

UC Archaeologists Respond to SAA Statement on Draft Repatriation Policy

July 6, 2020

Dear President Napolitano,

We write to you as UC faculty and as archaeologists and bioarchaeologists to condemn and repudiate the recent statement, now retracted, by the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) regarding the draft Native American Cultural Affiliation and Repatriation Policy that was sent to the UC Office of the President on June 19, 2020. This statement was inappropriately sent out by the SAA President without proper vetting by the society's Board of Directors or relevant committees. As far as we have been able to determine, no UC affiliated archaeologists were consulted prior to the drafting and release of this statement. The statement has been officially rescinded by the SAA. (<https://www.saa.org/quick-nav/saa-media-room/news-article/2020/06/24/statement-concerning-calnagpra>)

We want to make it very clear that this statement does not reflect our own personal positions on the new draft policy, nor does it in any way reflect a consensus opinion of UC affiliated archaeologists, nor even the consensus of SAA members.

We want to emphasize our strong support for the goals and guiding principles of the new draft policy. The repatriation of Native American and Native Hawaiian human remains (ancestors) and cultural items (belongings) is not just the legal responsibility of the University under applicable federal and state law, it is also our moral and ethical obligation. Repatriation is an act of reparation and restorative justice that has been too long delayed and obfuscated within certain portions of our institution. Several of us have been fighting for more efficient, transparent, and collaborative repatriation processes within the UC since the 1990s, through our participation in various Senate and administrative committees at the campus and systemwide level and our positions as campus administrators. Others were directly involved in the drafting of the new draft policy, acted as consultants to the UC Office of Research Policy Analysis and Coordination throughout the drafting process, or provided extensive comments on various drafts through campus or systemwide review processes. Thus, we were completely blindsided by the SAA statement to UCOP, which failed to acknowledge the years of negotiation and deliberative process that went into the development of the current draft policy or its legal, political, and historical context and was filled with inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and hyperbolic and reactionary rhetoric.

Contrary to what was suggested by the SAA statement, we do not see the new draft policy as a threat to our research practice or teaching in archaeology. Rather it is a necessary first step that will enhance our ability to develop truly collaborative and productive research relationships with Native American and Native Hawaiian communities both here in California and beyond. It will be essential to our ability to recruit and retain Indigenous faculty and to attract and mentor the next generation of archaeologists in our graduate programs and in our undergraduate classrooms, laboratories, and field projects. Engagement with NAGPRA and state repatriation processes has been a part of archaeological practice for more than a generation. Our discipline has been improved and thrives as a result of these experiences. NAGPRA and its consequences have forced us to become more transparent and accountable in our work and increased respect for and collaboration with descendent communities has allowed us to tell better and richer stories about the human past.

We look forward to working with UCOP and our campus administrators to facilitate the adoption and implementation of this important new policy.

Sincerely,

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