

# Meeting the Demands of Mexico's New Cultural Heritage Protection Law

## Advocating for a Paradigm Shift in Academic Training

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In 2022, Mexico implemented a new Federal Law for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of Indigenous and Afro-Mexican peoples and communities, requiring archaeology and heritage professionals, more than ever, to expand their knowledge and skills to integrate spatial planning, policy, mediation strategies and to act as experts in a legal proceeding involving these resources and their associated religious and cultural significance to communities. Although archaeological and heritage training in Mexico has been driven, historically, by economic growth and development policies (López Varela 2017, 2018), students are trained to conduct projects, fieldwork, and laboratory analysis to meet academic goals. However, they are not ready to use their academic knowledge to prepare and assist government agencies in implementing land use and mitigation plans or policies that address impacts on archaeological resources. Additionally, Mexico's new law demands the involvement of expert witnesses to give an opinion on the collective ownership and intellectual property of heritage resources. Although Mexico's stewards are trained on the job to participate as fact witnesses in decommissioning, repatriation, or looting cases, the skills needed from an expert witness are different.

Despite Mexico making a structural change to university programs by accommodating a shorter career cycle with an area of specialization, the shift has yet to be fully implemented in archaeology or heritage programs. To meet the demands of Mexico's new law, López Varela initiated an international online dialogue with heritage management experts, whose work requires engaging with communities or serving as an expert witness. In sharing this dialogue, first, we agree that a new paradigm shift is needed in Education, one in which academic programs give greater emphasis to the skills required for a successful career in heritage management (Altschul and Klein 2022), particularly in Mexico, a country in which future professionals may not be able to further their Education after the BA level. Currently, professionals in heritage management worldwide are trained mainly on the job. Second, introducing this paradigm shift will certainly bridge the gap between academic and applied practice, as suggested already by Welch et al. (2018). However, in practice, this paradigm shift requires a structural change in the organization of university programs, which is taking place in Mexico, but not yet in its curricula. Third, we suggest the inclusion of online teaching to link students and experts worldwide to better serve the public. Hopefully, extending our conversation to this venue will be a learning experience for us all interested in creating better opportunities for future heritage and archaeology professionals.

### References

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