

Fostering a Culture of Critical and Ethical Learning to Shape Future Leaders

We live in an age marked by rapid technological advancement, social transformation, and global interdependence, making it imperative to inspire critical and ethical learners across academic disciplines. The Smithsonian has adopted a similar ethos in the Institution's five-year Strategic Plan, "Smithsonian 2027: Our Shared Future," which first launched in 2022. "Nimble," a central tenet of this plan, highlights the Smithsonian's innovation in improving operations, cultivating new opportunities for staff, and embracing a culture of connection. The Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship intends to uphold the same philosophy as we engage with museum resources, imagine high-impact student engagement strategies, enrich our professional development mission, and build bridges between the world of academia and our students' futures.

While the college classroom is a primary destination for learning, it can be enlivened by Smithsonian resources and the institution's mission: "Through our unparalleled collections and research capabilities, and the insight and creativity we foster through art, history, and culture, the Smithsonian strives to provide Americans and the world with the tools and information they need to forge **Our Shared Future**." This language offers a powerful model for cultivating a comprehensive learning culture.

This year, we invite Fellowship applicants to consider how the youthful minds in their unique curriculums will take advantage of and participate in the Smithsonian's robust educational ecosystem. The museums of the Smithsonian Institution provide a dynamic educational platform that fosters both critical inquiry and reflection. From the stories of trailblazers throughout American history to the experiences of survival, resilience, and social change to the ethics of scientific advancement and more, the National Museum of American History, the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the National Portrait Gallery, the National Museum of Natural History, and the National Air and Space Museum offer a rich tapestry of exhibits and resources to explore and drive wonder.

Beyond inviting students to admire a portrait or unearth the history of an artifact, we encourage faculty to imagine projects that bolster agency, promote self-directed learning, leverage creativity, and underscore the skills that will buoy their students' personal and professional futures. By helping our students develop critical thinking skills, for example, we are providing them with the ability to distinguish truth from untruth as they work to solve complex real-world problems. Equally important is the need to develop a sense of empathy, integrity, and responsibility, qualities of ethical learning needed to confront the challenges of today. We know the students in our classrooms invigorate our shared learning with fresh ideas, distinct perspectives, valuable lived experiences, and so much more. When invited into the museum, it is a joy to see how their intellectual and creative worlds evolve.

Intentional interactions with museum resources foster empathy, healthy skepticism, ethical research, debate, communication, observation, and attentiveness. It is important to cultivate opportunities and discover spaces that celebrate our students' practice and achievement of these skills. *Youth and the Future of Culture*—the theme for this past summer's Smithsonian Folklife

Festival—put a spotlight on the projects and organizations that help to cultivate and energize the voices of today's youth. At Montgomery College, we are in an especially unique position to engage this same audience, whether they are high school graduates, adult learners, or visiting scholars. College students are our future innovators, leaders, and problem solvers, and as such, need to develop the capacity to think critically and act ethically across all areas of public life.

Through this program, the Smithsonian is our partner in the robust work ahead. We can help our students participate in the national dialogue. They will be part of maintaining traditions and preserving history, while meeting and addressing contemporary challenges and finding their unique voices.

Since 1998, Montgomery College and the MC-Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship have played a special role in the Smithsonian story. 256 professors from varied disciplines on all three campuses and more than 26,000 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 *Fostering a Culture of Critical and Ethical Learning to Shape Future Leaders* 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 2026 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:

Between *Native Knowledge 360°*, the *Americans* exhibit, and other exciting spaces for learning, the **National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)** offers a robust opportunity to invite students into ethics-driven conversations about storytelling, business practices, entertainment, and American identity. *Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations*, an especially theme-relevant exhibit, unpacks contracted language that was often broken or coerced in the relationships between the United States and Indian Nations.

At the **National Museum of Natural History (NMNH)**, fellows will discover a treasure trove of content. While closing this December, *Lights Out: Recovering the Night Sky* offers an enduring examination of light pollution, its environmental impact, and man-

made solutions. 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, revealing a complicated infrastructure that grants opportunity while simultaneously harming Earth.

At the **National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC)**, the Culture Galleries offer a smorgasbord of content tied to food, tradition, music, entertainment, and more that will enliven classroom learning and foster creativity, inquiry, and reflection. One such gallery, *Reckoning*, is particularly powerful, collecting the resilience-themed artworks produced by Black painters, sculptors, photographers, and textile artists. *Making a Way Out of No Way* is another rich space dedicated to works of activism inspired by education, religion, business, journalism, volunteerism, and other opportunities embraced by the Black community.

In Summer 2025, five new exhibits opened their doors at the **National Air and Space Museum (NASM)**, including *Aerospace and Our Changing Environment* and *Futures in Space*. From a futurist lens, these exhibits highlight the aerospace innovations that broaden our understanding of climate change and pinpoint the near- and long-term futures of space exploration respectively. Together with *One World Connected*, which explains how aviation and spaceflight altered global connections as well as our view of “humanity’s home,” this trio of resources will enrich STEAM learning and discovery.

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, social justice changemakers, or founding voices in the arts and culture. Each artwork tells a profound story and provides ample room for shared critical thinking or self-directed learning opportunities.

The **National Museum of American History (NMAH)** includes numerous exhibits that align with the 2026 SFF theme. Well-known and untold stories of how entertainers, artists, and sports heroes provide a unique lens to explore the ethics and activism of pop culture in *Entertainment Nation*. *American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith* explores the ever-evolving landscape of U.S. politics, highlighting the significance of citizen participation and debate. *Giving in America*—a small exhibit but a large virtual offering—explores the power of philanthropy and is centered on the questions of “Who Gives?” “Why Do We Give?” “What Do We Give?” and “How Do We Give?” Finally, the beloved *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit collects the stories, histories, and objects that define and continue to shape the American landscape and deserve celebration as well as protection.

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!