“You Choose” Leadership Award Application for 2014 Competition

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Collaborative Analysis and Interpretation of Maya Heritage at Yaxunah, Yucatan, Mexico

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Abstract:

Archaeologists increasingly acknowledge the importance of sharing their scientific findings with local descendant communities, many of whom have often been disenfranchised from accurate information about their heritage. The current project will provide current archaeological science in an accessible manner to the residents of a village adjacent to where the PI has conducted archaeological investigations. In workshops a group of high school aged women and men will choose topics of interest to pursue in more depth for joint public presentations to the village. This pilot program will establish collaborations for a future larger program of curriculum development on ancient Maya culture and history.

Activity Goals:

There are approximately 8 million indigenous people who speak one of the 25 known Mayan languages living today in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras. Despite improvements in the educational systems of rural Mexico, most Maya people living in the Yucatan peninsula have very little access to accurate scientific information about the accomplishments of their direct ancestors who built the urban centers of the Classic period. The current project seeks to address this injustice through mentorship of Maya high school students interested in their archaeological heritage. Those students who are interested in Maya archaeology or learning about their indigenous ancestors typically are limited to what they see and hear on television or from uneducated guides working in the tourism industry. It is extremely rare for modern Maya young people to have the resources to attend university.

The Yaxunah Cultural Center, located in the Yucatec Maya speaking village of Yaxunah, in the center of the Yucatan peninsula, is a multi-purpose facility that opened in 2010. One half of the Center houses a museum of village history and the other half houses instructional space for classes, internet access, a library, and meetings. The Center has become a home for the maintenance of local history in addition to a place for learning the skills of the 21st century. Young people have learned the information needed to explain all the displays contained in the museum and to provide scientific and ethnobotanical information about plants in the garden. There has never been a sustained program of instruction in the archaeological history of the Classic Maya at the Center, despite the presence of a large Classic period archaeological site located adjacent to the modern village.
The current project proposes to facilitate the creation of a basic curriculum in ancient Maya history with a culinary focus. Many important Maya culinary traditions are largely unchanged since pre-Hispanic times and Maya people, especially women, take great pride in their culinary history. This curriculum would be created collaboratively between the PI Ardren, who has nearly 30 years of experience working with the villagers of Yaxunah, and a group of local high school students who have expressed interest in learning more about their history. Because young men learn about archaeological research through their employment by the archaeological project, this proposal targets high school aged women in order to re-dress the existing gender imbalance in access to knowledge about local archaeological history and heritage.

Through a series of workshops between the PI and local students, the following goals will be achieved: students will be provided access to the latest theories and data on ancient Maya history; topics of interest to them will be explored in more detail in order to generate powerpoint presentations open to the entire village; and a written guide (in Maya and Spanish) will be generated to leave in the Cultural Center library for future reference. If the students are motivated, this guide could be adapted to the elementary level for use at the local elementary school. While a small overall contribution to the academic environment of the village, this project will lay the groundwork for further and more extensive collaborations between the Cultural Center and the on-going archaeological project situated at the adjacent site.

**Professional Goals:**

There are few funding sources that support the dissemination of archaeological knowledge in venues other than traditional academic discourse. Despite growing expectations on the part of NSF and other federal agencies that scientific findings must have well-defined broader impacts, efforts to share archaeological findings with descendant communities still are seen by many researchers as peripheral to the main research mission. With my recent promotion to professor, I wish to dedicate a greater percentage of my research efforts to sharing the information I recover through scientific excavation. The Yaxunah Cultural Center is a perfect venue for reaching under-served and traditionally under-represented populations.

I first conducted research at the archaeological site of Yaxunah in 1989, and I served as Co-Director of the archaeological project from 1993-1997. I left to work at another archaeological site only because the Mexican government took over the research program at Yaxuna in 1998. In early 2014, I was invited to return to Yaxuna to Co-Direct the on-going research program established 4 years ago by my colleagues at UC-Riverside. I am extremely enthusiastic about returning to the archaeological site of Yaxuna, and am currently collaborating on a proposal to NSF to fund investigation focused on the longest known ancient Maya raised road. I am equally enthusiastic about the opportunity to collaborate with the Cultural Center and
the members of the village of Yaxunah on programs that will educate anyone who has an interest in the extraordinary heritage of the Maya.

In sum, the professional goals of this proposal include: mentoring populations under-represented in archaeology, such as women and minorities; dissemination of up to date and accurate scientific information about the past to interested local communities; and making a contribution to my discipline by modeling the importance of collaborative knowledge production.

**Budget:**

Round-trip Airfare Miami-Merida, Yucatan, Mexico—2 trips, one in March 2014 to plan summer workshops and 1 in June for 4 weeks of time in the village to conduct the proposed research project including workshops and presentations

$499. X 2 

= $998.

Honoraria for 4 high school students in Yaxunah—4 hours/day for 3 days/week for 4 weeks = 48 hours working on basic Maya archaeology, further research on culinary heritage, preparation of powerpoint presentations, etc.

$125. X 4

= $500.

Housing and food for the PI in Yaxunah during the project—1 week in March 2014, and 4 weeks in June 2014

37 days @ $30. /day

= $1110.

Reference materials, images, etc will be provided by the PI. Powerpoint software and computer time will be provided by the Yaxuna Cultural Center

**TOTAL Requested**

= $2608.