

TEACHING THE PAST IN THE PRESENT: ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD TRAINING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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The archaeological field school continues to be an integral part of any archaeologist's training, but at the same time there are significant differences in the quality and quantity of our field training programs. As part of its mission to enhance archaeological professional standards, the Register of Professional Archaeologists (RPA) has begun a program to certify archaeological field schools. Today's field school needs to include more and different experiences than the field training many of us acquired early in our careers. We need to provide exposure to new cultural properties regulations, international antiquities laws, increased inclusion of descendant aboriginal populations in our research, and technological advances in the realms of remote sensing, preservation, and computerization of many field tasks. This talk considers how we may best approach the field training of tomorrow's archaeologists.

INTRODUCTION

My topic is archaeological field schools and field training in the 21st Century. A consistent theme that runs through most recent critiques of archaeological education is the disconnect between how public archaeology is done and how we teach archaeology in the academy. It is small comfort, but this disconnect exists in all professions. Pick up any law, business, or medical journal and you'll find the same complaint that today's students are not being trained for the "real world." An MBA arrives to her or his first day of work and is immediately plunged into the realities of business politics, competition, incredibly fast-paced decision-making, and yes, ethics. So it is with our archaeology graduates.

THE EDUCATIONAL DISCONNECT

This education-vs-skill disconnect is real, but I think it is also really oversimplified. The archaeology classroom of the 21st century does not, and should not, have walls. Similarly, public archaeology does not start once we graduate from the academy. The line separating academic and public archaeology is increasingly fuzzy and gray, our archaeology shouldn't be dichotomized. We need to think in terms of today's archaeology as a diverse professional discipline, not as two antagonistic camps.

Academic training in archaeology is, to borrow Lévi-Strauss's description of totemism, good to think with, not to eat with. Public archaeology is often where the we start to eat; in fact, it allows most professional archaeologists the opportunity to eat. The fact that the academy stresses theory

over application and mind over materials is not borne of laziness or disinterest. The disconnect rests in large part with vast differences in reward structure. In major research departments where most of the Ph.D.s are created, academic archaeology rewards publication and research. Teaching, particularly that directed toward applied skills, goes largely unrewarded and, in some cases, is actively discouraged. The reward structure of public archaeology benefits those who can know and use applied skills, compliance regulations, and efficient reporting of results.

These very different reward structures are not going to change anytime soon. As a discipline, we have to find those niches where successful cross-pollination can occur. One very important niche is the archaeological field school. I am a firm believer that field schools should shoulder more of the revisions we'd like to see in our discipline.

The 21st-Century field school, like the 20th-Century field school, is a rite of passage. Yet as much as our discipline has changed over the past few decades, the institution of the archaeology field school has changed very little. In fact, of all of the academic curricular components of an archaeologist's education, field schools have probably changed the least over the past 30 years. Today's student is expected to learn basic excavation techniques, and a lesser amount of laboratory analysis, and to come into contact with mapping, photography, note-taking, and other recording activities.

There are a few major reasons why field schools have changed so little over the past several decades. First and foremost, archaeology field

schools are too often designed solely as a way to introduce students to excavation techniques, without an understanding of research-design writing, permitting processes, the ethics of archaeology, and the interpretation of research results. An additional reason is that field schools are too often a test pit writ large. Field school directors often locate their projects to test a new site, assessing the potential for later non-field-school based research. This is not a context that begs for change. Finally, and let's be honest about this, too often field schools are cobbled together to provide quick and easy labor pools for researchers who may not have done too well on a recent grant.

Each of these, of course, is an insufficient reason for continuing to follow the old school approach to the archaeological field school. So, you ask, what should the modern archaeology field school include in its curriculum?

WHAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE MODERN ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD SCHOOL?

The Register of Professional Archaeologists answers this question, at least in part, through its Field School Certification program. The program defines professional conduct and standards that should be met in the modern archaeology field school. Standards exist for personnel, operational procedures, field procedures, sponsorship, and purpose. (You can get the details on these standards at the RPA web site.) The standards require that the project is under the direct supervision of an RPA-certified archaeologist, and that any other field school supervisors have at least one year of experience in the region and time period focused on during the field school. We recommend that field school participants receive at least 12 hours of lecture and discussion relating to the research and field methodologies prior to field excavation. Students need to be instructed in a wide range of field operations, including all aspects of excavation, note-taking, laboratory analysis, mapping, and use of appropriate technologies. Institutional sponsorship has to be clear, and the field school research program must be guided by an explicit research design. The RPA guidelines do not explicitly discuss a minimum duration for field schools, but the members of the RPA certification committee recommend at least four weeks of cumulative field experience as a minimum.

How do early 21st-Century field schools stack up? Two years ago I informally reviewed information on 50 archaeological field schools in the U.S. and abroad, and by my estimate 80% of those programs would qualify for RPA certification. Okay, 80%, a pretty good grade even in an archaeology class. But let's not forget that many of our present field school standards date back to 1974. We do need to advocate for important additions to the field school standards.

First, students need to have a significant exposure to the SAA and RPA ethical codes and research standards prior to the beginning of active field research. We do have rules, and students need to know our professional standards. Second, we need to be serious about write-up and publication of field school research. We send the wrong message when students simply walk away from a research context without having participated in the written summary of their intrusive research. The Southern Methodist University field school requires excavation groups to turn in one chapter of their final reports each week of the field school, starting in the first week with a written summary and critique of the PI's research design. At the end of the field season these reports, from introduction to interpretation, often reach 100 pages of description, interpretation, maps, and artifact-density graphs. These reports form a permanent research archive at our Taos campus. Writing clear prose for the public is highly stressed in the reports, and collaboration among the students is essential. I hope that over the next few years we work to change our professional standards, asking more from our students and supervisors than we presently do.

Field school certification is completely voluntary, but it is important that we try to bring the 21st -Century field school into the same working environment that the rest of modern archaeology utilizes in its daily existence. We benefit from peer review in our publication and grantsmanship. We need the same approach for the archaeology field school.

WHERE ARE WE NOW WITH FIELD SCHOOL REFORMS?

These are major changes that will take time. We have been making smaller changes to the certification program, alterations that we hope will encourage more participation and professional

growth. First, certified field schools now have to reapply for certification every two years rather than annually, lightening the load on PI's who already have many forms to fill out. Major changes have also been made to certification classifications. Previously all field programs that achieved certification were given an identical "RPA Certification." Based on comments and requests from cultural resource management firms, graduate programs, and students, we now accord RPA certification along with an indication of program duration and course prerequisites. So a field school meeting for four, five-day weeks would be given the certification classification of RPA4, for example. A program of similar duration that also requires one or more class prerequisites would be classified as RPA4-P. This classification is not meant to be a "ranking" of programs relative to other programs, but it does provide basic information that prospective employers and others may want about a person's field school experience.

Finally, the certification committee has also worked to better the parameters of our program. We are explicitly interested in the certification of archaeological field schools in which participants disturb or adversely effect intact archaeological contexts in the course of the program. This focus more closely reflects a primary professional goal of the Register of Professional Archaeologists, specifically the protection of archaeological resources through teaching and application of modern archaeological methods and ethics.

CONCLUSIONS

The modern archaeology field school is by no means perfect, but I'm very encouraged by the short- and long-term plans to improve this very important educational component of professional archaeology. The field school certification program is not an attempt to limit or constrain theoretical or methodological approaches in archaeological field schools. Our goal is to instill the minimum standards to field programs that RPA expects of all professional archaeological field projects. Professionalizing field school programs will have a long-term, positive effect on the professionalism of future archaeologists.

Present field school offerings are good, and most meet the minimum requirements and criteria for certification under the RPA guidelines. Given these successes, we now need to take our expectations for field school education up a notch. My hope is that students come away from the modern archaeology field school having been challenged physically, mentally, and academically. Each should experience the rigors of fieldwork, analysis, report writing, and interpretation, and have a realistic view of what is required of today's professional archaeologist.