

HENRIETTA N. EDMONDS | Program Director, Arctic Natural Sciences,
National Science Foundation (hedmonds@nsf.gov)

Degree: When, where, what, and what in?

I received a bachelor of science degree in chemistry from Yale University in 1991, but decided I wanted to spend more time outdoors and not just in a laboratory. I entered the MIT/WHOI Joint Program in Oceanography/Applied Ocean Science and Engineering straight out of college, and received my doctorate in chemical oceanography in 1997.

Did you stay in academia at all, and if so, for how long?

I followed a pretty traditional academic path all along, until taking this position at the National Science Foundation (NSF) two years ago. First, I did a couple of postdocs, one at the University of Rhode Island and, through an NSF-NATO fellowship, a second at the Southampton Oceanography Centre (now the National Oceanography Centre, UK). I took a faculty position at the University of Texas at Austin's Marine Science Institute in 1999, and received tenure in 2005.

How did you go about searching for a job outside of the university setting?

I thought about some sort of change for a while, but I did not pursue new opportunities very actively. I was at UT longer than I had been anywhere in my life (not just my career), and while there was a lot to enjoy about the job, I found that there were also some real limitations to being in a very small department, 200 miles from our main



campus. I wasn't necessarily or exclusively looking outside of academia, but when one of my NSF program managers said she was retiring, I thought "Hmmm, I wonder if that job will open up?" It did, I applied, and here I am. The big leap was that I applied for the position as a "permanent" program director, rather than as an Intergovernmental Personnel Act assignee (commonly known as a "rotator").

Is this the only job (post-academia) that you've had? If not, what else did you do?

Yes, I came straight here from UT.

What is your current job? What path did you take to get there?

I am a program director in the Division of Arctic Sciences at NSF. As described above, I followed a traditional academic path until moving here in 2009. In the end, it was an interesting decision to make. Not long before I was offered the NSF job, I also received word that a

new proposal of mine was being recommended for funding. I wrestled a bit with staying in academia and following the new path that this research would have taken me on, or leaving that world behind. Now that I'm at NSF, I'm very happy with the decision that I made.

What did your oceanographic education (or academic career) give you that is useful in your current job?

An oceanographic education is inherently interdisciplinary, and I believe that chemical oceanography is particularly so. My advisor was really a geochemist, with interests well outside of the ocean, and I spent most of my graduate years in the Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences department at MIT. At UT, I collaborated a lot with people in the Jackson School of Geosciences, as well as in my own department, which was mostly biology focused. I served on some thesis committees that were incredibly far out of my comfort zone. All of these experiences were very helpful to me in my current job. Arctic oceanography is just one piece of the funding portfolio of the Arctic programs at NSF; we also cover glaciology, soil microbiology, ecology, limnology, atmospheric science, geology—you name it. My formal training doesn't cover anywhere near all of these scientific areas, but the broad exposure to a variety of subjects that I gained through my oceanographic education and faculty experience set me up well to handle them.

Is the job satisfying? What aspects of the job do you like best/least?

My job at NSF is very satisfying. My favorite part is the breadth of what we cover—I am constantly learning new things—and the fact that we are constantly exposed to people's new ideas. It's great fun to tell scientists you are recommending their proposal for an award. I also enjoy the opportunity to encourage new researchers. Of course, the flip side is hard. We receive many more proposals than we can fund given our budgets. I think that having been on the other end of those conversations helps me to be better at being the bearer of bad news, though. Sometimes I miss doing my own research, and especially getting out to do fieldwork. In my NSF job, I've had to learn to step back and take pleasure in the fact that I am helping other people do their research. The work at NSF is much faster paced than academia and you have much less control over your own time. It also involves interacting with people a lot more, or at least in very different ways. I've enjoyed exercising different sorts of skills than I did as a practicing scientist.

Do you have any recommendations for new grads looking for jobs?

Keep your eyes open, and don't think that choosing one working environment now has set you on a particular path forever or limited your options. Your education can take you to places you've never even considered. 📧