

Abstract — The Field Museum

Collaborative Curation: Building a 21st Century Model for the Care of North American Human Remains

The Field Museum of Natural History respectfully requests \$455,746 to support **Collaborative Curation: Building a 21st Century Model for the Care of North American Human Remains**. This three-year initiative will generate essential, innovative approaches for museums to curate human remains respectfully. We will use The Field Museum's collection as a pilot to address pressing needs for improved documentation and appropriate housing of Canadian and U.S. human remains.

Challenge: Currently, more than 175,000 North American indigenous human remains are curated in U.S. and Canadian museums and other repositories. These individuals hold great cultural significance to descendent communities and simultaneously have potential value for substantive scientific research that could benefit a broad public. The Field Museum is among several collections-holding research institutions that struggle to refine, update, and implement ethical standards for the respectful care of human remains that can be sustained over time. Museums must collaborate with descendent communities and other stakeholders to develop flexible solutions that are responsive to the potential needs and outcomes related to the care of North American human remains, including repatriation, scientific research, and long-term curation.

Activities and Time Frame: We propose to address these needs through three interrelated and concurrent components. The first involves a two-day invited symposium in year 1, bringing together leaders from Native North American communities, museum professionals, and scientists to identify challenging issues, discuss multiple perspectives, and develop potential solutions. The second will refine and implement a forward-looking standard of ethical care, using the approximately 1,500 North American human remains at The Field Museum as a pilot. The third will be the creation of a web portal by the end of the year 3 to disseminate products of the symposium and lessons-learned from the pilot, including sample inventory sheets, presentations, publications, examples of research and data-collection tools, and designs for boxes and other re-housing essentials.

Benefit to the Museum Field: By addressing collaboratively the challenges and opportunities associated with the curation of North American indigenous human remains, this project will be of profound value to the national and international museum community. It will generate discussion and create new networks among stakeholders from wide-ranging perspectives. Our ultimate goal is to research, explore, develop and implement thoughtful and forward-thinking practices for the ethical care of human remains currently under museum stewardship.

Intended Outcomes: Expected outcomes include (1) the promotion of improved stewardship of human remains in North America; (2) the creation of guidelines for respectful care informed by open discussions, hands-on implementation, pragmatic considerations, and consultation with specialists; (3) the fostering of an open dialogue about benefits and drawbacks of improved scientific techniques (cf. Tallbear 2013); (4) the demonstrated, greatly improved care of human remains using The Field Museum as a pilot; (5) the dissemination of information to a broad community of collections-holding institutions, universities, descendent communities, and the public through our developed on-line resource; and (6) the training of students and recent graduates in scientific techniques, data collection, and appropriate procedures in human remains curation.

Measuring Success: The three-part evaluation will use qualitative and quantitative measures. Phase 1 will consist of developing a semi-structured interview protocol, including an expertise-oriented evaluation to help assess the landscape of current practices and to give stakeholders an opportunity to discuss the potential value and importance of the upcoming symposium. In Phase 2 the Museum's evaluator will develop an anonymous questionnaire—to be circulated to all conference participants—to measure the usefulness of the conference, illustrate concerns about collections, and illuminate next steps. These data, in conjunction with those gathered during the conference, will contribute to the practical guidelines being developed. Phase 3 will consist of another round of semi-structured interviews conducted by the evaluator and the biological anthropologist. This phase will follow up on the usefulness of the conference and its broader impact. The evaluator will draft a final report that covers all phases of the project and defines suggested next steps.