



CHOOSING AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD SCHOOL

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The field school is the backbone of archaeological training; it provides a skill set that no classroom could possibly offer. Whether you are excavating, surveying, mapping, or using a plethora of other skills vital for modern fieldwork, it is during your first field experience that the Brunton and the Marshalltown find their way into your life. Field courses are a tradition deeply ingrained in the history of the discipline and a place where lifelong friends often are made. To see this, one only needs to go to the hotel lounge at the SAAs. You will find an unlikely group of individuals sitting together swapping stories of six weeks spent in some strange place.

Archaeological fieldwork has diversified greatly over the years, and this has yielded a dizzying array of opportunities for students who try to pick out a field school. This article is concerned with addressing the question: which field school is right for me? Both your interests in archaeology and your career goals are important considerations in your decision. It goes without saying that some students will either love or hate fieldwork, regardless of the situation. But if you are certain that this is something you might like to try, then perhaps the following thoughts will help in making an informed decision. Chances are you will have a blast wherever you end up.

Project Type

The first question you have to ask yourself is what do you want from a field school? No single field school can teach you everything, but perhaps you want to focus on gaining excavation experience, or maybe survey or mapping skills. In recent years, field schools have expanded into other topics as well, such as working with Native American groups or the public through educational outreach. There are also opportunities to learn valuable skills and gain field experience outside of dedicated field schools. For example, a summer working for a cultural resource management (CRM) firm will help you to refine skills such as laying out grids and digging test pits.

Ultimately, the type of field school you choose is based on two factors: your interests and your career goals. The first factor is incredibly important. For example, survey is great if you like to hike and see large portions of the landscape, whereas excavation provides a unique experience to uncover the past right before your eyes. In addition, a field school may use a particular technology or methodology (i.e., remote sensing or geoarchaeology) that piques your interest. Read the project description, talk to your advisor and other students, and see if it sounds like something you would enjoy. Keep in mind you will be doing this for up to six or eight weeks. The second factor is based on what you want to do with archaeology as a career. Do you want to enter the job market after your undergraduate education, or apply to graduate school? Many CRM and federal government projects are survey-based, so having these skills will properly equip you for work after college. If you are continuing your studies, however, you might consider what types of fieldwork would be beneficial for your future research, be it survey, excavation, or a specific methodology.

Project Site and Living Conditions

One can find fieldwork opportunities almost anywhere, whether on another continent or in your own state. Although the “romantic” tradition of living in a tent for the summer is still alive and well, field school living conditions range from sleeping under the stars to living in an air-conditioned apartment. While it might sound more exotic to be in another country where luxuries are at a minimum, examine your personality before signing up for something that might make you uncomfortable.

It may seem obvious, but think about what area of archaeology interests you. If it is the U.S. Midwest or Southwest, for example, you should consider a field school in those areas. You will be able to get to know your future colleagues and gain experience with the type of archaeology you are pursuing. The same can be said about working abroad. If you want to do European archaeology, consider traveling out of the country. Attending a field school overseas offers a unique set of challenges and rewards. Can you speak the language, and if not, are you okay with feeling a little out of place? Can you be out of touch with everyone back home for half a summer and deal with “snail mail,” infrequent phone calls, and dial-up Internet that you can only use once a week? Are you okay with eating and drinking things that may seem odd? And there is climate. Remember that when you’re basking in the rays of the sun in the northern hemisphere, down in the southern half it is winter—it might be the rainy season or just plain chilly. It is also worthwhile to examine how you value privacy and personal space. You will be with your fellow students almost non-stop and sometimes in particularly close situations. Contact the project director to ask questions about the living conditions, political climate, etc. Hopefully they will make you feel more confident about the experience. (As for your parents, that is another matter.)



Figure 1: The Harvard Archaeological Field School crew observes the excavation of a large, deep archaeological feature.

Living conditions often go hand-in-hand with the cost of attending the project (see below), but all field schools will provide some sort of room and board. This might mean bringing your own tent and eating what you or the project director cooks, but it can also mean living in a dorm building and eating in a mess hall. Some programs may supply two meals a day and others three. In most cases, weekday meals are provided but weekends are your responsibility—meaning you should bring a little extra spending money. On the other end of the spectrum, there may be apartments and a full-time chef. Which would you prefer? Each answer will be unique to the individual, but refrain from judging yourself too harshly if you would rather have a roof over your head. With all of the choices out there, finding a place that is comfortable should not be a problem.

Costs and Funding

The two major factors that influence the cost of field schools are the tuition rates for the host college or university and the cost of living for that geographic region. Some universities charge large amounts of money for out-of-state tuition or for summer courses. The high price of tuition might mean taking a field school from your own school to cut costs, but which also could give you a chance to perform follow-up analyses and work with the project long-term. A limitation you may face is the need to fulfill a departmental requirement, so paying tuition to receive college credits may be mandatory. If the field school is not affiliated with your own college or university, it is essential to find out whether the program offers academic credit that is transferable to your school. Often, departments that require field experience for the major will have criteria that define what is an appropriate field school. In such instances, refer to your particular department and especially your advisor for help.

As noted earlier, living conditions also affect how much you will pay. Would you be comfortable living in a tent and saving a thousand dollars, or would you rather spend extra to feel not so far from home? If your field school is abroad, summertime plane tickets can be expensive. Remember that there might be additional expenses, particularly for foreign studies. In some cases these might include things like passport fees, immunizations, supplementary insurance, or side trips you might want to take.

There are ways to spend little to no money at all on a field school. Some programs have financial aid scholarships, and others are affiliated with the National Science Foundation's Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) program. In addition to having plane tickets, room, and board provided, you may receive a stipend. Another way to reduce your cost is to volunteer at the field school. This usually involves the same work and learning experience, but without paying tuition and therefore not receiving college credit. Ask the project director what options are available, and check outside sources of funding.



Figure 2: A Harvard Archaeological Field School participant delves into his work in order to excavate a shaft burial from Tiwanaku, Bolivia.

Field School as a Research Experience

A field school is hard work, and you will be generating more data than any one person can analyze. While some students may want to attend a project to learn a skill, others take joy in the fact that they can continue to be part of the research experience *after* fieldwork is completed. In recent years, a number of field schools have begun to emphasize student research projects, many of which are showcased at the SAA Annual Meeting. Other students have taken a small project from field school and developed it into a M.A. thesis or even a Ph.D. dissertation. Involvement in a field school that makes you part of the research process not only makes getting your hands dirty seem more worthwhile, but it also allows for career development. A paper or poster presentation looks great when applying to graduate school, and continuing research relationships means extended opportunities to pursue your own projects in the future.

Many field schools with this sort of focus have evening lectures (often by campfire light) and student research projects as part of the curriculum. These features are generally a good indication of a project that will include you in the research experience. Read the project description and talk with the project director to make sure that the orientation of the field school fits your interests. The Internet is a good place to start your research, but remember that word of mouth often provides the most intimate and realistic picture of a field school program.

Resources

When these considerations are taken into account, finding a field school that is right for you becomes easy. Several organizations post free online resources advertising digs and field schools, including the Archaeological Institute of America (<http://www.archaeological.org/webinfo.php?page=10016>), the American School of Oriental Research (<http://www.asor.org/ASORCAP.html>), American Anthropological Association (http://www.aaanet.org/ar/fs/fschool_current.htm), and Shovelbums (<http://www.shovelbums.org>). A detailed list including session dates, affiliated universities or museums, site conditions, and room and board information is extremely helpful to obtain a complete picture of the field school, but if this information is not provided, don't hesitate to contact the director for more information. Good luck, and we look forward to seeing you in the field!