

**Preliminary Report:
Results of the AABA Taskforce on the Ethical Study of Human Remains Surveys of Members of
the African American Community and of Biological Anthropologists**

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Background About of the Taskforce and Surveys

The Executive Committee of the American Association of Biological Anthropologists contacted Benjamin Auerbach, chair of the Committee for Community Partnership, in May 2021 to discuss the formation of a task force to address the myriad concerns raised about the ethics and practices associated with the study of human remains. Members of the AABA have expressed concerns about developing ethical standards in the study of human remains in various capacities over recent decades, most notably in conjunction with the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). In May 2021, disquiet was publicly raised about the possession at the University of Pennsylvania of the remains of victims from the 1985 MOVE bombing in Philadelphia, and about the presence of remains of enslaved African Americans in the Samuel Morton Collection. In these cases, communities of origin* and descendant communities had not been consulted in the disposition of these remains.

After initial conversations in May 2021, Dr. Steven Leigh, President of the AABA, appointed Drs. Benjamin Auerbach (in his capacity as chair of the Committee for Community Partnership) and Fatimah Jackson to co-chair the task force. The AABA Taskforce on the Ethical Study of Human Remains (hereafter “the Taskforce”) was given a charge to assess and develop guidance concerning the study and disposition of human remains in universities, laboratories, and museums, especially those of underrepresented and marginalized communities, as well as those that are the product of colonialism. Because of the specific problems that arose in the spring of 2021, and because attempting to address all underrepresented communities would prove unwieldy, the co-chairs of the committee elected to focus on human remains and biological samples of members of the African American community. Members of the Committee for Community Partnership, given their prior experience on that committee, were asked to serve on the Taskforce. These members are Drs. Shamsi Berry, Ellen Lofaro, Ripan Malhi, and Charlotte

* Broadly, the community of origin comprises all individuals to whom the study of and interpretations based on human remains apply. Thus, this includes but is not limited to those who are genetically and culturally related directly to the individuals whose remains are under investigation, and provides opportunities for groups to self-identify their association with the remains of any individual or group of individuals.

Roberts. To broaden experience and representation on the Taskforce, additional members were added to the Taskforce; initially, these were Drs. Michael Blakey, Alan Goodman, Joseph Graves, and Clarence Gravlee, with Sheela Athreya joining as a representative from the AABA Executive Committee. In April 2022, Drs. Jennifer Caldwell, Carter Clinton, Joseph Jones, and Carmen Mosley joined the Taskforce. We are currently adding additional members as the Taskforce undertakes the next stages of work.

After initial meetings, it was agreed upon in the Taskforce to advocate for research that is undertaken from the start in partnership with communities of origin and descendant communities, and that research be conducted with the permission of those communities. A perspective proposed by the Taskforce members was that the default position for researchers would be that research need not occur, and that there is an opportunity for richer research to occur when studies are undertaken in partnership with communities. In light of this, the Taskforce members decided early in their work that the best function of the Taskforce would be to develop a roadmap for how to operationalize this approach.

Before developing any roadmap, however, the Taskforce members advocated for two surveys to be conducted in parallel: one of members of the African American community, and one among members of the AABA. After all, the Taskforce members wanted to know if members of the African American community would be interested in partnerships with biological anthropologists, and what concerns the community has about the study of their relatives and ancestors. The Taskforce also needed to know what kinds of research are conducted by members of the AABA on human remains and biological samples, how members already engage in community partnered research, and attitudes about community partnered research. This report provides a first summary of results from these surveys.

Informal surveys of members of the African American community were conducted by Fatimah Jackson and colleagues in the greater Washington, D.C., area from late January through early March 2022. A total of 538 individuals completed the survey out of 630 self-identified African Americans approached. Five questions were asked of participants:

- 1) Are you aware that appropriated African American remains are in the possession of U.S. university labs and museums?
- 2) How should the remains be handled?
- 3) Should guidelines exist to control scientists' access to these samples?
- 4) Who should be consulted to set up these guidelines?
- 5) How should these guidelines be enforced?

Those individuals who administered the survey were asked to provide definitions and context for terms used on the questions (e.g., the meaning of “appropriated” or “possession”). Responses were recorded by the survey administrator.

The survey of the members of the AABA was administered using the Qualtrics XM Web Survey Tool through the University of Tennessee (IRB-21-06691-XP). A copy of the survey questions and responses are provided in the Appendix at the end of this report. The link to access the survey was sent out to the AABA membership via an emailed newsletter, and the survey was open from 14 February 2022 until 25 March 2022. Results from the first 400 respondents were presented at the Presidential Plenary Panel at the AABA Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado, on March 26th. We report complete survey results here.

African American Focus Group Survey Results Summary:

The answers provided in the African American focus group survey are still being analyzed by the Taskforce. These responses will be used to support the development of an invited workshop with leaders of the African American community that is planned for May 2023, as well as an ensuing national survey of the African American community that will seek responses from 4,000 self-identified members of the community. Nonetheless, broad themes emerged from the initial focus groups that we report here. We consider these within the context of the five questions asked of participants, below providing a selection of answers from respondents and a summary for each.

Are you aware that appropriated African American remains are in the possession of U.S. university labs and museums?

Example responses:

- Yes, (long pause) I think it is wrong. What is appropriated? VCU is an example of African American remains [that were taken and discarded into a well] without consent versus Howard University African American remains, [which were obtained] with some level of permission.
- No way to generalize. Black people have a right to donate themselves and their family for science. We need to be represented in anatomical studies.
- There should not be rules just for African Americans, there should be guidelines for all people.
- Consent is fundamental. Most scientific researchers are unethical and take samples without consent. People get samples for one cause, but the samples are used for other purposes.

- Scientists are shady. Consent is a joke. Medical researchers take advantage of people and make giving your sample a condition for treatment. Lots of medical activity is shady. There should be rules for all people.

Survey respondents varied in their answers. Some were unaware of or only in recent years learned about the presence of African American remains and biological samples in U.S. labs and museums. The popular discussion about the cells of Henrietta Lacks, as well as news stories about the nineteenth century VCU human remains or the MOVE bombing victims, have made the presence of African American remains at institutions more widely known. Survey participants branched into discussion about consent for these remains to be held by institutions. Respondents ranged in responses from implying that remains should only be in institutions with explicit permission and consent to distrust of the scientific community to study the remains only within the bounds of those permissions.

How should the remains be handled?

Example responses:

- If they were given voluntarily and consent was given – this unlikely.
- There should be a living will or a family decision made.
- Who decides? It's complicated in our society. We have so many options.
- The individual or the family should decide the disposition. For example—a cemetery in an abandoned Black town—what if there are no living relatives – what do we do? Should the Black people in the nearest town make the decision? What if they are not locals?
- Well, the premise of any research without a testable hypothesis is unjustifiable.
- Do dead people have rights? What is the significance of burials? Aren't burials for the living people?
- Few African Americans are in molecular genetics – most go for the money and become physicians – so African Americans are not being well researched anyway.
- There should be rules for everyone, not just African Americans. In the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia there is a whole room full of bones that belong mostly to white people. [This refers to people who died during the 1918 pandemic in the city.]

Following up on the initial question, where many respondents discussed consent without prompting, we asked about how remains should be handled, leaving the question broad. Respondents interpreted this as a question about who decides whether the remains should be in collections. As one participant stated in

response the first question provided as an example above, respondents to this second question stated that African Americans should be represented in studies and research, but they should be used to address well considered questions. The criteria for what these questions constitute were not addressed. We note that a few respondents made statements about returning remains to families or relatives, but those who did noted that this is complicated.

Should guidelines exist to control scientists' access to these samples?

Example responses:

- Science should be purposeful, not serendipitous. Right, it should be hypothesis driven, researchable questions, no fishing trips.
- No community sanctions are needed if prior approval is given. You can't say okay and then make a fuss.
- It is sensitive and polite to ask permission and to engage the community that is associated with certain remains. You should ask the community for support and permission.
- What if the community says no? That should not be the end of that.
- Doesn't the county have rules and regulations? The community or county should have guidelines that prevent fishing. Everything has to be justified.
- Why don't they put community people on the university IRBs [institutional review boards]? Community people would be sensitive to their own proprieties and represent the larger group. That could ensure a dignified response.
- What is dignified? Do you mean consistent with the religion of the people and community in the same area? [examples given of Jewish community and presence of rabbi consultants to certain projects]

This question received more consensus among respondents. Themes in answers included a desire to have representation of members of the community involved in making decisions in the study of remains or biological samples, a standard policy for asking permission or obtaining prior approval, and for studies to be explicit and directed (e.g., no "fishing trips"). Respondents stated that the community should have a say, whether it is initial permission to study remains or specific input on individual research questions to be asked of remains. Some participants also stated that a "no research is necessary" should be the default.

Who should be consulted to set up these guidelines?

Example responses:

- Doesn't the university have review boards with guidelines and training programs for scientists?
- NIH [National Institutes of Health] should also have guidelines. They should add a local component.
- There should be sanctions for university that fail to follow through with local and national research requirements.
- We need to enlarge the research sensitivities of national mandates.
- I agree, we need dual clearance required to set up guidelines for working with any remains. We need group specific clearance at the local level
- There may be a discrepancy in the criteria between the local and national levels. The local level should dominate, however.

A broad theme is that researchers should police themselves but also answer to representatives of the communities of origin, especially at a local level. Respondents noted a need to have flexibility and sensitivity in the setting of guidelines, as guidelines that apply for some circumstances may not apply for others. Answers reflected responses to the prior questions, in that respondents spoke about a need to have dual participation between the community and researchers. Some cited IRBs and other organizations as mediators, though the mechanism for setting the interface between communities of origin and researchers remains an open topic for future discussion.

How should these guidelines be enforced?

Example responses:

- Enforcement should be through the scientist's home institution. IRBs are not toothless.
- For scientists, there should be a research ban for some time, like in Ethiopia when scientists took the samples out of the country without permission.
- We need to challenge university associations of the offending scientist and place sanctions against his or her future activity.
- I agree we need higher scrutiny of offending scientists for future infractions.
- Nobody want to be taken advantage of – the risk of this is greater with uneducated communities and in developing countries.

Respondents to this question called for more oversight of permissions for researchers in their studies. An implied argument again made was that scientists should be policing themselves, and that there should be

consequences for researchers who transgress against the permissions agreed upon by communities of origin. National professional associations and IRBs were noted as organizations that could be used to enforce guidelines. Many respondents noted concern about groups that are underrepresented, not informed, or whose voices have not been heard.

The focus groups among members of the African American community give guidance to the Taskforce as we seek to develop a roadmap for how to engage in partnerships in pursuing research. While some respondents expressed skepticism and mistrust of the scientific community, a strong theme that emerged from the focus groups was that communities should be involved in the research process. Whether this would be limited to initial permissions or an ongoing relationship over the course of many research projects, respondents thought the community should have voice and that they should be the ones who decide about access to and study of remains. Finding other themes will await additional detailed study of the focus group responses, but this initial analysis impresses upon the AABA Taskforce that the approach we chose on community partnered research is shared by the focus group participants. Considering the outcomes of this initial analysis, we turn our attention to understand the practices of biological anthropologists in their research and their attitudes with respect to community partnership in research.

AABA Survey Results: Basic Information on Fields of Study and Research of the Respondents

A total of 660 members of the AABA started the survey, and 587 completed it by 25 March 2022, when the survey closed. Only results from individuals who completed the survey will be discussed in this report. Individuals self-identified their career group and fields of study, reported in Table 1 on page 9. Individuals could report themselves as studying more than one field of study. The majority of respondents were tenured faculty (29.5%, $n=173$), graduate students (28.1%, $n=165$), and nontenured faculty (18.7%, $n=110$). Fewer than 5% of the total respondents identified their career as non-academic professionals ($n=24$), as government researchers ($n=22$), or as retired ($n=19$). Therefore, most individuals who completed the survey are in the academy, either as faculty or engaged in graduate studies.

Among these respondents, most of the individuals who chose to participate in the survey are engaged with research that concerns data obtained from humans, either in sampled biological materials or remains. Approximately half of the respondents identified their field of study to be bioarchaeology (53.7%, $n=315$) and skeletal biology (43.3%, $n=254$). Among these individuals, 167 identified as both fields. 402 individuals who participated in the survey identified as either or both fields. More than 20% of respondents identified as working in other fields that concern the study of human remains or biological samples: comparative anatomy, forensic anthropology, human biology, and human evolution. A relative

minority of respondents to the survey identified their studies as focused on non-human primates (primate evolution, $n=71$; primatology, $n=56$). We also note from Table 1 that in most cases the majority of respondents within each field of study are either nontenured or tenured faculty. Graduate students comprise more than one third or more of respondents within five fields of study: biocultural studies, forensic anthropology, human biology, medical anthropology, and molecular anthropology. (It is also worth noting that only 22 respondents overall overlap in biocultural studies, human biology, and medical anthropology.) Governmental and non-academic professionals predominantly work within forensic anthropology or bioarchaeology.

Table 2 presents the types of materials studied by those who completed the survey. As in Table 1, individuals could choose more than one type of material used in research. Only 51 of the respondents stated that they have not worked with human remains or biological samples in the course of their research. Most respondents have performed research using the nondestructive analysis of human materials: 439 individuals have studied human remains, 301 have studied human dental materials, and 286 have studied medical imaging of humans. Approximately 50% or fewer of respondents identified destructive analyses or tissue samples as part of their research: 151 each reported research using cadavers or performing isotopic analyses, and 107 individuals study DNA. 299 individuals examined some form of tissue sample (blood, bodily fluids, or other tissues) in their research; of these, only 38 used these tissue samples in DNA analyses. Biological anthropologists who completed the survey mostly do not study immortalized human cell lines ($n=13$).

We conclude that most of the individuals who responded to the survey, then, were members of the AABA who are involved in studies that directly involve data obtained from human materials, whether these are tissue samples, anthropometrics, or data obtained from human remains. Most respondents do not perform destructive analysis, and of those who do most are engaged in research using isotopic analysis. It is notable that individuals who do not work with human remains or biological samples in the AABA largely did not respond to the survey. We attribute this to self-selecting interest, as individuals who work with human remains and other human materials are most impacted by any policies that will be set forth by the AABA and other organizations, and thus are more invested in the topic. In addition, we note that nearly 65% of the respondents study humans in archaeological contexts (Table 3); less than one fourth of the survey participants study living humans ($n=133$, 22.7%). Therefore, when considering the remainder of the survey, this context suggests that most survey participants are individuals who perform nondestructive analytical methods on human skeletal materials from archaeological contexts, with a smaller but notable number of individuals who study human remains and biological materials in other contexts.

Table 1. Survey participants by self-identified career groups and fields of study. Individuals could select multiple fields of study but only one career stage. Numbers in parentheses are the percent that each career group comprises of the total within each field of study

Career Group	Total	Field of Study													
		Bioarchaeology		Biocultural Studies		Comparative Anatomy		Developmental Biology		Evolutionary Modeling		Forensic Anthropology		Human Biology	
Graduate student	165	102	(32%)	36	(40%)	20	(16%)	14	(27%)	15	(26%)	66	(35%)	47	(34%)
Postdoctoral fellow	37	22	(7%)	4	(4%)	9	(7%)	4	(8%)	3	(5%)	4	(2%)	6	(4%)
Non-academic professional	24	13	(4%)	1	(1%)	3	(2%)	3	(6%)	0	(0%)	15	(8%)	5	(4%)
Government researcher	22	15	(5%)	2	(2%)	3	(2%)	0	(0%)	1	(2%)	19	(10%)	5	(4%)
Nontenured faculty	110	47	(15%)	7	(8%)	44	(35%)	10	(19%)	13	(22%)	32	(17%)	15	(11%)
Tenured faculty	173	91	(29%)	32	(36%)	38	(30%)	17	(33%)	22	(38%)	33	(18%)	50	(36%)
Retired	19	7	(2%)	2	(2%)	1	(1%)	2	(4%)	1	(2%)	6	(3%)	1	(1%)
Other ¹	37	18	(6%)	6	(7%)	8	(6%)	2	(4%)	3	(5%)	12	(6%)	11	(8%)
Total	587	315		90		126		52		58		187		140	

Career Group	Field of Study													
	Human Evolution		Medical Anthropology		Molecular Anthropology		Non-human Primate Evolution		Primates		Skeletal Biology		Other ²	
Graduate student	41	(21%)	17	(35%)	22	(33%)	12	(17%)	16	(29%)	69	(27%)	4	(13%)
Postdoctoral fellow	14	(7%)	2	(4%)	9	(13%)	8	(11%)	3	(5%)	10	(4%)	2	(6%)
Non-academic professional	5	(3%)	2	(4%)	1	(1%)	2	(3%)	1	(2%)	15	(6%)	3	(9%)
Government researcher	2	(1%)	2	(4%)	5	(7%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	13	(5%)	2	(6%)
Nontenured faculty	51	(26%)	7	(15%)	9	(13%)	20	(28%)	10	(18%)	51	(20%)	6	(19%)
Tenured faculty	64	(32%)	12	(25%)	16	(24%)	18	(25%)	18	(32%)	68	(27%)	9	(28%)
Retired	5	(3%)	0	(0%)	1	(1%)	3	(4%)	3	(5%)	8	(3%)	0	(0%)
Other	17	(9%)	6	(13%)	4	(6%)	8	(11%)	5	(9%)	20	(8%)	6	(19%)
Total	199		48		67		71		56		254		32	

¹ Other career groups were primarily museum staff or researchers. Eight undergraduate members of the AABA responded as well.

² Other fields of study represented are history and philosophy of science, ecological fields of study, and dental anthropology.

Table 2. Research conducted by members of the AABA within each career group.

Career Group	Total	Materials Studied in Research						
		Do not study human materials	Nondestructive analysis of human remains	Cadaveric human remains	Human dental materials	Fossilized human materials	Human blood samples	Human DNA
Graduate student	165	17	127	38	82	17	8	23
Postdoctoral fellow	37	0	28	9	27	9	5	8
Non-academic professional	24	1	19	10	12	3	2	4
Government researcher	22	2	18	5	10	2	1	2
Nontenured faculty	110	8	84	37	53	31	8	18
Tenured faculty	173	15	128	33	94	45	28	46
Retired	19	4	10	5	9	5	0	0
Other	37	4	25	14	14	6	3	6
Total	587	51	439	151	301	118	55	107

Career Group	Materials Studied in Research					
	Human solid tissue samples	Human non-blood fluids	Radiographs and other images of humans	Human immortalized cells	Isotopic samples from human remains	Other materials ¹
Graduate student	40	12	72	3	32	4
Postdoctoral fellow	20	5	19	3	16	2
Non-academic professional	6	1	15	1	7	1
Government researcher	9	1	13	0	5	0
Nontenured faculty	34	10	58	1	29	5
Tenured faculty	61	27	89	5	56	9
Retired	5	0	7	0	3	0
Other	10	3	13	0	3	5
Total	185	59	286	13	151	26

¹ Individuals marked “other” if they studied living groups or took anthropometric data without also studying tissue samples. Other exceptions included individuals studying public databases, fingerprint data, or footprint data.

Table 3. Humans studied by members of the AABA within each career group.

Career Group	Total	Living humans	Human remains from archaeological contexts
Graduate student	165	26	102
Postdoctoral fellow	37	13	27
Non-academic professional	24	6	17
Government researcher	22	1	15
Nontenured faculty	110	28	74
Tenured faculty	173	55	117
Retired	19	1	10
Other	37	3	18
Total	587	133	380

How AABA Members Obtain Permission to Study Human Remains and Share Results

Following questions to establish the fields of study and types of materials studied, for respondents who have used human remains or biological samples in their research we asked how these researchers determined the group identity of those they study. In the case of human remains from archaeological contexts, most researchers relied on museum records, historical records, or archaeological context to associate the remains with either descendant communities or, more often, archaeologically designated groups (e.g., cultural horizons or historical time periods). Many researchers cited use of twentieth and twenty-first century institutional collections, such as the Hamann-Todd Collection, Terry Collection, and University of Tennessee Donated (Bass) Collection, which have documentation about individuals as determined by archaeologists, curators, or by donor questionnaires. Less often, researchers included oral histories of descendant or local communities to determine group identity of remains. An important subset of individuals who completed the survey ($n=37$) stated that they engage in collaborative work with communities of origin and descendant communities in determining group identity for the remains studied.

Table 4 presents the sources of permission that respondents to the survey used to access and study human remains or biological samples. Most respondents ($n=392$) relied on permission from the institutions that house human remains and biological materials. This parallels the self-reported ways in which individuals determined group identities, as most respondents identified their research as focused on human remains curated by institutions like museums and universities. For respondents who cited donor/patient consent or family permission, most work with cadaveric remains ($n=82$) or tissue samples ($n=87$), though a nontrivial number of respondents also performed nondestructive skeletal analysis ($n=108$). We note that

there is a bias in which career groups are able to engage in obtaining permissions from tribes or nations and from communities of origin; a higher percentage of faculty (both nontenured and tenured) are able to obtain these permissions than graduate students. We cannot account for how many graduate students obtain permissions in partnership with their academic mentors, though given the length of time that many community-researcher partnerships take to develop, we hypothesize that at least some of the graduate student respondents worked with communities that already have established relationships with faculty respondents. Follow-up inquiries will be necessary to determine if this is the case.

We note that nearly 20% of respondents reported that they obtained permission by consultation with communities of origin and descendant communities, and nearly 14% of respondents reported obtaining permission through consultation with a tribe or nation. As these may overlap, we examined how many of these were independent; 44 respondents reported obtaining permission from both tribes and communities of origin, 63 respondents reported consultation exclusively with communities of origin (*not* tribes or nations), and 38 respondents reported consultation only with tribes or nations (not considering these groups to also be communities of origin). This may be in part because respondents considered lineal descent to be a criterion to be a community of origin, while respondents considered modern tribes or nations may have ambiguous descendant relationships with remains recovered from archaeological contexts. Nonetheless, this meant that 144 unique respondents (24.5% of the total respondents) reported direct interactions with communities of origin and/or tribes and nations in obtaining permission to engage in research. If this is representative of the discipline, then a up to a fourth of biological anthropologists already make communication with communities of origin a facet of their research program.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents within each career group who shared results from their research, and through what methods. Most respondents across career groups shared results of their studies either at professional conferences (63% overall) or through peer-reviewed publications (54% overall). (We also noted that few respondents—14%—cited the popular press as having been a method by which they shared research outcomes.) Between 19% (graduate students) and 48% (retired) of respondents among career groups had interacted with a community of origin during or after a research project; most of these were through correspondence or through intermediary organizations (e.g., the national NAGPRA office). Notably fewer individuals—22% among all career groups—made formal presentations of research outcomes to communities of origin, though we note that this is similar to the percentage of respondents who directly interacted with communities of origin in obtaining permission to engage in research. We assessed this further (Table 5) and found that seeking permission from communities of origin made it more likely for an individual to later communicate results to that community than not

communicate results ($n=83$ versus 61), starting interactions with communities of origin did not necessarily translate into ongoing communication with that community at the conclusion of a study. The survey results therefore imply that biological anthropologists are more consistent at communicating their research to each other and the broader academic community than they are presenting to the public or to communities of origin.

From these responses, we conclude that members of the AABA have worked to seek permissions from and engage with communities of origin in their research. This engagement has been inconsistent, however, and is only performed by a minority of members in the association. This is tempered by the context that there has been no explicit expectation for researchers to consult or partner with communities of origin for much of the history of the discipline, and the majority of research reflected in this survey was performed using human remains curated in institutions that continue to broker research permissions.

Table 4. How AABA members obtain permission to study human remains and biological samples by career group

Career Group	Total	Permission to perform research obtained from					
		Institutional	Tribe/Nation	Patient Consent	Community of Origin	Family	Other Source ¹
Graduate student	165	98	17	34	21	20	6
Postdoctoral fellow	37	27	5	9	13	2	2
Non-academic professional	24	18	4	9	4	2	3
Government researcher	22	15	4	5	2	3	1
Nontenured faculty	110	80	13	40	17	12	11
Tenured faculty	173	120	30	33	39	13	19
Retired	19	12	4	1	4	3	4
Other	37	22	4	10	6	7	2
Total	587	392	81	141	106	62	48

¹ In most cases respondents indicated that institutional review boards (IRBs) were the other source for permissions.

Table 5. Individuals who shared research results and sought permission to perform research from communities of origin or tribes/nations.

Presented results to community of origin	Obtained permission from community of origin	Obtained permission from tribe/nation	
		No	Yes
No	No	468	27
	Yes	24	10
Yes	No	48	36
	Yes	14	33

How Percent of Respondents Share Results

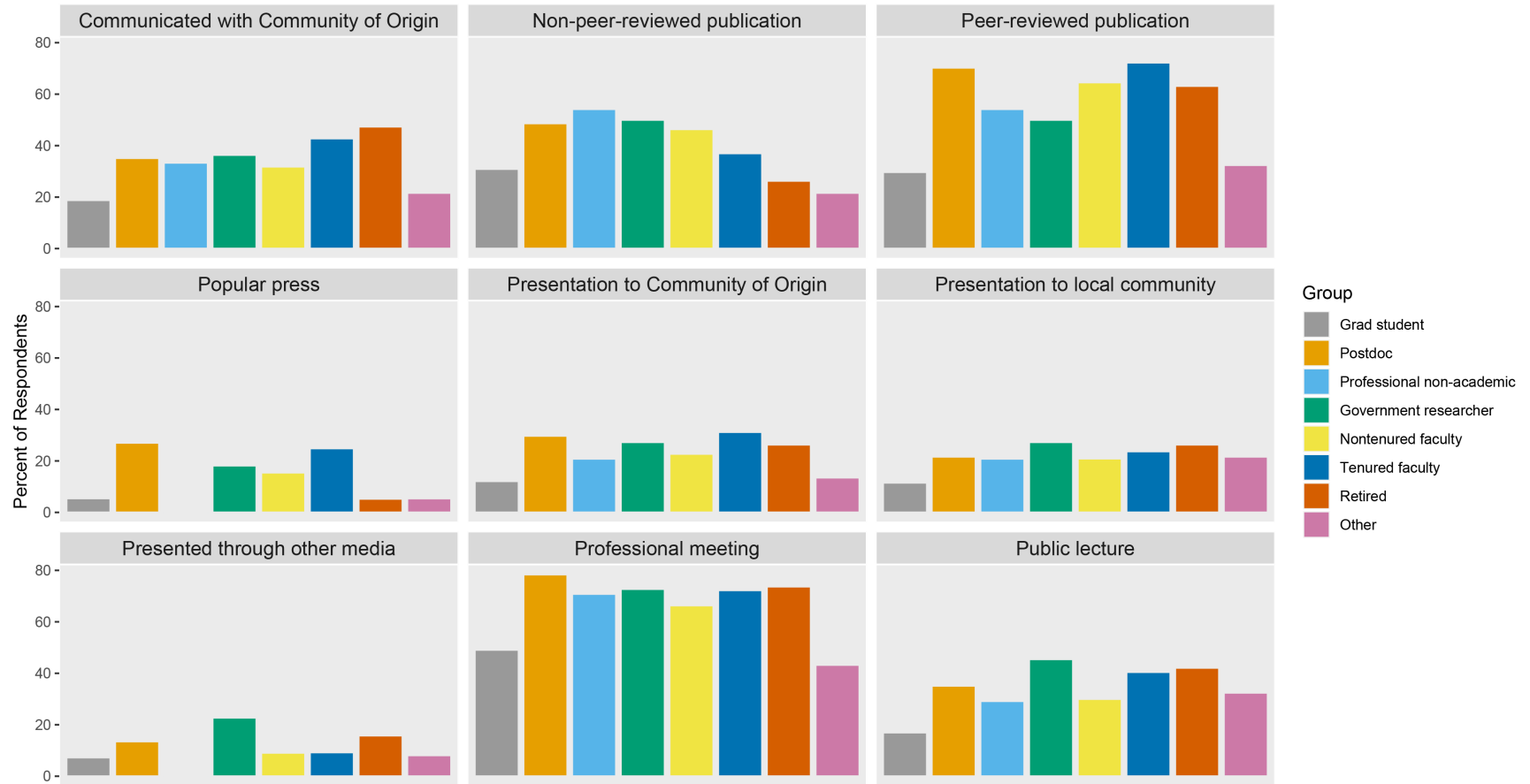


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents within each career group who shared results of their studies by methods.

AABA Members and the Study of African American Remains

In the survey, we asked whether respondents had conducted any research that involved the remains of African Americans. Results are reported in Table 6. Nearly half (44.4%) of the respondents indicated that they had engaged in studies that used African American human remains. In reporting provenance for the remains, respondents mostly cited major museum and university collections—Terry, Hamann-Todd, University of Tennessee Donated, University of New Mexico Maxwell Museum, and American Museum of Natural History’s collections—as well as local cemeteries and donors to medical schools. This is reflected in the distribution of locations in which respondents accessed African American remains, with the majority of respondents conducting their studies in public museums (28.3%). There is a notable discrepancy in the data, however; while 261 respondents noted that they had conducted studies of African American remains, only 180 answered where they performed their studies. Also, only 154 individuals responded to the open-ended question about the provenance of remains they studied. Thus, we are missing information about where individuals conducted their studies and under what contexts. One context that was not included in the survey was explicitly in forensic anthropology, where individuals may be performing research or estimating biological profiles on human remains. While the Taskforce thought government or private laboratories would encompass these locations, it is possible that respondents did not think the provided answers sufficiently captured the location of their research. However, we note that these respondents did not select the “other” option, and instead chose not to disclose where they performed their research.

Respondents were asked if their institution is in possession of African American remains. 420 respondents answered this question, and of these 233 stated that their institution did not possess any remains, and another 98 respondents indicated that they did not know or were unsure. Many of the individuals who were unsure noted that their institutions had skeletal teaching collections of individuals without provenance or documentation; future study will be necessary to determine the prevalence of unprovenanced skeletal collections used for teaching. Of the 89 individuals that indicated that there were some African American remains at their institution, respondents generally provided three ways in which these remains are used: donated human remains used in research; human remains either currently or formerly used in teaching (some respondents indicated such remains are now in storage and not used); or forensic anthropology contexts where remains are from ongoing cases or cold cases. We cannot know from the survey how many unique institutions are represented by these 89 respondents. As they represent approximately 15% of the total respondents, African American human remains may not be present in a plurality of institutional collections, but nonetheless are present at multiple institutions beyond those cited with respect to research institutions above.

Table 6. Respondents who have studied African American remains by career group.

Career Group	Total	Location of study							
		Have studied African American remains	Public museum	Private museum	Private laboratory	Archaeological storage	Government laboratory	Community-controlled space	Other
Graduate student	165	67	8	2	1	4	0	2	7
Postdoctoral fellow	37	19	6	0	0	2	0	1	5
Non-academic professional	24	8	5	0	1	1	2	0	4
Government researcher	22	10	4	0	0	1	2	0	1
Nontenured faculty	110	37	23	5	1	5	4	1	10
Tenured faculty	173	95	22	6	2	5	6	4	9
Retired	19	13	2	0	1	0	0	0	3
Other	37	12	4	0	0	0	2	0	6
Total	587	261	74	13	6	18	16	8	45

Attitudes about Community Partnership among Members of the AABA

Respondents to the survey were asked about their attitudes concerning the involvement of communities of origin in research, determining provenance of remains, communicating results, and repatriation of remains. Answers were provided on a Likert scale with six options of increasing importance: “not important,” “moderately unimportant,” “slightly unimportant,” “slightly important,” “moderately important,” and “essential” in importance. Of the 587 individuals who responded to the survey, 412 completed these questions. The percentage of responses for each level of the Likert scale is presented for all eight questions in Figure 2. We consider the responses to these questions below.

How would you rate the importance of determining the provenance of human remains and biological samples of them, including the identity of communities of origin?

Most respondents indicated that determining provenance of human remains and the identity of communities of origin is of moderate (22.6%) to essential (68.2%) importance. No respondents indicated that provenance is not important, and few thought it was unimportant (1.93%). Given that most anthropological research questions depend on knowledge about the provenance and origins of the groups sampled, this question may reflect attitudes about the application of these to research questions as much as the ethical concern of the respondents. Nevertheless, these responses indicate support among the membership of the AABA for the identification of communities of origin in the study of human remains.

How would you rate the importance of communities of origin in agreeing to consent to study human remains or biological materials relevant to them? How would you rate the importance of partnering with communities of origin during the planning stages of a research project? How would you rate the importance of partnering with communities of origin in the interpretation of results from a research project?

These three questions asked survey participants to rate the importance of partnership with communities of origin in developing, conducting, and interpreting research. Similar to the question about determining provenance and the identity of communities of origin, almost all respondents support obtaining consent from communities of origin before starting research (91% either choosing “essential” or “moderately important”). An important follow-up question that was not asked was whether such support for obtaining consent would mean that researchers start from the default position that research need not be conducted, and only with community consent would it be possible. This is a position that has been expressed in the open responses to the survey, as well as by members of the Taskforce, but nonetheless should be a point

of conversation within the association. Slightly fewer respondents thought that planning and conducting research with members of communities of origin was important; 60.7% of respondents thought it as essential, while 25.2% thought it was moderately important and 8.5% thought it was slightly important. Far fewer respondents supported the interpretation of results in consultation with communities of origin. Only 44.4% of respondents thought of this as essential, with the majority of respondents (49.5%) answering that it was moderately important to slightly unimportant. Among respondents, there is a slight skew toward more importance for partnering in interpretation among graduate students (50% answered “essential”) versus faculty (36.5% of nontenured and tenured faculty answered “essential”). It is notable that the highest percentage of “not important” responses were recorded for this last question (4% of respondents).

Thus, while a majority of respondents to the survey support the obtaining of consent for research from communities of origin, a majority think that partnering with these communities in interpreting research is of moderate importance. Questions like this do not account for the context under which researchers conduct their studies, instead asking for a broad opinion about research. We interpret these results to therefore show support for the involvement of communities of origin in the planning and execution of a study but hypothesize that it may be context-specific when researchers ask questions that would, in their perspective, benefit from conversations with the community of origin about the outcomes of the research. This will require further investigation.

*How would you rate the importance of communicating results of research to the academic community?
How would you rate the importance of communicating results of research to the general public, including via the media? How would you rate the importance of communicating results of research to communities of origin?*

Respondents equally indicate importance for communicating results to both the academic community and to communities of origin; for both, 94% of respondents answered “essential” or “moderately important.” Only one respondent indicated neither were important at all. In contrast, only 33.3% of respondents thought that communication of results to the general public is essential, and 44.4% thought it moderately important. Coupled with the number of individuals who reported reporting of results in public forums and the popular press (Figure 1), we conclude that, among respondents, emphasis is placed on the reporting of research within the academic community and to communities of origin and descendant communities.

We note that, despite this broad support for reporting results to communities of origin, there is a discrepancy between the individuals who have reported results to these communities and those who think it is important. Of the results we have obtained from the survey, this is one of the most important. Reasons for this gap need to be investigated. We hypothesize that researchers do not know who the community of origin is, have no clear method for determining the identity of communities of origin, or do not have a process by which to establish contact with that community. Future study, either by the Taskforce or by the association, is crucial if the desire of researchers to partner with communities of origin and descendant communities—which the survey indicates is supported by the majority of respondents—is to be operationalized by biological anthropologists in their research.

How would you rate the importance of repatriating human remains and biological samples to communities of origin?

The response to this question is similar to the importance placed on partnering with communities of origin in the conducting of research, with the notable difference that more respondents do not think repatriating remains to communities of origin is important compared with those who want to partner in pursuing research. Approximately 10% of respondents answered that repatriation is unimportant, and another 7.3% answered that it is slightly important. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents (57.3%) answered that repatriation to communities of origin is essential. Reconciling these results with the general opinions expressed by biological anthropologists in the past (e.g., with the passing of NAGPRA) merits some further study, but we anecdotally conclude that this reflects a change in priorities among the members of the AABA who responded to the survey. We note that there are no formal mechanisms for the repatriation of human remains with the exception of Native Americans, First Nations, and Native Hawaiians, as well as other specific groups (e.g., the Maori, indigenous Australians, and notable other recent groups, such as Algerians repatriated from France). The survey, though, indicates that, while there is more mixed opinion about the importance of repatriation among the AABA membership, the majority of members—at least as reflected by the survey—support repatriation to communities of origin.

Reflections on Performance of the AABA in Guiding Ethical Research

Finally, the survey asked respondents to rate the performance of the association in setting guidelines on a five-level Likert scale. We asked how well the association provides guidelines in general for ethics and research standards. The majority of the respondents rated the AABA leadership as being “good” or “very good” in developing guidelines and setting standards of practice within the association. In contrast, when survey participants were asked about how well the association had guided researchers in developing

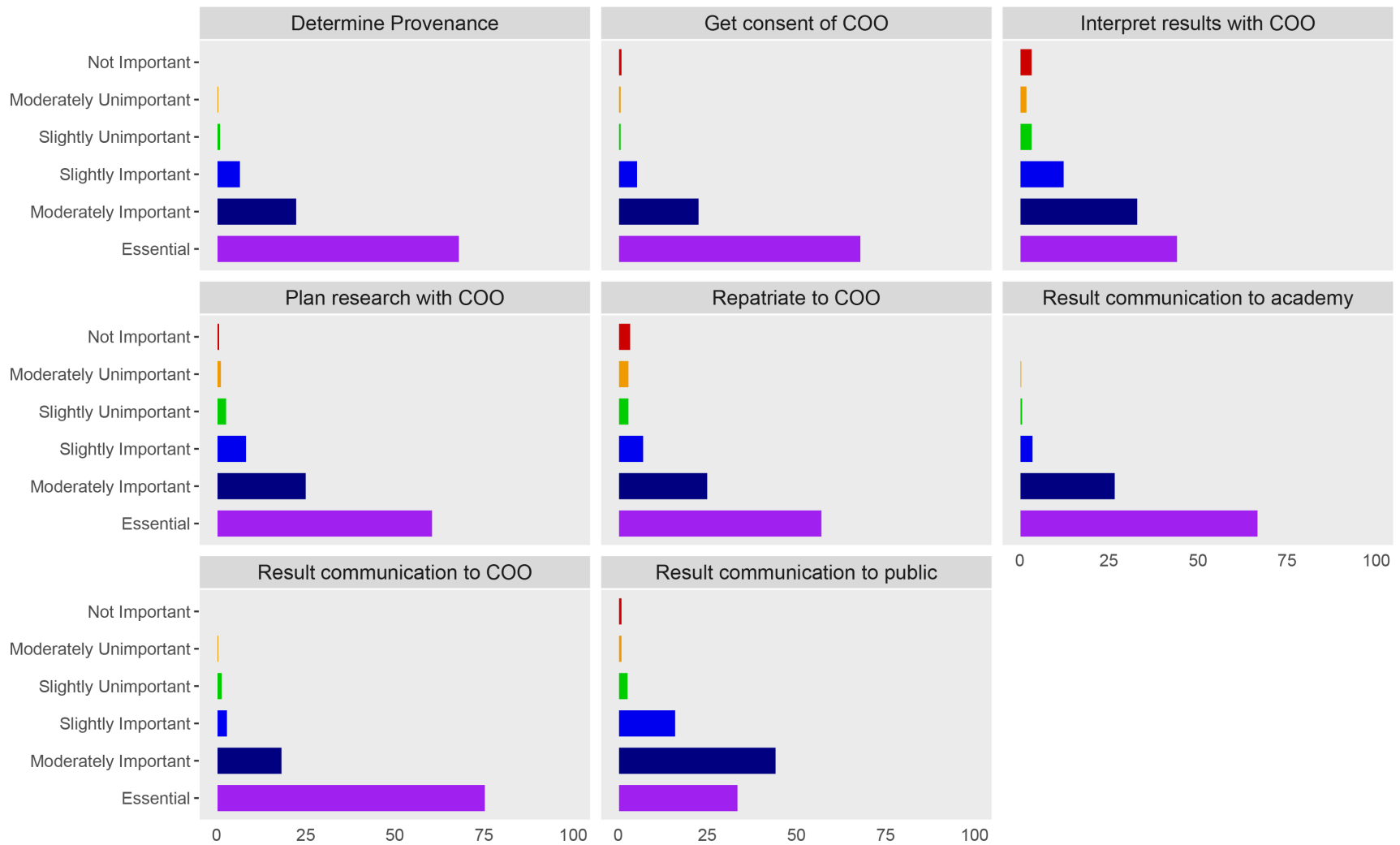


Figure 2. Percent of respondents answering each Likert level for questions about attitudes concerning the provenance, partnership with communities of origin (COO), communication of results, and repatriation of human remains.

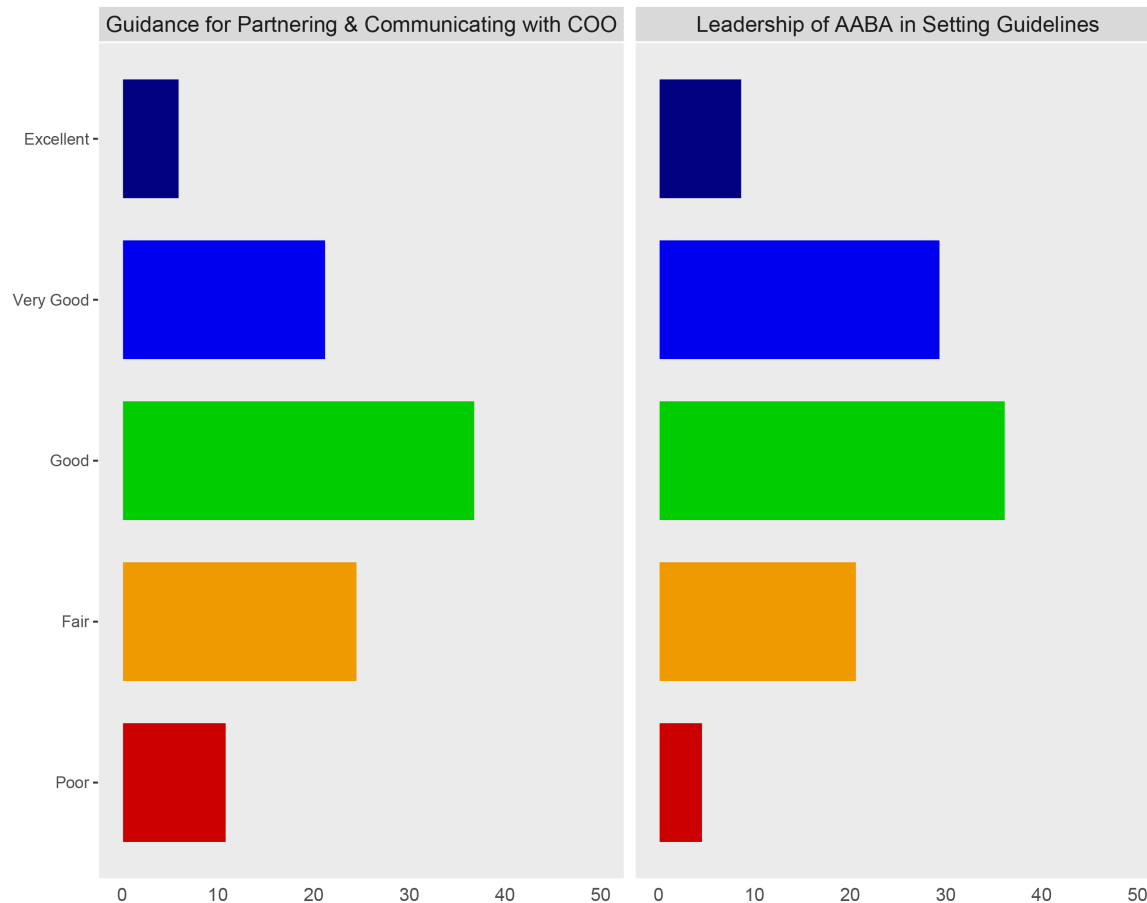


Figure 3. Percent of respondents answering each Likert level (“poor” to “excellent”) about the performance of the association in setting guidelines for research and for guiding partnership with communities of origin.

partnerships and communication standards with the communities of origin, 10.9% of respondents answered that the AABA leadership has been “poor” and an additional 24.6% answered that the leadership has had “fair” performance in helping to develop these approaches. Thus, while the respondents generally support the leadership of the association in setting guidelines, the leadership’s guidance for how to partner and communicate with communities of origin and descendant communities could be improved.

Preliminary Conclusions and Next Steps

The surveys of the African American community and the AABA community collectively indicate to the members of the Taskforce that both communities strongly support research conducted in partnership. As we discussed above, we note that there are already many members of the association who have been engaged in community-partnered research, some for many years, and other members of the association

wish to also engage in research that is partnered with communities of origin. The parameters of this partnership and the guidelines for how to engage in partnered research will be tasks for future work, both by the Taskforce and the broader association with input from the African American community, as well as other communities.

For this reason, the Taskforce is moving ahead with a second phase of work, which will be a workshop with leaders of the African American community to discuss themes introduced in the African American focus groups, followed by a national survey of African Americans. The nature of this survey will be determined through the discussions that take place in the workshop, but the results of the surveys presented here will give strong guidance in those conversations. That both communities have expressed caution but a desire to engage in partnered research is an important foundation on which we can build a plan for how researchers may be able to reimagine their research in ways that incorporate communities of origin or ethical clients. We also argue that community engagement had potential to introduce a richness to research that is not possible outside of these partnerships.

There is more to unpack from these surveys. We note in the discussion above some follow-up areas of inquiry that we will pursue as we look toward providing a final report to the leadership and members of the AABA, following the second phase of our work. There are challenges that emerge from these surveys, which will need to be addressed:

- How do we identify communities of origin, and once we do, how do we establish relationships with them that build mutual trust and encourage partnerships? As one of the respondents in the African American focus groups asked, “Who speaks for the dead?”
- Who should be setting guidelines for best practices in the study of human remains and biological samples? How do we ensure these guidelines are useful while also remaining flexible among contexts and communities?
- How do we enforce any guidelines that are developed? What are the consequences for individuals who do not abide by the guidelines?

These are questions that the Taskforce will seek to provide guidance about to the association, with input from the African American community, though we were not given a charge to develop policy. Rather, we think that these and other questions will need to be discussed by the members of the association with the information provided by the Taskforce. We encourage members of the association to reach out to us with

their thoughts and feedback as well, after reading these initial results, with knowledge of the plan that the Taskforce is taking in the coming months.

This report is thus preliminary in nature but has been essential in setting up the initial guidance in seeking solutions that could make fundamental changes in the ways in which biological anthropologists approach the study of human remains. As one of us (BMA) stated during the Presidential Plenary Panel in March 2022, we are having a group discussion about how to rebuild the foundation of the house (our research and community) while we are still living in that house. Both of us (Ben and Fatimah) are aware of the sense of urgency that members of the association have in finding solutions, but we have taken a deliberate approach toward our charge to gather information so we can hope to make meaningful changes that avert the crises that drove the creation of not only the Taskforce, but the taskforces in many sibling associations (e.g., American Anthropological Association, Society for Historical Archaeology, Society for American Archaeology, and the American Association for Anatomy). With them, we hope to ultimately provide useful guidance to the membership of the AABA, and anthropologists as a whole, about how to arrive at an understanding of and regular practice of community engagement in the study of human remains.

APPENDIX

AABA Taskforce on the Ethical Study of Human Remains Survey of Biological Anthropologists

Purpose of the Survey:

This survey asks for information about how we, as biological anthropologists, study human biological remains and samples thereof, and particularly how we engage with communities of origin across the world. This survey will provide a snapshot of the current state of research on and attitudes about the study of human remains and biological samples.

Multiple events in recent years have compelled the anthropological community to reexamine the ethics underlying the study and housing of human remains. This information will be used to give basic information to the Taskforce on the Ethical Study of Human Remains, convened at the behest of the AABA Executive Committee. Our focus here is broadly on study of remains of and biological samples, with special attention focused on those obtained from African Americans and their communities. Your responses are important to provide the background facts necessary to guide the Executive Committee and the AABA community about the history of research and partnership, and areas of concern. Combined with input from communities of origin, your responses will ultimately inform improvements undertaken to strengthen both community partnership and the ethical study and curation of human remains for research. Note: Definitions for terms may be found after consent to take the survey.

Informed Consent:

This survey tool, including any data or comments obtained in its conduct, is entirely anonymous and does not ask you to provide any identifying information. Your responses, including typed comments, are not associated with your identity and cannot be associated with you. By clicking “I agree” below, you are:

1. affirming that you are 18 years old or older;
2. consenting to allow the Taskforce on the Ethical Study of Human Remains to use your responses in analyses about the types of research conducted on, practices adopted in use of, and attitudes about human remains and biological samples;
3. completing this survey in response to the invitation sent to you by the leadership of the American Association of Biological Anthropologists; and
4. agreeing to allow analytical results that incorporate your responses to be used in future reports, presentations, and publications.

- I agree
- I do not agree

Definitions:

African American: Broadly, this refers to humans living in the United States who are descended from African populations. This includes individuals who are descendants of enslaved individuals, as well as those who are descended from individuals who were not enslaved.

Biological sample: A biological sample may include any materials sampled from a human, either living or deceased. This includes, but is not limited to, body fluids (blood, saliva, milk, urine), tissue samples, fecal samples, DNA/RNA, and immortal cell lines.

Community of Origin: Broadly, the community comprises all individuals to whom the study of and interpretations based on human remains apply. Thus, this includes but is not limited to those who are genetically and culturally related directly to the individuals whose remains are under investigation, and provides opportunities for groups to self-identify their association with the remains of any individual or group of individuals.

Human remains: Human remains are classified narrowly as the remains of a deceased individual, whether bone, teeth, mummified or preserved tissues, or other materials (e.g., hair or skin).

Provenance: Provenance refers to known association of materials with a specific group, time period, location, and/or descendant community.

1. Basic Information

What is your current career stage?

- Graduate student (Masters and/or PhD)
- Postdoctoral fellow
- Trainee
- Professional at a non-academic institute or organization
- Governmental researcher or position
- Non-tenured faculty at college or university
- Tenured faculty at college or university
- Other (please specify)

What area(s) best describes your research interests? (Check all that apply)

- Bioarchaeology
- Biocultural studies
- Developmental biology
- Evolutionary modeling
- Forensic anthropology
- Human biology
- Human evolution
- Medical anthropology
- Molecular anthropology
- Non-human primate evolution
- Primatology
- Skeletal biology
- Other (please describe)

What is your age?

- 18-25
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75+

2. Research and Partnership

(i) Questions about research and partnership for human biological materials overall (contemporary or archaeological)

If you have used human biological samples, what have you studied in your research? (Check all that apply)

- skeletal materials (bones)
- dental materials (e.g. teeth, dental calculus)
- human blood
- immortalized human cell lines
- human DNA and/or RNA
- human tissue samples
- human body fluid samples (e.g., saliva, milk, urine)
- samples for isotopic analysis
- none
- other (please specify)

From what populations or communities were these samples associated? [open ended question]

How have you defined the communities or populations of the samples you studied? [open ended question]

If you studied skeletal or dental materials, what location(s) and time period(s) do these remains date to? [open ended question]

Did you receive funding to support the collection of any of these data? If so, please specify the source(s). [open ended question]

What type of consent or approval (and with whom) was given for the remains to be used for your research? (Check all that apply)

- Institutional (e.g., the institution you work in, or from a museum curator who curates human remains)
- Official consultation with a tribe or nation
- Donor permission
- Permission from community of origin, affiliated community, or ethical clients
- Permission from a family member
- Other (please specify)

How did you share the results and interpretations of your study? (Check all that apply)

- Professional meetings presentation
- Peer-reviewed academic publication
- Non-peer-reviewed publication
- Popular press
- Public lecture
- Presentation to local (non-origin) community
- Presentation to community of origin
- Other (please specify)

If you interacted with a community of origin in the course of the research project, how did you interact with that community? (For example: conferences, correspondence, individual meetings, co-authorship on publications and/or presentations) [open ended question]

In seeking consent to perform research, have you ever been denied access? If so, what were the circumstances under which you were denied access?

Does your institution curate the remains of humans of unknown provenance? If so, how are these remains used (e.g., research, teaching, public engagement etc.)? [open ended question]

(ii) Questions about research and partnership specifically for African American human biological materials

If you have studied human biological samples and remains of African Americans, in what setting were these materials curated?

- Private museum
- Public museum
- University department
- Medical institution
- Private laboratory
- Archaeological excavation store
- Community-controlled space
- Other (please specify)

What was the provenance of these African American remains (i.e., the location or community of origin)? If unknown, please provide the name of the collection. [open ended question]

Does your institution have the remains of African Americans? If so, how are these remains used (e.g., research, teaching, etc.)? [open ended question]

How should the consent to study human remains of African Americans be designated? [open ended question]

3. Perspectives and Attitudes

(i) Attitudes about importance

[Note: These questions use a Likert scale for answers: 1=not at all; 2=moderately unimportant; 3=slightly unimportant; 4=slightly important; 5=moderately important; 6=essential.]

How would you rate the importance of determining the provenance of human remains and biological samples of them, including the identity of communities of origin?

How would you rate the importance of communities of origin in agreeing to consent to study human remains or biological materials relevant to them?

How would you rate the importance of partnering with communities of origin during the planning stages of a research project?

How would you rate the importance of partnering with communities of origin in the interpretation of results from a research project?

How would you rate the importance of communicating results of research to the academic community?

How would you rate the importance of communicating results of research to the general public, including via the media?

How would you rate the importance of communicating results of research to communities of origin?

How would you rate the importance of repatriating human remains and biological samples to communities of origin?

(ii) Attitudes about performance

[Note: These questions use a Likert scale: 1=poor; 2=fair; 3=good; 4=very good; 5=excellent.]

How would you rate the guidance provided by the AABA and associated organizations in partnering and communicating with communities of origin?

How would you rate the leadership taken by the AABA in setting ethical guidelines for the study of human remains and biological samples?

How would you rate the sensitivity of your own research to the concerns of communities of origin?

Comments box if you would like to provide feedback or additional context for your responses: [open ended question]

Thank you for your time and answers to the questions in this survey. The information you provided will be used to give basic information to the *Taskforce on the Ethical Study of Human Remains*, convened at the behest of the AABA Executive Committee. Your responses are important to provide the background facts necessary to guide the Executive Committee and the AABA community about the history of research and partnership, and areas of concern. Combined with input from communities of origin, your responses will ultimately inform improvements undertaken to strengthen both community partnership and the ethical study and curation of human remains for research.

Preliminary results from this survey will be presented at the 2022 AABA Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado.