



ARTICLE

Rethinking Field School Delivery and Addressing Our Biases

Mark S. Warner , Katrina C. L. Eichner, and Renae J. Campbell 

Culture, Society, and Justice, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID, USA

Corresponding author: Mark S. Warner; Email: mwarner@uidaho.edu

Abstract

Field schools are foundational training for archaeologists and the corresponding methods for instruction are largely consistent within the discipline. The expectation is that at some point early in their careers students will enroll in a field school. To participate, students must pay summer tuition, dedicate a minimum of four weeks (usually longer) to full-time fieldwork, and in many cases travel to remote locations. The reality is that for many students such expectations make field school participation an impossibility—and ultimately make archaeology a nonviable career option for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. Offering local field opportunities within the context of a regular school year alleviates those problems. A recent field school in north Idaho demonstrated how traditional field school structure excludes many students and how archaeologists can adjust instruction to make field training more accessible to students.

Resumen

Las escuelas de campo proporcionan capacitación fundamental para los/as arqueólogos/as y los correspondientes métodos de instrucción son mayormente consistentes dentro de la disciplina. La expectativa es que, en algún momento temprano de sus carreras, los estudiantes se matriculen en una escuela de campo. Para participar, los estudiantes deben pagar la matrícula de verano, dedicar un mínimo de cuatro semanas (normalmente más) al trabajo de campo a tiempo completo y, en muchos casos, viajar a lugares remotos. La realidad es que para muchos estudiantes tales expectativas hacen que la participación en una escuela de campo sea imposible —y, en última instancia, que la arqueología no sea una carrera viable para estudiantes de grupos históricamente subrepresentados. Ofrecer oportunidades de campo locales en el contexto del año escolar regular alivia esos problemas. Una escuela de campo reciente en el norte de Idaho demostró cómo la estructura tradicional de las escuelas de campo excluye a muchos estudiantes y cómo los/as arqueólogos/as pueden modificar la instrucción para que la capacitación en el campo sea más accesible para los estudiantes.

Keywords: field schools; training; educational biases; public archaeology; historical archaeology; Idaho

Palabras clave: escuelas de campo; capacitación; sesgos educativos; arqueología pública; arqueología histórica; Idaho

In many ways, field schools are the great “taken for granted” of archaeological training. Students are expected to participate in field schools, and university anthropology departments are encouraged to offer them regularly. Ostensibly, field schools are conducted to generate research, yet an ulterior reason is the financial incentives. Put bluntly, universities encourage field schools because they generate revenue through tuition and course fees during the summer—a time when university facilities and resources are generally underutilized.

For archaeologists, field schools are simply an assumed part of our schooling—to the point where field school participation has to be documented on official transcripts for an individual to be eligible for some jobs. In recent years, a few archaeologists have started to examine and critique the implications behind this model. One obvious issue is that field schools contribute to the profession’s problem with unanalyzed collections (Cain 2013:27; Milanich 2005; Sonderman 2018). Many universities run

field schools on an annual basis, but all too often there is no corresponding support to process the artifacts generated through those projects—let alone funds to pay repository fees for those collections. The result is an emphasis on excavation at the expense of collections and curation. This is clearly a significant problem that merits further discussion, but it is not the focus of this work (Warner and Rivers Cofield 2024).

A second strand of scholarship is a critical assessment of the biases inherent in field schools and archaeological training. Heath-Stout and Hannigan (2020) published an excellent article illustrating the class biases of archaeological training and the impacts of such financial inequalities on our profession. The model of mandating that students dedicate a significant amount of their summer time—usually at least four weeks according to the Register of Professional Archaeologists (RPA) standards (<https://rpanet.org/field-school-standards>)—and pay several thousand dollars in tuition and fees effectively eliminates archaeology as a potential career option for many students. As part of the article, Heath-Stout and Hannigan offer concrete suggestions for addressing this situation—namely, urging scholars to lower costs and encouraging students to seek out opportunities for support. Our recent experiences in north Idaho have corroborated Heath-Stout and Hannigan’s findings, but we would also like to expand the discussion of potential solutions to this problem and offer some further thoughts on field school training and accessibility.

As archaeologists working in an institution (University of Idaho) where approximately 30% of our students are first-generation college students and in a state that has the second lowest “go on” rate to college in the country (<http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?year=2018&level=nation&mode=data&state=&submeasure=63>), we are aware of the many economic challenges faced by students. The University of Idaho’s administration further estimates that approximately 9% of students at our university have a documented disability, and 20%–40% of enrolled students are “nontraditional”—meaning they are primary caregivers, veterans, or individuals over the age of 23 (<https://www.uidaho.edu/student-affairs/nontraditional>). Moreover, conservative estimates in 2020 suggest that up to 9% of 13- to 17-year-olds in the state identify as LGBTQ+, a community that has been explicitly targeted by discriminatory state legislation in recent years (Conron 2020; Williams Institute 2019). Indeed, we see our students occupying unique positionalities and facing tough financial decisions throughout their academic careers—a reality that has manifested itself in our previous field schools consistently having very low student participation rates.

Over the past 15 years or so, the University of Idaho has run a number of field schools following the traditional model of field school delivery (several weeks of digging away from campus, either in state, out of state, or abroad). Before our 2019 field school (discussed momentarily), we only had one field school enroll more than seven students going back to the early 2000s (Table 1). This is despite the fact that we have had solid numbers of undergraduate majors to draw from over the years. Informal discussions with our students consistently indicated their need to work during the summer to pay for school—and the correlated inability to take several weeks off from work. Moreover, students must weigh the decisions of leaving behind support networks (healthcare, academic support services, social

Table 1. Summary of Student Participation in Recent University of Idaho Field Projects.

Year	# of Students	Project	Idaho Location
2012	12	Kelly Creek	North Central
2012	2	Cyrus Jacobs / Uberuaga House	Boise
2013	7	Kooskia Internment Camp	Kooskia
2014	2	VA Surgeon’s Quarters	Boise
2014	2	University of Idaho Campus	Moscow
2015	1	Erma Hayman House	Boise
2019	18	Moscow High School	Moscow

communities, safe lodging, etc.) and personal obligations (family caretaking, shared finances, etc.) to try their hand at field work. Interestingly, despite low enrollment prior to this project, we commonly had many students volunteer on the field school excavations for short periods of time (half days or single days). Students clearly wanted field experiences but were limited in their ability to make time commitments that are typical of most field schools.

Our 2019 Field School: A New Experience

For the past several years, a faculty member at the local high school repeatedly reached out to University of Idaho archaeologists inquiring about doing a field project at a nearby natural history center. The high school used the center as the focus of “environmental club” activities, and administrators thought the center could provide new opportunities for both college and high school students. The property is located about 8 km (5 miles) outside of town and an informal walking tour of the property identified a likely historical site that could be suitable for excavation.

In some regards, the proximity to town made the nature center a very convenient field school site. However, we also quickly realized that there were going to be significant logistical hurdles to running a field school in that location. The primary concern was that transporting high school students several kilometers out of town was going to be a problem given that the high school did not have funds to support bringing students to the natural history center. An ancillary issue was that the location was not going to be practical for doing any sort of public archaeology—something that we have emphasized in almost all of our projects over the past decade (Campbell et al. 2017, 2018:31; Eichner et al. 2024; Warner et al. 2014). The high school instructor’s initiative did inspire further thinking on our part about what would be a practical way to run a field project that could incorporate both high school and college students. This led to the idea of conducting a field school on the grounds of the high school.

In many ways, the location was ideal. The high school is located in the historic core of our community (Moscow, Idaho), is about a 15- to 20-minute walk from the Idaho campus, and has large amounts of open spaces on its grounds—and a review of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps indicated multiple structures on the location in the late nineteenth century (Figure 1). In short, the location had exactly what we needed: easy access by college and high school students and the potential to uncover evidence of several aspects of the town’s history. In addition, the project somewhat follows in the footsteps of archaeologists who have conducted excavations on college campuses (see Camp 2022; Dufton et al. 2019; Skowronek and Lewis 2010), but the twist was that we were not planning to excavate *our* campus. Instead, we were following (unknowingly at the time) the work of Danielle Raad (2016), who built a stand-alone field course for high school students and conducted excavations on the high school grounds where she taught. This is not to say our idea was totally novel, because similar community heritage-focused field methods courses offered during the regular semester have become popular over the past few years (Chenoweth 2022; Ryzewski 2020; Vacca 2023).

In the spring of 2019, we received a small internal grant that provided funding to staff the field portion of the project. We also began discussions with the administration at Moscow High School (MHS) about the logistics of excavating on the high school grounds. Overall, the high school administration was supportive; principal concerns were establishing protocols for high school student and college student interactions on-site (an issue we addressed in consultation with our Risk Management office) and ensuring that we did not dig anywhere near the recently installed fiber optic cables. Despite strong support from the high school, it took some time for us to receive written approvals to work on the high school grounds. We ultimately received formal confirmation from both the University of Idaho and MHS in late June / early July. The significance of this was that the field school was not listed on the university schedule until several months after the spring semester was complete, and most students had already registered for the upcoming fall semester.

Timing also presented a challenge to incorporating both college and high school students into the project. A typical summer field season was not viable given that the high school would not be in session, and, as we have noted, our university students generally could not afford a typical summer field school. To address this challenge, we proposed an early fall field school with an excavation schedule of

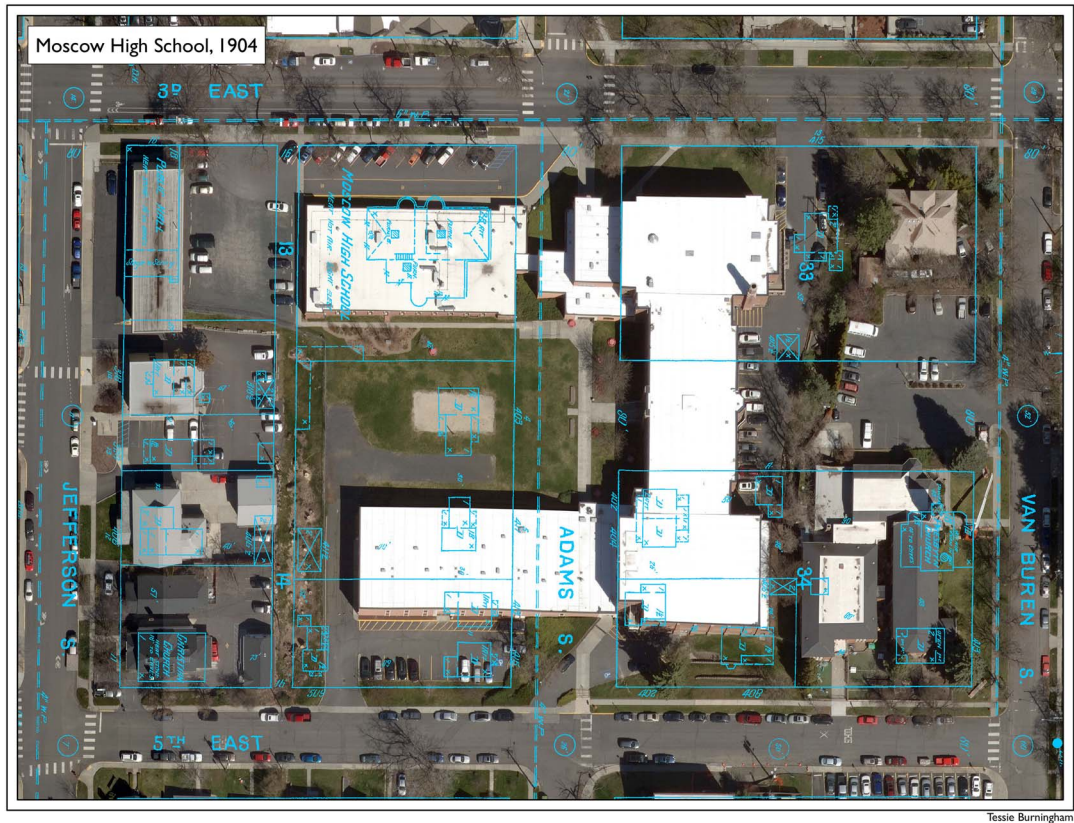


Figure 1. Present-day Moscow High School grounds with 1904 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map overlay. (Image courtesy of Tessie Burningham.)

Friday afternoons and all day on Saturday for a period of seven weeks. Such a timetable would (generally) fit into our university's scheduling and would allow for interested high school students to participate immediately after their release from school or on weekends.

The field school worked administratively from the university's perspective, because the school offers the option of compressed half-semester (eight-week) courses. This sort of "short course" offering is not frequently used during the school year, but it provided opportune scheduling for a field project. From a learning perspective, we would say that the students experienced minimal negative impacts. We were able to expose students to much of the typical field school curricula, with the primary shortcoming being that the repetition/routine of fieldwork was not as extensive. We also provided the opportunity for students to continue to work on the materials in a lab course during the spring semester.

Project Outcomes and Broader Implications

Overall, the project was surprisingly successful. We located materials associated with the past 70 years of student life. Beyond that, we also identified the remains of the first school that was built in Moscow and household debris from multiple late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century households. From a conventional archaeological sense, we provided hands-on field experience for students and community members as well as recovered data about the town's history that was the foundation for a student's master's thesis (Hollingshead 2024; Warner et al. 2019).

We also want to acknowledge that the project had logistical challenges that are not typical of standard field schools. First, we had to be a bit more flexible with student scheduling. For example, several students had a Friday class conflict that necessitated them coming onto the site an hour or two late. We also had two students who were in our university marching band, which led to

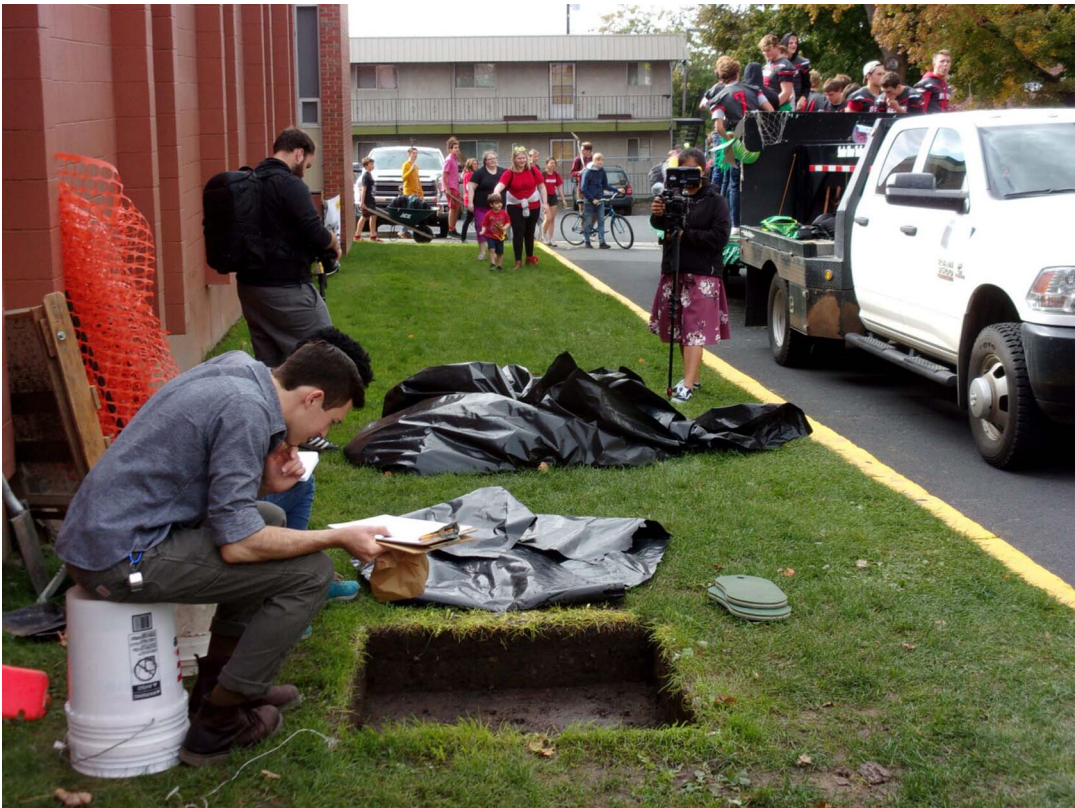


Figure 2. Owen Olsen-Smith working with Maia Wilson (obscured) on unit notes while preparations are made for Moscow High School homecoming. (Photograph by Katrina Eichner.)

conflicts on two Saturday afternoons when they had to perform at home football games. In practical terms, this meant that supervisory staff were regularly dealing with some of the crew coming onto or leaving the site at different points during the work day. These were minor inconveniences from our perspective, and in the big picture, student learning was not compromised by missing a few hours of fieldwork.

As an aside, one of our Friday excavation days was moderately interrupted by preparations for the high school homecoming parade. One of the areas we were working in was the staging area for the homecoming floats—a work hazard that we believe is a first for archaeologists (Figure 2).

Financial Unburdening

Unexpectedly, our unconventional scheduling led to a number of positive outcomes. The first thing that surprised us about our project was that by folding a field school into the regular school year calendar (that is, fall semester), we had no problem enrolling students. Despite its not having been put on the university course schedule until late summer, we enrolled 18 students in the class. Upon reflection, this should not have been surprising. There are two reasons this schedule was popular with students. First, because a field school was folded into the regular academic calendar, students did not have to make additional sacrifices to participate in it. Nationwide, almost 42% of full-time college students work while in school (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_503.40.asp). Although we do not have Idaho-specific data on this point, our strong sense is that well over 50% of our students work during the school year to support themselves. And nearly 100% work during the summer. Consequently, by having the class largely integrated into a regular fall semester schedule, students did not have to disrupt their work schedules significantly—and lose needed income—in order to participate.

The second reason for the popularity of the field school was that by folding the class into the fall schedule, the field school cost no more than a typical three-credit class. By offering it as a normal fall course, there was no need for students to pay extra tuition for summer classes or make supplemental requests for financial aid, as is generally the case with summer enrollment. As a side note, the cost to students for this class was approximately \$275 per credit¹ (total cost in 2019 was \$875: \$825 in tuition plus a \$50 course fee), making this the most affordable field school of all of the 208 field programs surveyed by Heath-Stout and Hannigan (2020:124). Additionally, the field site was located approximately 1 km (0.75 mile) from campus, which meant that students had no transportation costs to get to this field school, and housing was already accounted for as part of their fall residency on campus. The program's affordability is arguably the most compelling reason for the success of the project.

Moreover, we are all well versed in the “go off to a remote locale and dig for six weeks” model of field schools. Yet, what this project taught us was that thinking creatively about structuring projects can generate more student access to field training. Archaeologists have not generally talked about how student finances have profound impacts on student training until very recently (Heath-Stout and Hannigan 2020; White 2022a, 2022b; Zachary 2015). By requiring long-term residential field schools, archaeology is effectively putting the profession out of reach of undergraduate students with limited financial resources. The evidence from Idaho's field schools over the past decade clearly indicates the limited success of traditional summer field schools for our students. Our fall field school significantly “out enrolled” all of our previous field opportunities. This is because our students do not have the luxury of taking time off from work to spend four to six weeks at a residential field school.

If we look closely at archaeology's field school tradition, it is evident that what we are talking about in Idaho is not unique to us. It is a problem that needs to be confronted. What we identified is something that students are increasingly calling out as class privileging. As Zachary (2015) stated, “Today, field school is a luxury for students. As the cost of undergraduate education continues to rise, especially in the United States, it has become more difficult for some students to justify attending field school instead of taking a summer job or paid internship.”

There's No Place Like Home

Finally, we want to discuss (and speculate on) the impact of one particularly unexpected aspect of this project—namely, the participation of a large number of queer and disabled students. Approximately 25%–30% of the student participants in the field school identified as queer, and a slightly smaller percentage identified as having an ability difference or chronic health condition. We found this point to be fairly striking given that the state of Idaho is not exactly known for its socially progressive policies. This finding gave us another unexpected outcome on which to reflect. Certainly, there are a number of issues that can factor into this. For example, anthropology (but not necessarily archaeology) is a popular field of study for queer and disabled students. One also cannot discount the importance of communal solidarity and peer support for students who regularly experience discrimination, and it is understandable how word of an inclusive space on campus—for instance, an academic program—could easily spread (Coley and Das 2020; Sadowski 2016). This was something discussed somewhat informally while we were in the field, and Eichner and Vacca (2020) explored this further in a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology.

It is often overlooked how living situations in residential field schools can be not only physically disagreeable but also psychologically uncomfortable. The arrangements at many residential field programs—where students are in isolated or inaccessible settings that require sleeping in communal spaces (bunk houses, tents, etc.) and sharing bathrooms and bathing areas with an accompanying lack of privacy, personal space, and accessible design—can be profoundly stressful. This is true not just for queer and disabled students but for *all* students. It is our strong sense that another unrecognized benefit of local, nonresidential field schools—like the one we ran in the fall of 2019—is avoiding the communal living situation of the typical field school while also maintaining student support networks at home (for example, access to locally licensed therapists, insurance-covered pharmacies, support persons, tutoring services, inclusive and accessible housing, etc.). A nonresidential field experience—particularly one at an ADA compliant public school—provides a greater sense of comfort for students, particularly for

members of queer, disabled, and nontraditional student communities. Simply put, our students could go home at the end of field work to their own *private* space while also maintaining a lifestyle outside of the field setting that supported their learning and personal needs. Such a seemingly small thing goes a very long way to easing students' discomfort in—or even preventing their exclusion from—isolated field settings. This point was alluded to in Blackmore and colleagues' (2016:22) recent discussion of queering archaeology: “For many who define themselves as gender queer, being comfortable in their living and work space is essential,” and we can easily extrapolate a similar sentiment for disabled and nontraditional students.

Lessons Learned

We initiated our field project on the grounds of Moscow High School guided by some very practical considerations—namely, how we could create a field schedule that would overlap to some degree with the high school schedule. By doing that, we expected to have a field program that could incorporate college students, high school students, and the general public. Ultimately, our success in fostering high school and community participation was limited. We had five high school students participate, 19 community volunteers, and 199 site visitors. Upon reflection, this was clearly due to scheduling incompatibility with the high school.

However, our somewhat unconventional field structure also resulted in very unexpected and positive outcomes that speak to some broader problems that archaeology faces. First, by folding our field school into the fall semester schedule, we eliminated the dual financial barriers of students having a summer tuition bill while also having to sacrifice work opportunities to participate in a field program. Eliminating these barriers is something that is important in a state such as ours. Second, by having the field school in town and within walking/biking distance of campus, we inadvertently created a field setting that was more accessible and safer for queer and disabled students. The appeal of our field program to students with ability differences and queer identities was attributable to a variety of factors, but we do not want to overlook the impact of having a field program where students are psychologically comfortable. Having a field school where students are still living in their homes and not required to absorb additional financial costs for participation does seem to be a model for providing more accessible educational opportunities in archaeology.

Acknowledgments. We thank several people for enabling us to conduct archaeology at the high school. From Moscow public schools, we thank recently retired Superintendent Greg Bailey as well as the Board of Trustees for Moscow School District #281. Individually, we particularly thank Lee Anne Eareckson, who was the catalyst for getting us to think about doing a public archaeology project in town, and Erik Perryman, principal of Moscow High School. He provided access to and support from the high school and was an enthusiastic supporter of the project from the beginning. We also thank our colleague Ashley Kerr for providing the Spanish language translation of the abstract. No permits were required for this work.

Funding Statement. Fieldwork discussed in this article was funded by a grant from the John Calhoun Smith Fund at the University of Idaho.

Data Availability Statement. No original data are presented in this article.

Competing Interests. The authors declare none.

Note

1. The number we report is an average. Students pay a set tuition per semester if they are “full-time” students. Full-time students can take as few as 12 credits or as many as 20 credits. Consequently, their cost could have been as low as \$206/credit or as high as \$344/credit. The figure we report is for a 15-credit load, which is considered to be a normal semester course load.

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