

THE PETITIONERS

We the petitioners would like to offer both our names and sentiments to this issue. Collectively, we have committed over twelve hundred years to SEAC. Most of us have served on the Executive Committee, as conference organizers, or in various other capacities and, thus, have had a lifelong commitment to the organization. We firmly believe that the Executive Committee exists as a representative body, created to advocate for the wishes of the membership, as with any democratic organization. We are as follows:

Sam Brookes
James A. Brown

Ian W. Brown

Cheryl Claassen

Jessica Fleming Crawford

R. P. Stephen Davis Jr.

Kathleen A. Deagan

David H. Dye

Thomas E. Emerson

Robbie Ethridge

Ned J. Jenkins

John E. Kelly

Lucretia S. Kelly

Vernon J. Knight

Janet E. Levy

Rochelle A. Marrinan

Jeffrey M. Mitchem

Lee A. Newsom

John O'Hear

Timothy R. Pauketat

F. Kent Reilly III

Robert Sharp

Kevin Smith

Vincas P. Steponaitis

Lynne Sullivan

Patrick Trader *

Paul Welch

John Worth

Nancy Marie White

plus 2 petitioners who either desire to remain anonymous or who just didn't get the message on time.

* Withdrawn: Oct. 8, 2023

SIX ESSAYS FROM THE PETITIONERS

Why We Called a Referendum

By Vernon James Knight, Lynne P. Sullivan, Vincas P. Steponaitis, and Jessica Fleming Crawford

The April, 2022 edition of SEAC's newsletter, *Horizon and Tradition*, contained a brief notice on page 6 stating that a "SEAC Journal Policy Taskforce" had been formed by President Maureen Myers. This task force, according to the notice, was to "develop recommendations to be submitted to the Executive Board for discussion at the 2022 meeting in November." The notice also said that "any comments, questions, or suggestions" could be submitted to the task force chair.

At the business meeting of the November, 2022 SEAC meeting in Little Rock, those in attendance learned that the Executive Committee had not merely discussed this task force's recommendations but, evidently, had already passed them. SEAC now had a policy on the matter of publishing funerary objects in our journal. There and then, we were told that photos of such objects would no longer appear

in the pages of our journal, under any circumstances. It would be another five months before the membership could see this new policy in print.

In conversations at Little Rock after the business meeting, we heard a variety of reactions. There was puzzlement that such a profoundly consequential policy would be enacted by the Executive Committee behind closed doors, without any serious opportunity for members to comment. There was also dismay regarding the chilling effect on research that this policy obviously would have. One young scholar was clearly saddened, saying "I guess I won't be able to publish my thesis." And another common reaction we heard was, "shouldn't we be voting on this?" Yes, we should have been, and that was the basis for the actions we subsequently took.

WHY WE CALLED A REFERENDUM

It is important to understand that SEAC is a member-driven organization. The Executive Committee is elected not to pursue its own agendas, but to work on behalf of the membership. Our bylaws make this crystal clear: Article III, Section 5 states that the Executive Committee exercises its powers “subject to the general directives imposed by the membership”; Article V, Section 6 says that “all matters of business related to the conference may be decided by means of a referendum”; and Article VI, Section I lays out the simple procedure by which such a referendum may be called, requiring a petition signed by two percent of the individual membership.

Our initial efforts involved conversations with President Hollenbach and other members of the Executive Committee in which we expressed our concerns about both the policy itself and the process that led to it. The Committee reacted by proposing that photographs of funerary objects could be posted on the Digital Archaeological Record (tDAR), hidden behind a password and only under certain stringent conditions. But they refused to put the policy on hold while members had a chance to weigh in. Obviously, this response did not seriously address any of our concerns, particularly the ones about process. So we reluctantly decided to invoke the bylaws and to petition the Executive Committee to hold a referendum on a resolution that, if passed, would hit the reset button on this new policy and to require that any new policy be developed in full and transparent consultation with the membership.

In February, we and a few others began reaching out to our colleagues by telephone to ask if they were interested in signing such a petition. Given SEAC’s total membership, we needed about twenty signatures. We stopped asking at thirty, although we have since learned of many others who would have participated, had they known. The organizers spent some time drafting and refining the language of the resolution, and then emailed that draft to those who had responded positively in our earlier telephone conversations. Just about everyone agreed to sign, and we sent the signed petition along with a resolution to the Executive Committee, via

President Hollenbach, on March 27, 2023. The resolution is entitled “On Transparency and Consultation in SEAC’s Governance.” The signatories to the petition include five former presidents of SEAC, four former editors of *Southeastern Archaeology*, and seven recipients of SEAC’s Lifetime Achievement award.

While gathering the signatures, we spoke with a number of people who agreed with our petition but were reluctant to sign because they worried about reprisals or verbal abuse should their views become known. Sadly, we work today in a politicized environment of fear and recrimination, particularly on social media. In a few cases, we advised younger scholars not to sign the petition for this reason, as they might be exposed to recriminations that could affect their academic careers.

We now direct the reader’s attention to the text of our resolution as given in the President’s introduction to this newsletter issue (see pg. 9). The resolution calls for two things, and two things only. First, it calls for rescinding the newly announced publication policy. Second, it calls for any new publication policy replacing that one to be “developed in open consultation with the membership, with ample opportunities for comment on written drafts.” We want to emphasize that the referendum addresses only the process issue, that of how any major publication policy needs to be discussed by the full membership as a matter of good governance. We have heard many reasons why members think the current publication policy is not a good idea; indeed, many of these reasons are discussed in the articles that accompany this one. But those substantive reasons are not part of what is to be voted on. We have been assured by President Hollenbach that our resolution will be offered to the SEAC membership for a vote at some point after the October SEAC meeting in Chattanooga, where the leadership is planning a public forum on the issue. While having a public forum before the vote is contrary to the logic of our resolution, we welcome the opportunity to vote. As of now, the Executive Committee stands by their publication policy as

WHY WE CALLED A REFERENDUM

given in the April, 2023 edition of our newsletter (SEAC Journal Image Policy Task Force 2023).

SEAC is a scholarly community, self-organized to facilitate and promote a few key functions including arranging for an annual meeting and publishing members' research. Our elected leadership, in the form of an Executive Committee, volunteers their valuable time to manage these functions for us, to keep us on budget, and to keep everything vibrant and enjoyable. As a democratic community, issues of larger importance are brought to the membership for consideration, discussion, and a vote. That is why our bylaws include a section on referendums, a mechanism by which either the Executive Committee or the members can initiate a vote on the larger issues of the day. The current Executive Committee will insist that nothing they did in establishing the new publication policy was contrary to the bylaws. They are correct, but only in the narrow sense that the bylaws do not require that every policy be adopted by a referendum. This was a consequential issue, and, in a membership-driven

organization like ours, it should have been brought to the members before being adopted. The lack of full transparency in the process (which seems to have been deliberate), and the failure to bring the matter forward for discussion and a vote by the full membership does not, in our opinion, constitute good governance.

We encourage members to do two things. First, consider letting your personal perspective on this issue be known to the SEAC Executive Committee. Second, when the time comes, we urge you to vote in favor of the resolution, that is, to call for re-setting the process of discussion and debate on this issue. We trust the membership to improve this outcome.

Reference Cited

SEAC Journal Image Policy Task Force
2023 Southeastern Archaeology Journal Image
Policy. *Horizon and Tradition* 65(1):14.

On the Importance of Academic Freedom

By Vin Steponaitis

As anyone who follows the news is aware, academic freedom these days is under attack, more so than at any time in the last half century. Unlike in the 1950s, when such attacks came exclusively from the right (in the form of various anti-Communist crusades, Senator McCarthy's being the best known), these days the threats come from both ends of the political spectrum. On the right, we have seen persistent attempts to curtail research on climate change, as well as to prevent the teaching of any topic related to a nebulously defined "critical race theory." On the left, these efforts have generally invoked the equally nebulous concept of "harm," portraying words as "violence" in an attempt to justify their censorship. Both of these trends have been exacerbated and accelerated in

recent years by social media. Both are equal threats, not only to academic freedom, but also to our democracy (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015; Haidt and Lukianoff 2017; Haidt 2022a).

Academic freedom is, at its core, the right to pursue research and teaching without undue interference or intimidation by governments, institutional structures, or public pressure. It protects the ability of scholars to seek the truth wherever it may lead, to teach that truth, and to speak truth to power. Restrictions on academic freedom are common under authoritarian regimes, and for good reason, as freedom to seek the truth gives one the ability to see and understand the world based on evidence, rather than ideology. Evidence-based academic research is just as essential