

Building Bridges with “Native Voices”

REFLECTIONS ON
THE REU-NSF
PROGRAM,
2005–2007

BY ABIGAIL SELDIN

IN 2003 THE National Science Foundation (NSF) awarded Jeremy A. Sabloff, then Williams Director of the Penn Museum, and Janet M. Monge, Keeper of the Museum’s Physical Anthropology Section, a three-year grant to establish a Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) program entitled “Native Voices.” The

primary goal of “Native Voices” was to involve visiting Native American and non-native Penn undergraduates in research on the Museum’s North American collections by helping fund six Native American students for a semester at Penn and covering the research expenses for all the students. Now, in its third and final year, it is clear that the “Native Voices” program has had an overwhelmingly positive impact by building bridges between Penn, the Museum, and Native American communities.

The initial idea for this program grew out of Sabloff’s interest in American archaeology, Monge’s commitment to undergraduate research, and the collective desire in the Museum’s American Section to bring Native students to Penn. “The Museum is really interested in engaging with Native American communities and is serious about opening up the study of the collection to broader constituencies than we have in the past,” explains Jeremy Sabloff. “It’s not just for Ph.D. students, but also for Native American communities and Penn undergraduates.”

Robert W. Preucel, Curator in the American Section, elaborated on the urgency of bringing Native students to the University. “Penn has the smallest number of

self-identified Native students in the Ivy League and no Native faculty. We have a responsibility to Native peoples to do something about that.”

Although the initial proposal to NSF was rejected, the “Native Voices” program stimulated interest among the NSF reviewers. “They *really* liked the idea and the concept,” Sabloff noted, “but they weren’t convinced we could do it [from an organizational standpoint].” Heartened by the NSF’s excitement, they revised their proposal and were awarded most of the funding for three years, with additional funding coming from the Museum and Penn’s Diversity Fund.

THE REU PROGRAM

“Native Voices” officially began operations in the Fall of 2004. Although initial recruiting went slowly, hard work by faculty, staff, and teaching fellows Utsav Schurmans (2005–2006) and Emily Renschler (2007) eventually helped raise Penn’s profile



Left, soon after arriving at Penn, visiting REU students eat in the Museum café: (left to right) Calista John, Jennifer Brown, Rebekah Horsechief, Sonya Ashley, Herbert Poepoe, Michael Ray, and Napua Hueu.

Right, (from left to right) Calista John, Napua Hueu, Rebekah Horsechief, and Jennifer Brown cook one of their monthly potluck dinners in the Greenfield Intercultural Center.



Emily Renschler

THE GOALS OF “NATIVE VOICES”

- To introduce and integrate Native American undergraduates into research conducted at the Museum.
- To use the Museum’s extensive and multiple resources to aid in the experience and knowledge of museum studies by Native students and to use that experience to enhance their own undergraduate academic pursuits.
- To increase the scholarly value of the North American collections with the addition of Native American knowledge and perspectives on both the material culture elements and, if possible, on the skeletal remains.
- To increase the presence of Native American students on Penn’s campus.
- To re-evaluate recruitment strategies in Penn admissions so that in the future the University can engage more Native American students in a variety of academic pursuits even beyond anthropology.

and the visibility of the Museum and its collections in Native communities. Since 2005, applications to the program from Native American students have steadily increased. The visiting students learned about the program in a variety of ways. For example, Calista John (Navajo, REU '07) discovered the REU through a Native American-interest listserv, while Jennifer Brown (Haida, REU '07) was directly recruited by a professor at her home institution, and other students responded to advertisements in Native American college journals.

For at least one student, knowledge and encouragement to apply came from a more unusual source. “I found out about the REU because my dad [Harry Ray, Pueblo of Laguna, REU '06] did the program before me last year,” said Michael Ray (Pueblo of Laguna, REU '07). “He said it was a really great opportunity and he got a lot out of it.”

Indeed, the REU experience made such a positive impact on some of the alumni that they returned to Penn for a second spring term or even transferred from their previous university. Sonya Ashley (Navajo, REU '06 and '07) explained her decision: “I wanted to go back to Penn because I feel that they facilitate creative learning and they helped me to achieve my goals. I call it the ‘power of Penn.’”

Rico Worl (Tlingit, REU '05), now a member of Penn’s Class of 2009, explained his transfer from Alaska by noting that his REU experience taught him “about all of the other resources that were available at Penn, especially for my interests in anthropology.”

After acceptance into the program during the fall semester, visiting Native American students arrive in Philadelphia in January and move into an undergraduate dormitory for the spring semester. Most of the REU students (both visiting Native Americans and their Penn partners) take two undergraduate classes and two credits of independent study, affording them time to work with the Museum’s collections and develop their own projects.

Over the course of the last three years a number of unexpected challenges did arise, particularly when the Native American students interacted with the Museum’s collections. “It can be so emotional for them to work with the objects,” observed Stacey Espenlaub, the Museum’s Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) coordinator.

“For Native students, objects are *alive* in ways that others might not realize,” observed Lucy Fowler Williams, Keeper of the American Collections. “Part of [our job] is to try and be aware of such issues and to have a heightened sensitivity to the student’s needs as they interact with the collections.”

Sonya Ashley emphasized that “it is important for any student participating to enter with an open mind, willing to look for learning opportunities in untraditional settings.”

Fortunately, each challenge led to increased support for the students, especially as the Museum united around the REU program. For example, the teaching fellows organized an informal seminar series with various Museum departments to orient the students to archives, publications, conservation work, and the collections.

Mia King (REU '06, Penn '09) commented that “we saw all parts of the Museum, and had access you wouldn’t normally get as an undergraduate . . . it really enfranchises you to go look at any collection you’re interested in.”

Most interesting were the introductory lectures about the Museum’s NAGPRA program (see *Expedition* 45(3):21-27), where the students “were willing to just jump right in even on controversial issues,” remarked Utsav Schurmans.

“We’ve tackled a lot of hard issues,” notes Janet Monge positively.

The visiting students stressed the central role played by Penn Museum’s staff in the success of the program. “I think the most important part of it is the interaction between the student and the faculty in Philadelphia,” asserted Jennifer Brown.

Sonya Ashley agreed, “The biggest things I took out of the program were my strong friendships with the REU participants and the faculty.”

Although the program was initially geared toward supporting student engagement in collections research, Associate Keeper William Wierzbowski observed that “many people were not as interested in that aspect, so we had to be open . . . to a more fluid approach of working with objects.” Projects included creating replicas of Pueblo shields, assisting with or researching the repatriation of objects and human remains, studying particular objects, and even curating exhibits in the Museum and online.



Marlon Magdalena (right) holds one of the replica Pueblo shields he made for his REU project while Robert Preucel displays the original shield.

Inspired by his Tlingit heritage, Rico Worl chose to work with the Museum's Louis Shotridge collection of Tlingit objects—"I thought the freedom that you had in choosing your project was a great thing."

"The projects they produce are awesome!" beams Janet Monge. The "Native Voices" program has shown "that undergraduates can step out of their comfort zones and do something really special."

Two of the research projects—the repatriation work on human skeletal remains done by Rebecca Horsechief (Pawnee-Osage, REU '07) with the Pawnee and by Herbert Poepoe (Hawaiian, REU '06 and '07) with the Hawaiians—have helped to establish new relationships between the Museum and Native communities.

"We want to do more with tribal groups and to be more engaged, especially with our work with repatriation, so the REU fits nicely and also opened up new areas," explains Jeremy Sabloff.

Other projects will also benefit the Museum and Penn. For example, Robert Preucel notes that Abigail Seldin's (REU '07, Penn '09) upcoming exhibit, which is being curated with the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania, will not only serve to build a stronger relationship between the Museum and the tribe, but will also "go beyond a normal class project to show the work to the community."

"With some collections we have a built-in tie and we tend to focus resources on where we have a history," explains William Wierzbowski. But with the REU "the great thing is the opportunity to make new connections."

NEXT STEPS

Despite the tremendous positive impact of the REU on all involved, the National Science Foundation has elected not to renew the Museum's "Native Voices" program for an additional trial period. Unless new sources of funding are found, this may result in a program hiatus.

Although the REU program's future is uncertain, what does seem clear is that it is an important step toward achieving the greater goals of increasing collaboration with Native communities, stimulating more undergraduate research at the Museum, and building a Native American studies program.

Mia King, now heavily involved in Penn's Native American interest group, "Six Directions," believes that those goals are now within reach. "The All-Ivy Native Conference that we hosted this past spring would not have been possible without the REU students. They opened us up to their connections and networks . . . having more Native students at Penn allows us to be more active."

"Our intent was always to increase awareness of research opportunities in the Museum and to foster and support a Native American program," says Janet Monge. "I think that we've done more than any other single entity in the University to make that happen and, of that, I feel especially proud." 🏠

ABIGAIL SELDIN, a submatriculant B.A.–M.A. student at Penn, joined the REU program in 2007.



REU Closing Ceremony: (back row, from left) Stacey Esplenaub (holding child), William Wierzbowski, Paula Sabloff, Tim Powell, Abigail Seldin, Herbert Poepoe, Di Hu, Jennifer Brown, Jeremy Sabloff, Paige Selinsky (holding child), Robert Preucel, Marilyn Norcini, Samantha Cox, and Valerie De Cruz; (front row, from left) Sonya Ashley, Emily Renschler (holding child), Michael Ray, Calista John, and Janet Monge.

AS A NATIVE Hawaiian, I was fortunate to have been able to participate in the REU-NSF program during both the Spring 2006 and Spring 2007 semesters. This program allowed us to take classes at the University of Pennsylvania and gain valuable experience in conducting research. My research project involved working with *kapa*, or bark cloth, and learning techniques to clean, repair, and preserve it. I also learned how to create housing units for artifacts that I can now use to help preserve my own people's prized possessions.

While the Penn Museum's Hawaiian collection is fairly small compared to its other collections, it has some items that are valuable to Hawaiian culture. Among these are the *lei niho palaoa*(s), or human hair and whales' tooth necklaces, and the large *ahu ula*, or Hawaiian feather cape—both of which are symbols of Hawaiian royalty.

One of the amazing aspects of the REU program was the opportunity it presented for some of us to educate other

members of our own culture. In my case, I was able to revise some of the Hawaiian artifact labels (that were originally written in the 1970s from the perspective of the colonizer) to correct spelling mistakes and historical inaccuracies.

The REU program also introduced us to "Six Directions," a Penn Native American interest group under the auspices of the Greenfield Intercultural Center. This connection allowed the REU students to play a part in the planning process for the All-Ivy Native Conference that Penn hosted during the spring of 2007. As a result, everyone who attended the conference was also able to hear Manulani Meyer, a noted Native Hawaiian educator, speak in the Penn Museum's *Dialogues Across Indian Country* series on "Ho'ea Ea: Returning to Freedom—Hawaiian Epistemology and the Triangulation of Meaning." Similarly, during a presentation at the Greenfield Intercultural Center, Gail Makuakane-Lundin, the Director of Native Hawaiian Student Services at the University of Hawaii at Hilo, shared her expertise on how to indigenize a university campus.

These are just a few of the many wonderful experiences I have had thanks to the REU program. And the friends I have made at Penn have become lifelong ones. As a Native Hawaiian it is customary to acknowledge those who have been instrumental in our endeavors. Therefore, I would like to thank Janet Monge for the inspiration that created this program, her unending support, and for always being there. Thanks are also due to Valarie De Cruz, Director of the Greenfield Intercultural Center, for her guidance and help in making us feel at home in Philadelphia, to Ginny Green, the Museum's Senior Conservator, for her time and patience in teaching me the skills I have acquired, and to Jeremy Sabloff for his hard work behind the scenes. Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to Lisa Gemmill, for being a wonderful emotional support and friend, and to Sonya Ashley, who was an inspiration when things got tough, my lunch and dinner buddy, and the person with whom I spent many days exploring Philly and all it has to offer. 🏠



Herbert Poepeo works on his REU project.

Janet Monge

SITTING ON A couch on the first floor of one of Penn's dormitory high-rises, the REU students waited patiently for the last student to join us for lunch. The night before, I had walked out of Philadelphia's airport hoping to see snow, but was slightly disappointed that there was none. With

just the winter wind blowing through the super block of dormitory high-rises, I realized it was colder than I had expected. What would this place and its people offer to my interests in Native American studies, art history, and anthropology?

The answer was *more than I had expected*. There were random experiences, such as walking aimlessly with my equally inquisitive friend Rico Worl, as well as inspiring interaction with peers, teachers, and scholars. For me, the REU program was a combination of academic freedom set in a unique urban cultural experience that stimulated thoughts about being a Native person and applying that knowledge to research.

My research on “Visualizing the Native Renaissance, Part 1: Shelley Niro” helped me discover myself. I spent most of my time at the Penn Museum, surrounded by the belongings of Native people and immersed in research about our Native people. It was moving to participate in such an environment. It became part of my existence while I was there. I dreamt about my research, agonized over the process, found inspiration everywhere, and connected with people I respect—all of which became part of the learning process that I carry with me today.

The five months in 2005 that I spent in Philadelphia reignited my passion for Native contemporary art and its social issues relating to Natives today. Penn’s staff and faculty were very accommodating, encouraging us to attend lectures and conferences that allowed us to engage with a diverse mix of people. Amid our school workload, we met with Russell Thornton, a UCLA Professor of Anthropology; Mateo Romero, an artist; Sherman Alexie, an author; Wilma

Mankiller, the first woman chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma; and befriended “Six Directions,” the Native American student organization, with talk of “knowing” how to make frybread. Our education through the REU program was special. It showed mutual respect in cultural understanding and was a perfect culminating experience for my undergraduate years.

It has been nearly three years since my arrival in Pennsylvania and I continue to work in the arts and culture field, expanding my knowledge into development and marketing. As for the connections I made in Pennsylvania, I continue to meet my friends in locations around the country, continuing our experience where we left off. 🏠

REU STUDENT SONYA ASHLEY

LIKE MY FRIEND Herbert Poepeo, I was fortunate to participate in the REU program twice (2006, 2007). Having just graduated from the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI) in Albuquerque, New Mexico, I came to Philadelphia never having seen a museum collection before. I will always remember my first reaction—astonishment and fear. As a Navajo woman, I stared at the ages-old Native objects stored in the Museum’s Mainwaring Wing and

remembered my grandma’s warnings to never touch these things. Among the Navajo it is said that to touch these objects may bring you the bad luck or illnesses of the object’s deceased owner. Staring through the glass windows at the objects in the collections, I thought, “How am I going to do this?”

Fortunately, after much reflection and some searching through the Museum, I found the *Na a’tlo*—Navajo string games that had been collected by the Museum’s first Director, Stewart Culin (1892–1903). Shaped into various forms—animals, constellations, and insects—I was intrigued to learn more about them, but most importantly, they were covered in plastic and fastened to cardboard—Perfect!

To my surprise, my REU project became more than just a learning experience for



Nanibaa Beck (purple coat) poses with the other members of the first REU group in 2005. Standing from left to right, Robert Preucel, Rogette Esteve, Janet Monge, Sarah Green, Utsav Schurmans, Rico Worl, and Andrew Pederson. Crouching next to Nanibaa is Lauren Sankovitch.

Janet Monge



Sonya Ashley displays part of her research project. "The REU program offered more than an opportunity to improve my research skills. It offered an opportunity to learn with my family, as I explored the Museum collections with my mother, and it allowed me to open my heart and mind to Native elders as they spoke of education, perseverance, and strength."

Philadelphia's Mummer's Day Parade. More importantly, this time I was more aware of my cultural limitations in handling the objects. Inspired by the work of Larry Aitken (an Ojibwe tribal historian and an amazing storyteller), Tim Powell, and Louise Krasniewicz (both Senior Research Scientists at the Museum), I investigated digitization as a solution for cultural limitations in museums. My final project took the shape of a website concept that used digital images as a means for cultural education.

Like the previous semester, I greatly enjoyed attending events, dinners, lectures, and exploring Philadelphia. My most poignant moment, however, was learning from

me—it was a community effort sparked by my research questions that led me to discuss stories, traditions, and philosophies with my family and friends that would never have come up in our normal conversations. It opened a doorway of communication. I was soon overwhelmed with cultural stories, personal accounts, and perspectives on Navajo traditions, and was surprised to find that many people do *want* to teach their cultural knowledge. It was an amazing learning opportunity for me, both academically and personally. Instead of being shy about asking questions, I have grown to understand the importance of asking these questions now.

During the Summer of 2006, I spent many days braving cell phone charges to chat with Herbert. Although the program was over, we continued to discuss our own Native experiences and ideas, and through Herbert, a Native Hawaiian, I became more aware of my connection to Indigenous People on a global level and not only to the Natives of North America. It was our friendship and my curiosity that encouraged me to apply to the program a second time.

My second REU experience was great. I showed the new participants around Penn's campus and the city and enjoyed

Larry Aitken. His eloquent teachings helped me understand the dynamic relationship between people and objects, and inspired me to understand the cultural concepts of objects and their purpose. His presentation of ideas of educational renewal based on traditional values gave me hope for new directions in Indigenous cultural education.

Today, I continue to be intrigued by Indigenous museum collections and their cultural implications. One day, I hope to make a career helping people to connect with their past through museum exhibits and collections.

I continue to be grateful for the opportunity to participate in the REU program at Penn. Besides engaging in a unique cultural exchange—hearing the experiences of a variety of Natives—I learned how to nourish myself culturally without the immediate presence of home and how to put ideas into action. For the first time in my life, I felt intellectually empowered. This learning experience has personally affected me. I formed lasting friendships and would like to extend my sincerest appreciation to Penn's staff, the REU participants, and the Museum guests that made this program so truly special. What I learned here, I will carry with me forever. 🏠