely with them in terms of age, gender, life experiences, race, and ethnicity.

Fellow Salary and Benefits

DEIJ Recommendations:

- Ensure that the fellowship is fully available to candidates from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds:
 - » Ensure that the salary is in line with similar fellowship programs (reassess the salary each year).
 - » Continue to require the fellowship administrator to provide full health insurance with 100% of premiums covered.
 - » Maintain locality pay for fellows in year 2 and explore locality pay for year 1 of the fellowship.
- Require that mental health be covered by the health plan provided by the administrator.

Communication

Recommendations:

- To ensure that all fellowship partners are aware of fellowship events, activities, and milestones, create a calendar of fellowship events to include trainings, meetings, and important upcoming deadlines.
- Explore providing a central place for current participants (fellows and hosts) in the program to easily access relevant materials.

Mentoring

Recommendations:

- It is preferred that the primary mentor be located in the same geography as the fellow. If this is not the case, the host will discuss the communication plan in the proposal.
- Mentors will develop a communication plan with their fellow within the first month of the fellowship.
- Ensure that the hosts are aware they can propose multiple mentors for their fellow, so long as a primary mentor is identified.
- Encourage mentors to provide opportunities for their fellow to participate in other projects and initiatives at the office to increase the fellow's professional development and learning.
- Encourage mentors to identify and help secure professional training opportunities for their fellow to supplement the professional development provided by NOAA.
- Develop, enhance, and share Office for Coastal Management mentoring resources, leveraging from other fellowship programs as appropriate. These could include:
 - » A worksheet to fill out when on-boarding and off-boarding a fellow.
 - » Best practices for mentoring.
 - » Clear and consistent expectations for both mentors and mentees.
- Enhance peer to peer learning within the mentor group.
 - » Increase the frequency from annual to every six months of the mentor check-in, where mentors share experiences and tips. Check in with fellows prior to these meetings and include examples from fellows about what they got out of the mentoring relationship.
 - » Coordinate with mentors from other Office for Coastal Management fellowship programs to provide an opportunity for all to share stories, techniques, and resources.

Professional Development and Networking for Fellows

Recommendations:

- Maintain a fellow's Linked-In page with current and former fellows to provide them with a platform to connect and learn from each other.
- Continue providing in-person and virtual trainings and networking opportunities to the fellows.
- Provide an option for fellows to use their professional development funds to visit each other's work site in order to expand their professional networks and increase their knowledge of coastal management initiatives in other locales.
- In coordination with Office for Coastal Management regional staff, bring together, in-person or virtually, Office for Coastal Management fellows in the region to increase their regional connections and understandings.
- To prepare fellows for the end of their fellowship:
 - » Require one-on-one career sessions with the contract administrator's professional development trainer.
 - » Update the "Other Career Opportunities" section of the fellowship website to include descriptions and links to tutorials describing how to apply for federal jobs.
 - » Hold a virtual career panel for all Office for Coastal Management fellowships to talk about career pathways and opportunities.
 - » Provide all fellows with a short description of the fellowship program that they could use on job applications and resumes.
 - » Continue providing a bimonthly email to all second-year fellows and former fellows with information and links to various federal, state, local, nonprofit, and private-sector job openings.
- Encourage fellows, when they finish their projects, to present their results and lessons learned to interested and relevant partners, such as the Digital Coast partnership group.
- Encourage fellows to organize regular (monthly or bimonthly) semi-structured social/networking hours for current and past fellows. Volunteer organizers would choose a topic and lead the meeting.
- Establish an Alumni Ambassador program where fellows are encouraged to work with their former graduate faculty to present to current graduate students on their project and the fellowship program.