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The Future of Field Schools

Transformation In The Field

By Elizabeth Lunday

Archaeologists have widely varying specialties and interests, but most share one critical experience: field school. "It's such an intense experience," said archaeologist Laura Heath-Stout of Stanford Archaeology Center. "You're doing manual labor in a climate you're not used to, somewhere you don't know, with a group of people who were not selected for compatibility. And you're working and socializing together for weeks or months at a time." The purpose of field school is to teach the fundamental skills of the discipline, including how to excavate a site and use tools and technology. This knowledge is considered so essential that completion of field school is required, either formally or as a *de facto* obligation, for both cultural resource management jobs and admission to graduate programs.

For many archaeologists, field schools are transformative experiences. Heath-Stout conducted interviews with 72 archaeologists, and many described field school as the moment they became hooked on the profession. "I always asked my sources how they got into archaeology in the first place, and field schools were a big part of their stories," said Heath-Stout. But field school isn't easy, either physically or emotionally. Taxing work is conducted outdoors, often in remote and rugged locations. Students work long hours and often end up sunburned, sweaty,

Scholars aim to make field schools for nascent archaeologists more affordable and accessible to help diversify the profession. Current economic conditions create a need for specialized training in CRM archaeology to bridge a labor shortage.

Students at the Center for American Archeology CRM Field School conduct testing at a Late Woodland site in Calhoun County, Illinois.

JASON KING / CENTER FOR AMERICAN ARCHEOLOGY

bug-bitten, and dirty. Add to that the tension of living and working with the same group of people 24/7, and you've got an inherently stressful situation. "It's hard to get away from people you're not compatible with," Heath-Stout said. "It becomes this pressure cooker for interpersonal tension." At the least this can result in lots of jokes that may or may not be funny; at the worst it can lead to bullying, sexual harassment, and even assault. The consequences can be devastating. Some students—it's impossible to say how many—walk away from archaeology after a negative field school experience.

Bad behavior is not the only problem archaeologists have identified with traditional field schools. Concerned stakeholders claim field schools present barriers to those entering the profession. Physical demands can make it difficult for disabled students to participate, and high costs put field schools out of financial reach for many students. "The (traditional field school) model works really well for traditional students, but we are trying to encourage non-traditional students in the profession," said Sara Ayers-Rigsby, Southeast/Southwest region director of the Florida Public Archaeology Network (FPAN), which is a program of the University of West Florida. (The Southeast/Southwest office is hosted at Florida Atlantic University.) "Some people don't have

the financial resources to pay for field school. Some can't afford not to work for six weeks. Others might be caring for children or parents and can't step away from their normal life for that period of time." In addition, since field schools are generally directed by college or university archaeologists, those in the commercial cultural resource management (CRM) industry complain they inadequately prepare students for work outside of academia. All of these factors have led a growing number of archaeologists to conclude that field schools must change to open the profession to a more diverse population. Today, efforts are underway across the United States to create safe, inclusive field schools that are accessible to all.

A 2014 survey conducted among archaeological field researchers—professionals, not students—by the Southeastern Archaeological Conference (SEAC) found that 68 percent of respondents had experienced inappropriate remarks in the field and 13 percent were victims of unwanted sexual contact. While both men and women reported harassment, women were three times more likely to be targeted by remarks and nearly four times more likely to have experienced unwanted contact. A similar 2018 study of members of the Society for California Archaeology (SCA) further revealed that both students of color and LGBTQ+ students were more likely to be targeted than their peers, with more than 60 percent of LGBTQ+ students reporting verbal harassment. "There is an overwhelming feeling that if it happens in the field, that somehow it's OK, and as women we are supposed to just roll with the jokes or the comments and not be offended," stated one respondent to the SCA study. In her interviews, Heath-Stout heard many stories of negative field school experiences ranging from sexist, racist, or homophobic "jokes" to severe bullying and sexual assault. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many students who endure harassment leave the field. Certainly, those who remain struggle with lingering effects. More than 50 percent of archaeological professionals who responded to the SEAC survey reported changing jobs as a result of harassment; about 30 percent changed field sites and another 30 percent said the trajectory of their research slowed.

CAROL E. COLANINNO / EMORY UNIVERSITY

Field school student Lyric Buxton profiles an excavation unit wall at a southern Illinois Woodland site.

The good news is that awareness of the problem is growing along with demands for increased accountability, according to Emory University's Associate Director of Research and Scholarship Carol Colaninno. In studying how field schools can be operated safely, Colaninno found that change starts at the top. Field school directors must foster a culture of respectful behavior, in which even seemingly casual jokes and put-downs are unacceptable, she said. "When we think of sexual harassment, we automatically think of more egregious forms of behavior, but tiny incidents can go on to have a big impact if they aren't checked," Colaninno said. The goal is to create a culture in which students know that "any attitudes or jokes that would make people feel lesser are not tolerated here."

Awareness of barriers to the accessibility of field schools is also increasing, with "accessibility" considered as widely as possible. One area of focus is increasing access for students with disabilities—a challenge thanks to the popular image of archaeologists as "hyper-able-bodied," in the words of doctoral student Mason Shrader in the archaeology program at Brown University, who writes at length about accessibility in archaeology in a chapter of an upcoming book, *Archaeological Ethics in Practice*. "Archaeologists are supposed to be these Indiana Jones-types of rugged adventurers," Shrader said. This is a harmful misconception, stated Shrader—a person with cerebral palsy who typically walks with crutches—because it creates unnecessary barriers to the field. Shrader was

turned down for multiple field schools as an undergraduate and told his disability would be a medical and legal liability in the field. Eventually he found field school directors who wanted to work with him, and once out in the field, Shrader was able to contribute as much as any other participant—a fact that shouldn't come as a surprise, he said. "Archaeology is a team sport," Shrader said, "And every archaeology team accommodates one another's needs." Even when every member of a team is able-bodied, some will be better at certain physical tasks than others. Accommodating disabilities simply takes this a step further. "I can't handle a two-handled pick, but I can get down into a pit and scrub with a toothbrush," Shrader said. His best field experiences have been with directors who asked him for input on how to accommodate his disability while getting the job done. "Disabled people—or chronically ill or neurodivergent people—we know our bodies better than others do," Shrader said. "If you're running a field school, I think the best practice is coming to people and saying, what are you comfortable with?" In fact, this approach shouldn't be limited to students with visible disabilities. "There are a lot of disabilities that are invisible or that folks may not want to disclose," Shrader said. "If you ask everyone what they are comfortable with, then people don't get put into a position of having to disclose. That is the number one accommodation that can be made for everyone."

Accessibility is also a financial issue, and field schools aren't cheap. Heath-Stout and colleague Elizabeth M. Hannigan, an archaeologist at global consulting firm ICF, crunched the numbers on more than 200 field schools posted on the Archaeological Institute of America's Archaeological Fieldwork Opportunities Bulletin (AFOB) or advertised by email for summer 2019. They found that the average cost of a four-week field school was $4,065. These costs do not include travel to and from the school, a potentially considerable expense for international schools. Nor is the cost of the program the only financial consideration, since students attending field school are not able to work, noted Heath-Stout.

Scholarships are available for field school participants, but when Heath-Stout

BRYCE DESKINS / FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

Mason Shrader from Brown University maps a trench.

NICOLE GRINNAN / FLORIDA PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY NETWORK

FPAN's Sara Ayers-Rigsby teaches students to use a terrestrial laser scanner at the 2024 Jupiter Inlet field school.

SARAH KANSA / THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH FACILITY

Students analyze glass at the Archaeological Research Facility at UC Berkeley.

and Hannigan compiled a list of scholarships available to undergraduate students studying archaeology in the United States, they found they offer, on average, $2,268 toward the cost of field school. The expense of field school hits students from marginalized communities the hardest. "Disproportionally, Black and Latinx students are less likely to be able to pay for a field school and take the summer off," Heath-Stout said. "That makes it very difficult to recruit a new generation of archaeologists that includes a racially diverse group of people." Even if students can find the funds, other factors might make traditional field school impossible. "People have other commitments. People who have children are often unable to take time away from their kids or bring their kids with them," Ayers-Rigsby said. Similarly, students might be responsible for caring for parents or other relatives. "Many factors can make it difficult for people to step away from their normal lives for six weeks," Ayers-Rigsby said.

As criticism has grown about traditional field school accessibility, so have proposed solutions. Some, such as Heath-Stout, believe field schools should at least be free to participants and ideally would pay for students' labor. So far, this is extremely rare. The University of California Santa Cruz, for example, offers a summer internship for students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities to attend field schools focused on African Diaspora Archaeology; the program is not only free but also offers a $4,000 stipend to participants. Similarly, the Archaeological Research Facility at UC Berkeley has developed a field school that provides $3,000 stipends to 10 students every other summer to support their participation in a six-week commuter-based program. Other institutions are seeking to create alternatives to traditional field schools. One program, now in its second year, is the Shining A Light on the Past Field School at Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse Outstanding Natural Area. Located in Southeast Florida between Miami and Orlando and developed in cooperation with the Florida Public Archaeology Network, Florida Atlantic University, and the Bureau of Land Management, this 12-week program certified by the Register of Professional Archaeologists takes place on Mondays during the spring semester. It allows area students to gain field experience with little disruption to their normal lives.

Ayers-Rigsby and other organizers have worked to make the program as accessible as possible. The program is free unless students want to receive college credit; in that case, they are responsible for tuition to Florida Atlantic University. Organizers even made sure that students could use public transportation to reach the site. "Last semester, we had eight students who commuted by train, so we provided transportation to get them from the train stop to the site," Ayers-Rigsby said. "We had students commuting from Miami taking public transit for two hours to get to our school."

Another alternative field school is in development through the Data Literacy Program at the Alexandria Archive Institute (AAI). Program staff are currently developing an online, self-paced Archaeological Data Literacy Practicum that would provide 20 hours of training on data literacy, said Paulina Przystupa, a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico and postdoctoral researcher in data visualization and reproducibility at AAI. She is helping to develop the program at Alexandria Archive Institute. "Employers would like to see candidates with these skills, so this is a way to fill a gap that people aren't always getting in their education," Przystupa said. The practicum could be combined with other programs to give students the broad set of skills they need to succeed as archaeologists, Przystupa said. "I think having more opportunities like this over time could build similar skill sets as traditional field schools," she said. The practicum also reflects the fact that archaeology is more than excavation, said Przystupa. "A lot of archaeology isn't digging," she said. "There are other skills that are more accessible to people with different kinds of abilities and access." Shrader agrees. "We need to refine what the 'field' is," he said. The lab work required to process and analyze artifacts is just as important as excavation, Shrader said, and yet, outside of a few subspecialities, lab experience isn't considered as critical as field experience. Placing a higher value on lab experience—or, in fact, experience in the archaeology that takes place in museums, schools, government

offices, and archives—would open the profession to individuals unable to complete traditional field schools."Making the field more accessible will benefit archaeology," Shrader said. "I study disability in the ancient world, and I can only do that well because I'm disabled." As other individuals with diverse backgrounds are brought into the field, he noted, they will bring their own insights. Increasing diversity, Shrader said, is "an ethical obligation, and that should be our priority. But even if you aren't convinced by the ethical argument, there is a scholarly reason to expand the field. We will simply get better scholarship when more people are included."

Another concern about field schools is that they focus too heavily on academic archaeology. Cultural resource management (CRM) archaeology—that is, archaeology conducted to identify and manage historic or archaeological sites in association with infrastructure and development projects—makes up a large majority of the archaeological work conducted in the United States. The field is booming. In the next 10 years, annual spending on CRM is expected to increase from about $1.46 to $1.85 billion, largely in response to the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal), according to a 2022 paper in the journal *Advances in Archaeological Practice*. This law is forecasted to create about 11,000 full-time positions in CRM, of which 8,000 will be archaeologists. CRM work is open to individuals with both undergraduate and graduate degrees, and far more archaeologists will find work for a CRM firm than take a faculty position. Nevertheless, field schools are run and operated by academic archaeologists. Many in the CRM industry believe these programs do not adequately prepare students for CRM jobs.

A handful of field schools are attempting to remedy the situation. Ayers-Rigsby, who began her archaeology career in CRM, structured the Jupiter Inlet field school with this work in mind. "I really want students who participate to understand CRM, since that's how so much archaeology is done," said Ayers-Rigsby. The Jupiter Inlet school provides a thorough introduction to CRM techniques with the goal of preparing students for work with CRM firms. Another program, the Applied Archaeology for CRM Careers field school hosted by the Center for American Archeology in Kampsville, Illinois, specifically trains students for CRM. "The school was implemented to meet a specific need, which is training field techs for CRM jobs," said archaeologist and Center for American Archeology Executive Director Jason L. King. The center recognized the need for the program when staff realized how many students in their traditional field schools were asking about CRM work. To structure the program, they surveyed a number of CRM professionals to ask what new hires

MALACHI FENN AND EMILY JANE MURRAY / FLORIDA PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY NETWORK

FPAN staff demonstrate mapping for underwater archaeology at Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse Outstanding Natural Area.

NICOLE GRINNAN / FLORIDA PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY NETWORK

Students attend the 2024 Spring Bootcamp for the Jupiter Inlet field school.

needed to know. "We put together the curriculum based on addressing those needs so that students have work-ready skills," King said. Over the course of the four-week program, students learn techniques such as surveying, surface collection, shovel testing and reporting; they are introduced to the CRM process from data collection to mitigation and instructed on relevant laws. "It's a lot in four weeks, but they leave understanding the job," King said. Most students who have completed the program have found work in the field.

King has both participated in and directed numerous field schools over the course of his career. Like many archaeologists, he worries about the cost of these programs. "I would love to be able to offer more scholarships," he said. "I find it disheartening that we've collectively [as a profession] not found a way to make field school more accessible. In my dream world, everyone could go for 50 bucks." However, King believes that bringing students into the field is important for multiple reasons. "On the most basic level, for folks considering archaeology as a career, you're providing that basic training," he said. "It opens students' eyes to the field, and it's valuable for them to learn if this is something they really want to pursue. But it's more than that." A good field school experience, he believes, helps students understand why the past is important. "Ideally students leave field school with enthusiasm for discovering the past and what archaeology can tell us about it," King said.

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FURTHER RESEARCH

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