



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

ANNUAL MEETING OMBUDS REPORT

May 2021

**Submitted by: SAA Meeting Co-Ombuds - David Rasch
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SAA MEETING OMBUDS PROGRAM PRE-WORK AND PLANNING:

Overview

We – Elaine Shaw and David Rasch – your Co-Ombuds for this year’s SAA Annual Meeting are delighted to let you know that SAA meeting participants found us and consulted on a variety of issues and concerns over the course of the three-day meeting, April 15-17, 2021. You will see more detail below: we had direct contacts from 11 meeting participants and had the opportunity to meet and interact with many more.

Planning for the SAA Annual Meeting Ombuds

The SAA initiated a conference ombuds program for the 2020 conference in Austin, and at that time we were selected to be Co-Ombuds. In preparation for that conference, we worked closely with SAA Executive Director Oona Schmid and other SAA members and leaders to create a conference ombuds program that would best serve the SAA. Individuals and groups that might be likely to utilize the service were identified, and we each met with several key stakeholders to learn about the history, structure, membership and current challenges facing the SAA.

This process also included identifying and planning the communication channels for informing the membership about this new program, and about the confidential, neutral, informal and independent services an ombuds would provide. We created an informational video for the SAA website, developed a brochure and wrote descriptions for publicity emails and the web.

The 2020 conference was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic and when the 2021 conference was planned as a virtual conference, additional conversations took place between the ombuds and SAA to adapt the ombuds program to a virtual format, utilizing phone and zoom communications. A separate ombuds email address and phone number were created to ensure the confidentiality of contacts with the ombuds. Several additional communications with the Executive Director and others took place in 2021 in preparation for launching and providing the service.

In addition to ombuds services provided during the conference, we also agreed to monitor the email and respond to concerns that could come in within the two weeks following the conference, and to provide a summary report to give non-identifying aggregate and demographic information connected with the ombuds services provided during the conference.

OMBUDS PROGRAM UTILIZATION

2021 Annual Meeting SAA Ombuds Session Involvement

The SAA Co-Ombuds were invited by leaders and members to a number of Annual Meeting sessions as discussants, panelists or participants. Because the SAA Leadership had the foresight to publicize the availability of the Co-Ombuds to participate in the virtual Annual Meeting in a visible way, the Co-Ombuds had multiple opportunities to observe and share in the discussion of important topics at sessions including: Increasing Transparency at the SAA; Women in the SAA; Curation, Repatriation and Accessibility: Vital Ethical Conversations; The Ethics Bowl; Archaeology, and Diverse Expertise: On the Importance of Multivocality and Inclusion in Archaeology; and the SAA Business Meeting. Participating in this way allowed us to see and be seen by meeting attendees. Because we believe we were viewed as objective, independent observers with access to the SAA Board, we think this reflects well on the SAA Board's decision to establish an SAA Annual Meeting Ombuds program and promote it in this way.

“The SAA is an influential organization. What they say and how they act has impact...”

Visitor Feedback

Our experience during the meeting as well as our conversations over the last 18 months with leaders, members and stakeholders have helped us identify a number of themes:

- *The SAA is perceived to be an important professional connecting point for archaeologists – particularly students and those early in their careers.*
- *That said, the organization is viewed as ineffective at anticipating and/or slow to respond to events involving harm to women, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). Examples include: the sexual harassment issue at the Annual Meeting in*

- 2019, the CAL NAGPRA letter issue in June 2020 and one of the sessions on Repatriation at the Annual Meeting this year).
- We heard from women in particular a desire to engage in SAA leadership and volunteer activities, but an overwhelming sense that the organization is large, complex, confusing and can be a source of burn-out requiring significant investment of time without remuneration or consideration.
 - There appears to be a disconnect between the well-intentioned SAA Board, which seems to us to be open and receptive to feedback and ideas, and some of the members who view the actions of the SAA Board as defensive and indifferent to the feedback provided.

Ombuds Cases April 15-May 3, 2021

The SAA Ombuds received 11 contacts from the Annual Meeting participants. De-identified data on the cases is as follows:

- **Demographics:** 100% of the contacts came from women
- **Subject of Concern:**
 - 82% (9/11) of the cases raised concerns about the session "Has Creationism Crept Back into Archaeology;" (The session in question has been removed from the available session recordings and a letter of apology from the SAA Board was distributed to meeting registrants by email and on social media.)
 - 9% (1/11) concerned the Institute for Field Research (IFR) and the SAA's decision to post positions for the IFR;
 - 9% (1/11) concerned policies and practices of the SAA in general
- **Employment Sector:**
 - Academic: 55% (6/11)
 - Professional: 27% (3/11)
 - Unknown: 18% (2/11)
- **Ombuds Actions:**
 - 45% (5/11) – Ombuds provided de-identified information to the SAA Executive Director with Visitors' permission
 - 27% (3/11) – Ombuds offered and explored options

- 18% (2/11) – Ombuds shared upward feedback with the SAA Leadership
- 9% (1/11) - Ombuds referred Visitor to the formal reporting process

In addition to the individuals who contacted the SAA Ombuds by phone or email, six additional participants posted comments on the Annual Meeting Ombuds homepage on the SAA Annual Meeting website. All posted comments were related to the Repatriation session previously mentioned.

Contrary to our typical ombuds practice where people can be anxious about being identified to their peers or organization leaders for raising an issue, we noticed that our Visitors did not seem to be concerned with confidentiality. Instead, they were committed to using as many channels as possible to voice their concerns: posting comments publicly in the sessions, or on social media or electing to copy numerous SAA leaders on email communication sent to the Ombuds.

“I applaud the SAA for offering ombuds services. That is meaningful.”

Visitor Feedback

RECOMMENDATIONS / FEEDBACK

Here are the recommendations we heard from the Visitors:

- *Review and improve the abstract selection process to avoid issues like the one experienced at the 2021 meeting;*
- *Clarify for membership what the abstract selection process requires;*
- *Develop quality standards for abstract proposals;*

- *Ensure that selected abstracts are consistent with SAA policies and code of conduct;*
- *Improve communication to membership of the abstract proposal process;*
- *Develop and communicate a plan to address the process for responding to Annual Meeting controversies;*
- *Clarify the roles of the Executive Director, the SAA Board President and the SAA Board in decision-making relative to controversies that arise at the Annual Meeting.*
- *SAA Leadership should determine how to provide and maintain support for volunteers and leaders in the SAA stretched to the limit by workload and facing member criticism.*