

Museums as Catalysts for Collaborative Change in a Complex World

“By 2022, the Smithsonian will build on its unique strengths to engage and to inspire more people, where they are, with greater impact, while catalyzing critical conversation on issues affecting our nation and the world” (Smithsonian Annual Performance Plan, 2022, p. 2).

Daily news can spur flight or fight responses. War, climate change, social unrest, tech innovations and interventions—the topics that populate news cycles are especially demanding. Investment in these topics can linger, too, in our conversations with colleagues and our interactions with students. Fortunately, museums—too often thought of as storehouses of artifacts that document history—are not in the business of ignoring national and international conflicts or sugarcoating modern ills. Over the last decade, there has been an evolution in the museum world driven by the belief that the museum serves best when it offers dynamic and engaging exhibits capable of speaking to the challenges of our complex world. The impact of this critical work is palpable and ready to be leveraged in Montgomery College (MC) classrooms.

The Smithsonian Institution’s 21 museums, research centers, and the National Zoo showcase this evolution in approach in spaces dedicated to developing accessible and inclusive exhibitions, challenging existing narratives, provoking critical thinking, and fostering global citizenship. These spaces actively engage us in essential dialogue centered on the intricacies of our world. Increasingly we see social, cultural, and environmental issues being addressed throughout multiple museums and their exhibits, with accompanying educational resources that help further and transform conversations. Stories once overlooked are renewed and recovered, as attention is paid to missing voices. Efforts to decenter common negative narratives of climate change instead prioritize "Earth Optimism" and human-led innovation. Through Earth Optimism Summits, the Smithsonian Science for Global Goals Project, and 2022’s Earth Optimism x Folklife Festival, the Smithsonian has helped to pioneer the message of a sustainable future, attempting to address the world’s most pressing matters from a lens of sustainable action. Moreover, the talents of content experts and scientists have found new life and energy thanks to the contributions of communities and everyday citizens.

These endeavors align with the mission of Montgomery College educators, who masterfully weave innovation, collaboration, and critical thinking skills into their conversations with students. Our 2025 MC-Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship (SFF) theme, *Museums as Catalysts for Collaborative Change in a Complex World*, is one that faculty from all disciplines can apply in their classrooms, too. They can invite students to examine topics, such as the power of historical reinterpretation, the inclusion of marginalized voices, and the significance of missions in social justice. They can discover their own role in solving environmental problems rather than accepting them as irrevocable. They can explore what it means to be not only citizen contributors but also how to serve as catalysts for change in their own communities.

As it enters its 28th year in operation, the MC-Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship's future is bright. We continue to attract MC's most brilliant minds across the disciplines, and their insights and experiences inform how we build and evolve to meet the unique needs of our academic community. Thanks to our Fellows' support, as well as the guidance of participating Smithsonian museum educators and curators, we are well-situated to address the challenges and opportunities of an ever-changing world.

Since 1998, Montgomery College and the MC-Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship have played a special role in the Smithsonian story. 245 professors from varied disciplines on all three campuses and more than 25,000 students, as well as their friends and families, have visited Smithsonian museums as part of the MC-Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship program. MC is distinguished as the only community college with such a relationship with the Smithsonian, and, as a result, participants benefit from an incomparable learning opportunity. Extraordinary Smithsonian visits and exhibits become part of classroom conversation, whether in person or virtual, and help students meet course outcomes in exceptional museum-inspired projects. As the most diverse community college in the continental U.S., too, Montgomery College occupies a unique position to contribute mightily to the Smithsonian's mission. Indeed, through their visits and projects, participating faculty and students add new stories to the conversation, glean and share discoveries, expand horizons, and foster skills essential to addressing 21st century challenges.

The exhibits, artifacts, and learning experiences that define *Museums as Catalysts for Collaborative Change in a Complex World* continue to take shape. However, as is the case for every MC-Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship cohort, museum curators and educators will lend their immense knowledge and expertise to the 2025 Fellows, introducing them to exciting and stimulating exhibits in a variety of carefully selected Smithsonian museums. The faculty and their students will be the beneficiaries of knowledge and inspiration from various arms of the Smithsonian, which could include the following:

Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations, which ushers forth the oft-untold stories of Native diplomats and the Leaders of Indian Nations, and *Americans*, which speaks to the unexpected ways Indians are embedded in every facet of American history, are both rich exhibit spaces to explore at the **National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)**.

At the **National Museum of Natural History (NMNH)**, fellows will discover a treasure trove of content. *Lights Out: Recovering the Night Sky* looks at the impact light pollution has had on nature, disrupting the natural cycles of many species in ways that affect migration and reproduction. In the *David H. Koch Hall of Fossils - Deep Time* and *Sant Ocean Hall*, in addition to witnessing a skeletal battle between a Tyrannosaurus rex and Triceratops or standing before the jaws of a Megalodon, visitors will navigate the impacts

of climate change while also recognizing the human role in innovating solutions. Finally, *Cellphones: Unseen Connections* explodes our powerful personal devices to highlight the 65 elements that go into their creation, share stories of technology changemakers, and display the influential objects that preceded the cellphone.

At the **National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC)**, the exhibit *Reckoning: Protest. Defiance. Resilience* examines how the visual arts are critical contributors to protest and perspective for African Americans. *The Power of Place* highlights the influence that geographical spaces and environments have on shaping individual identity, as well as sense of community and culture. Inspired by Congresswoman Maxine Waters' phrase, "*Reclaiming My Time*" is a brand-new exhibit that spotlights contemporary Black designers and their contributions to rest and restoration.

Early Flight draws attention to a decade of innovations across the world that ushered in the aerial age. *One World Connected* explains how aviation and spaceflight altered global connections as well as our view of "humanity's home." And, *Destination Moon* invites visitors to explore not only the Apollo 11 astronauts but also the folks behind the scenes of America's iconic moon landing. All these and more can be found at the **National Air and Space Museum (NASM)**.

In *20th Century Americans*, *The Struggle for Justice*, *Perspectives*, and other exhibits, the **National Portrait Gallery (NPG)** presents the lives of America's most influential persons, whether hallmarks of the 20th and 21st centuries, civil rights leaders, or founding voices in the arts and culture.

The **National Museum of American History (NMAH)** includes numerous exhibits that align with the 2025 SFF theme. Well-known and untold stories of how entertainers, artists, and sports heroes demonstrate the power of culture as a catalyst for change in *Entertainment Nation*. *Food: Transforming the American Table* creates opportunities to investigate how food shapes past, present, and future American dining tables and eating habits. *Inventing in America* and *Picturing Women Inventors* draw attention to how invention solves problems, creates new opportunities, and inspires indefinitely. Finally, the beloved *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit collects the stories, histories, and objects that define and continue to shape the American landscape.

The MC-Smithsonian Faculty Fellowships are the product of a unique collaboration between MC and the Smithsonian Office of Educational Technology, creator and steward of the Smithsonian *Learning Lab*. As the signature program of the Paul Peck Humanities Institute at MC, the Fellowship is interdisciplinary and open to faculty from all three campuses. Both full-time and

part-time faculty can apply. Fellows are awarded three ESH per semester, a total of six ESH for their work and participation.

This Program continues to create new pathways for teaching and integrative learning at Montgomery College. This year's theme is rich in thought-provoking prospects for teaching and learning as well as academic and personal growth. Applicants are encouraged to look at some of the exhibits we have listed, explore or visit others, and imagine how both you and your students can benefit from a new approach to teaching. For additional information, the application process, and how you as an MC professor can take advantage of this professional development opportunity, please visit the Paul Peck Humanities Institute website, MC-Smithsonian Faculty Fellowships: <https://www.montgomerycollege.edu/special-programs/paul-peck-humanitiesinstitute/smithsonian-faculty-fellowships.html>.

Other questions? Please contact program coordinator, Dr. Denise Dewhurst at denisedewhurst@montgomerycollege.edu or co-coordinator, Professor Matthew Decker at matthew.decker@montgomerycollege.edu. We welcome the opportunity to brainstorm ideas with you!