ASU field school trains the next generation of archaeologists — right in their own backyard

The Archaeological Field School at S’e?av Va’aki in Phoenix provides a local, accessible opportunity for students to gain field experience

By Mara Busch, ASU News
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When an archaeology student thinks of doing a field school, a common requirement for those who enter the field of cultural resource management, they might envision traveling to remote corners of the world.

For students who participate in Arizona State University’s Archaeological Field School at S’e?av Va’aki, that does not have to be the case.

In 2021, the city of Phoenix was looking for ways to document archaeological resources around the S’e?av Va’aki Museum. At the same time, ASU’s School of Human Evolution and Social Change was searching for ways to offer local and lower-cost field school opportunities.

The museum, which is located on the ancestral lands of the O’Odoham at the village of S’e?av Va’aki, is a sacred site with ties to ancestral histories of Indigenous communities local to the region today, such as the Salt River Pima-Indian Community and Gila River Indian Community.

Together with the city and the Tribal Historic Preservation Offices of the Gila River Indian Community and Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, the school developed the field program at S’e?av Va’aki.

“We deliberately wanted to create an alternative to the traditional model where students travel somewhere for five or six weeks, which can be expensive or simply impossible for students with jobs and family responsibilities,” said Matthew Peeples, a professor in the school and co-director of the field program. “Working locally makes field training more accessible while also allowing us to take advantage of Phoenix's massive professional archaeological community.”

The field school was designed to provide students with a broad training on various archaeological methods, while teaching them about the legal and ethical frameworks of working in archaeology, such as consulting with tribes and learning about permitting processes.

“Students are able to build relations with the local archaeological community through this class, learning what careers in archaeology actually look like, and in several cases those connections have helped graduating students find jobs in the field right out of the program,” Peeples said.

Preparing students for careers in archaeology and beyond

Mackenzie Wright, former field school participant who now works as a repository aide at S’e?av Va’aki, chose to sign up for the field school due to the financial accessibility of the program, as well as the opportunity to gain hands-on archaeological experience while learning about the area she grew up in.

“Learning about archaeology is one thing, and actually doing it — drawing maps, surveying the site and interpreting the past — is another,” Wright said.

She said her field school experience prepared her on how to collaboratively work with different groups and members of the community, such as tribes and cultural institutions.

“This was key in influencing my decision to pursue the work I do, and I really appreciate the fieldwork we did for giving me a strong foundation in community collaboration and emphasizing Indigenous ways of knowing,” Wright said.

For Asa Andreas, another former field school participant, the program offered an opportunity to improve their understanding of hands-on archaeological work.

Andreas, who works as a senior environmental specialist for the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, shared how they regularly apply the methods, techniques and knowledge gained during the field program in their career today.

“As a tribal member myself, I already had some familiarity with these perspectives, but the field school reinforced the importance of cultural awareness and respect in professional archaeological practice,” Andreas said. “Students leave the course with a stronger understanding of how to approach fieldwork while keeping tribal perspectives and cultural considerations in mind.”

Reylynne Williams, a tribal historic preservation officer with the Gila River Indian Community, works with the field school to provide guidance on the curriculum, address potential concerns, serve as a guest speaker and help with the recruitment of interested O’Odham, Pee Posh and other tribal students or community members.

“From a tribal perspective, we have a vested interest in preserving our ancestral sites but also engaging with the people who are working in these careers to emphasize the importance of following the mandated laws, but to be aware of what is hidden under ground,” Williams said. “More people have to engage with Indian tribes more than ever, and this field school introduces that to these students.”

An opportunity to collaborate on historical discoveries

One outcome of the field school was bringing together numerous documents and archival photographs that provided new insight into the history of the Portland Tract, a 20th century Black neighborhood located on the grounds of S’e?av Va’aki, as well as the development of the neighborhood that followed.

As part of working on this analysis, students were trained on in-field recording systems, learning about historical artifact analysis and mapping. In collaboration with their instructors, students then created their own recording system and usage guide for the historical resources associated with the project.

This work provided students with a chance to contribute to real archaeological work and document resources associated with the historical Portland Tract neighborhood that was subsequently published in the International Journal of Historical Archaeology. It also allowed them to see firsthand the intersections of archaeological research, tribal consultation, heritage management and professional practice at work, Peeples said.

“The kind of work we do in a field school allows students to develop the practical skills — not just the knowledge — they need to be professional archaeologists,” said Matthew Kroot, assistant professor in the school and co-director of the field program.

“It can be a challenge to provide learners with the hands-on experience of doing archaeology in the classroom. Archaeology has two sides: the intellectual side is concerned with understanding the past, and the physical side that needs to engage with the material of the past in order to understand it. It is the second of these sides that an archaeological field school provides.”

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Main image



The Archaeological Field School at S’e?av Va’aki provides a local and accessible opportunity for students interested in archaeology to gain field experience and prepare for future careers. Courtesy photo

Text image(s)



Field school participants hike through South Mountain Park/Preserve on a tour of petroglyphs. Courtesy photo



Field school participants map remains of the Portland Tract, a 20th century Black neighborhood located on the grounds of S’e?av Va’aki. Courtesy photo