
● ● ● ● CAREER PROFILE ● ● ● ●

DANIELLE WHITTAKER



What is your current job title?

Managing Director of the Center for Oldest Ice Exploration, COLDEX

What is your connection to the university system overall?

At Oregon State University, my classification is “Professional Faculty.” Many universities have some kind of category for people who aren’t traditional faculty but who have a PhD or similar levels of experience for their position.

It’s an odd category – you’re not staff, and you’re not “real” faculty, and you are often not covered by any unions that represent staff or faculty. But you get most of the same benefits and access as academic faculty. These positions are usually paid through grants, and do not have tenure in the same sense as academic faculty.

How did you find your current job?

I found my current job because COLDEX posted a link to the advertisement on the NSF STC Slack workspace, which I was already a part of because of my previous job.

I was the Managing Director of BEACON (the BEACON Center for the Study of Evolution in Action, another center funded through the NSF STC program and headquartered at Michigan State University) for 12 years, and the center funding was ending, so I was looking for a new position. I had really enjoyed running that center and was excited about the prospect of working with another one. I found that job through an advertisement on the EvolDir listserv. This listserv is broadly targeted to evolutionary biologists, similar to the way Cryolist is used in polar science.

What skills did you gain in your PhD that made you a good fit for your current job?

Looking back, I gained a ton of organizational and management skills as a result of having a very independent graduate research project. My work was not part of anyone else’s project, so I had to manage my own research permits (not insignificant for fieldwork in Indonesia), obtain my own funding, and manage my own grants.



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My postdoctoral position also made me a good fit. It was not a postdoctoral fellowship; instead, it was a lab manager position that my postdoc adviser had turned into a part-management, part-research position. It paid very poorly (although better than adjunct teaching, which is what I was doing before), but it really helped me develop my grant and people management skills further.

What is the best part of your job and the most challenging part of your job?

I really enjoy being part of a large project. I'm a bit of a productivity nerd, so I actually like working with strategic plans and budget spreadsheets and reporting deadlines. But I think the best part is helping to create and nurture a community. The most rewarding time of the year for me is when everyone comes together for the annual meeting, and seeing how much everyone enjoys and values working together.

The most challenging part of my job is getting busy faculty to submit their reports and budgets in a timely manner. Sometimes I'm pretty sure I spend more time reminding them to submit a report than they do actually writing the report.



Danielle Whittaker is the Managing Director of the Center for Oldest Ice Exploration, COLDEX. In this photo, COLDEX members pose during their annual conference.

What advice do you have for others looking to follow a similar career path?

You are more qualified for management and administrative positions than you think! You have a ton of experience doing similar work for your own research projects, so make a list of the skills you've learned and be able to articulate that in a job application. Also, these kinds of jobs aren't as well advertised as traditional academic jobs, so let people know you're looking and they'll send opportunities your way when they arise.

