

Report on “Indigenous Futures and Collaborative Conservation”

Held at the
American Institute for Conservation
Annual Meeting at
the Mohegan Sun,
Uncasville, CT, on
May 17th, 2019



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August 2019

Our Thanks

We owe our thanks to:

- The Mohegan people
- The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, especially Alison Gilcrest and Abigail Choudhury
- Our co-organizers and speakers: The Akomawt Educational Initiative: Jason Mancini, Chris Newell, and endawnis Spears
- James Quinn, Mohegan Tribal Historic Preservation Officer & Archaeology Department Manager
- Heid E. Erdrich for reading her poem “Guidelines for the Treatment of Sacred Objects”
- American Sign Language interpreters Christine West and Sarah D’Agostino
- Our AIC liaisons: Suzanne Davis, Katelin Lee, Ruth Seyler, and all of the AIC Board and staff.

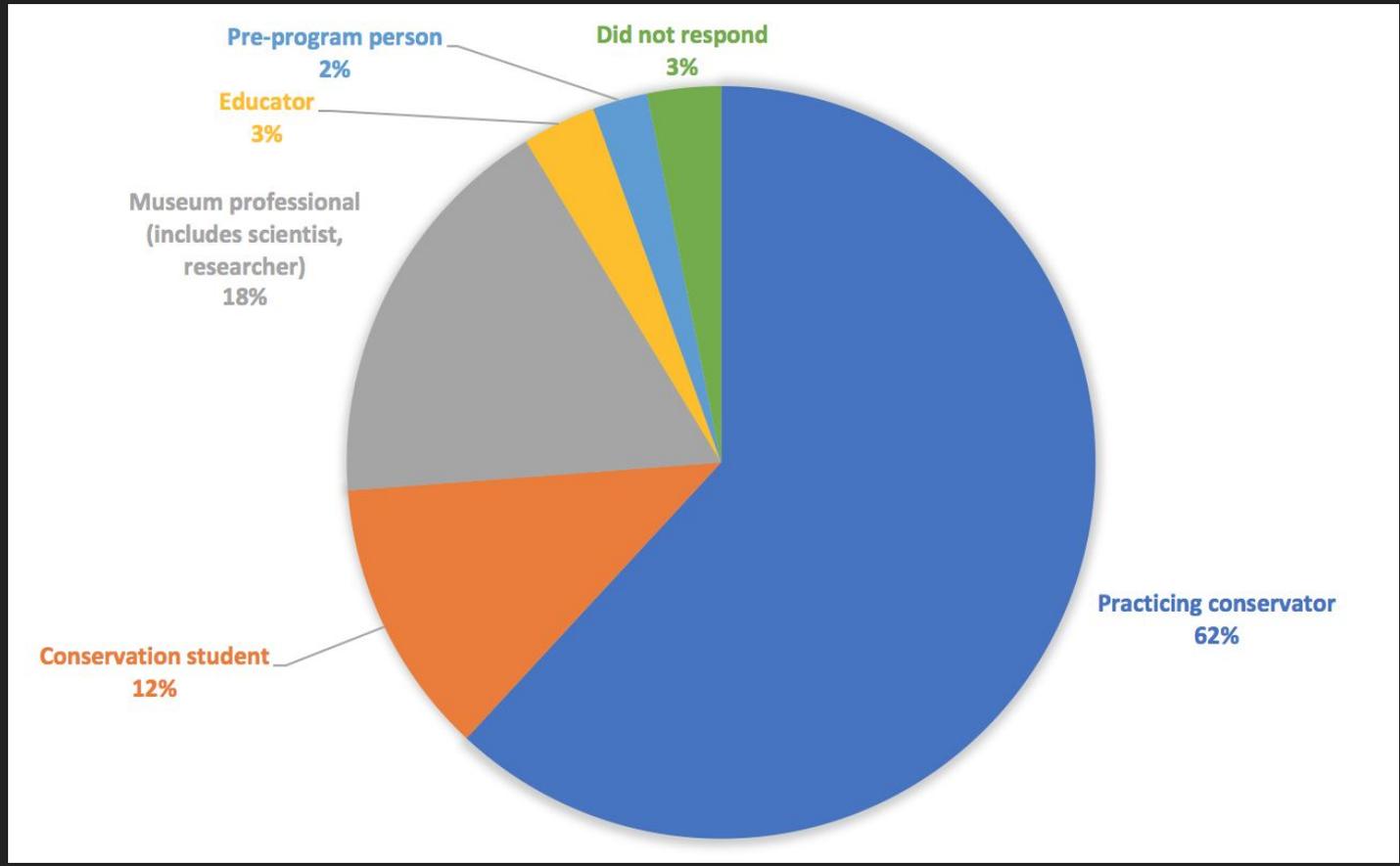
Event Details: “Indigenous Futures and Collaborative Conservation”

- Held on Friday, May 17th, 2019, from 4:30 to 6:30pm at Mohegan Sun, Uncasville, CT during the annual meeting of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), this session brought together three extraordinary facilitators Dawn Spears, Chris Newell and Jason Mancini of the Akomawt Educational Initiative, who reflected on their experiences engaging with Indigenous histories, narratives, and contemporary realities.
(<https://www.untoldstories.live/mohegan-sun-2019>)
- The event included at least 190 attendees, not including the speakers and staff.
- The event was live-streamed on the AIC Facebook (FB) page
(<https://www.facebook.com/aiconservation/videos/590742014746949>). FB analytics shows that 9 visitors joined during the live event and a total of 512 unique visitors have engaged with the video as of July 2019.
- A total of 111 surveys were collected from the participants, with the responses to the survey questions tabulated in the following slides. (Some questions were answered by fewer participants; these are indicated as relevant.) Selected comments are also included.

Key Lessons Learned from the Event

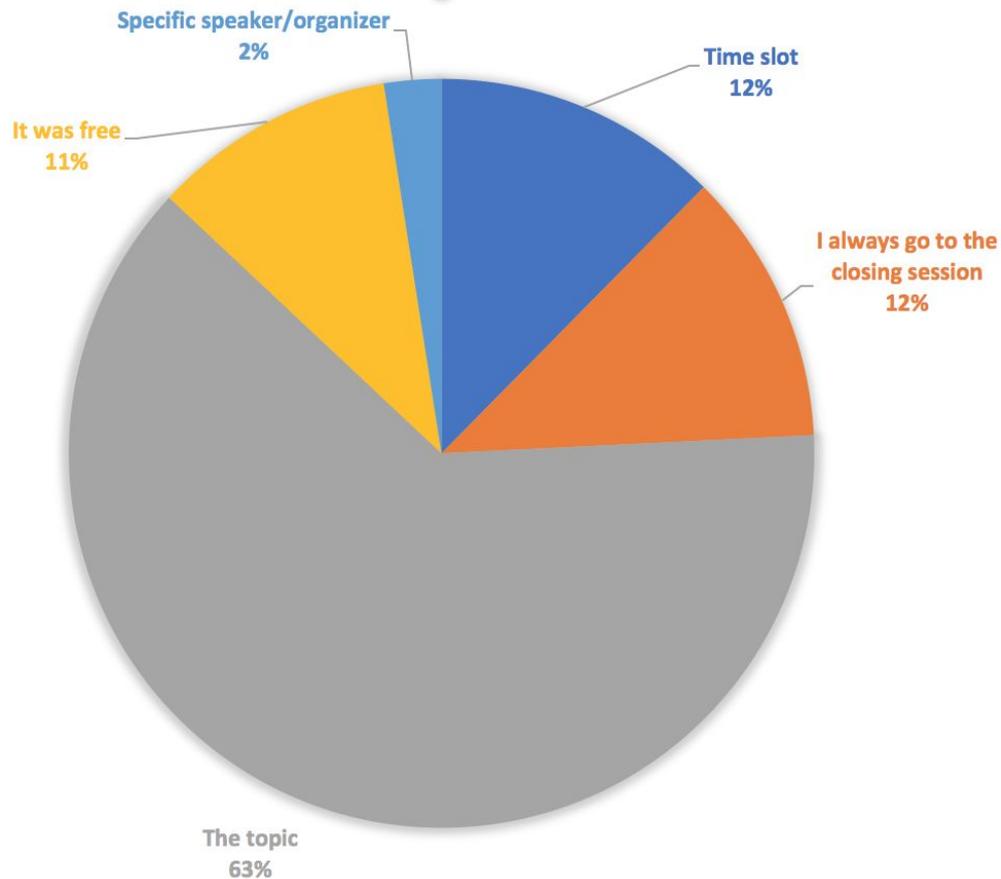
- There is significant interest among the AIC membership to connect the work we do with broader political and social issues. Participants had an earnest desire to re-educate themselves, gain new perspectives, absorb new skills, and feel emotionally connected to the work they do as professionals. Furthermore, the session gave many participants a sense of optimism, hope and purpose in the work we do.
- There was a lack of understanding that AIC and Untold Stories are two separate entities. While AIC supports our work, it should be made clearer that the program is developed and implemented by Untold Stories in collaboration with the invited speakers. Both praise and criticism for the event showed that participants were unclear as to who to applaud and/or criticize.
- Many participants expressed a desire to see such programs earlier in the conference, preferably to set the tone at the General Session. Despite the visibility of the closing session time slot, this event came far too late in the program for many who felt that there was a general sense of “conference fatigue,” that too many of their colleagues had already left before benefitting from this program, or that AIC showed disrespect to the indigenous people of the Uncasville area by holding this event at the end of the conference rather than opening with it.
- Expectations for the event need to be managed carefully, as some participants were frustrated that not all resources for engaging with indigenous communities were provided (though this was never the intention), or that the term “workshop” was used for an event that was in more of a lecture format. Making the parameters of the event clearer at the outset is essential.
- Participants responded very positively to hearing the perspectives of the panelists, and in having a variety of resources and implementable strategies that they could take with them and use in their own institutions and daily lives.
- Though the AIC conference does not typically make American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation available at its meeting, the fact that three individuals at our session stated that this was helpful to them suggests that ASL interpreters should be engaged for future Untold Stories events in keeping with our commitment to inclusion.

Participants described themselves as:



*NB: Participants could select more than one option

What drew participants to this event?

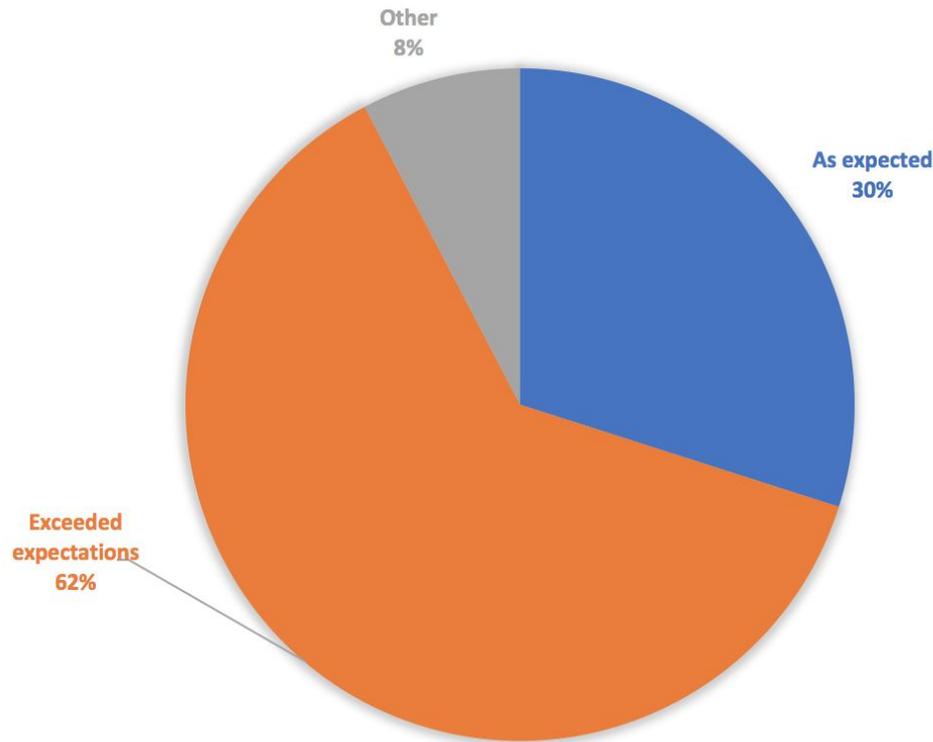


The topic clearly resonated with the attendees.

Some respondents had confidence in the success of the event because they had attended the 2018 Untold Stories event while others knew and respected the work of the organizers and/or speakers specifically.

*NB: Participants could select more than one option

How did participants feel about the quality of the conversation?

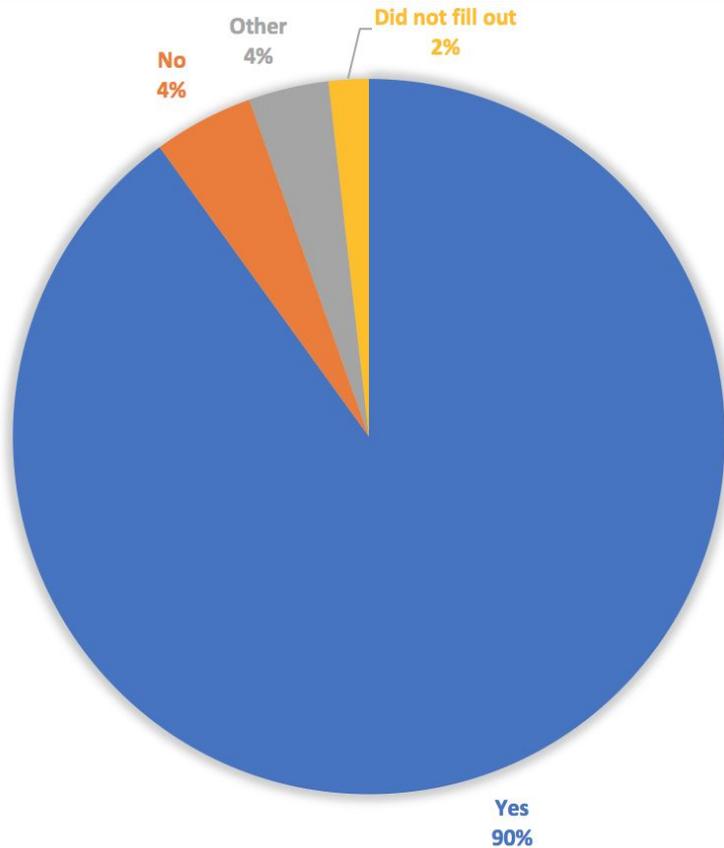


- It should be noted that no one selected the option “below expectations.”
- Participants were clearly making connections to the 2018 Untold Stories event and came with high expectations.
- There was some confusion regarding the format of the session, as some participants expected a more interactive session rather than a longer presentation; future events should carefully articulate the specific format of the event.
- Some participants felt that all other available resources for engaging with indigenous communities were not shared; however, this was not the intention of our session. Future events should manage these expectations more clearly.

Selected comments:

- “As expected: I had high expectations!”
- “As expected; it didn't feel like a conversation - between the panel members, or between panel and audience. It did feel like a wonderful convergence of important and useful information.”
- “As expected; met last year's high bar...”

Response to the question: “Did you learn concrete skills in this session that you would implement in your work or daily life?”



- For those who selected “yes” to this question, several found that shifts in their own perspective were most valuable, along with the strategies and resources provided.
- For those who selected “no” to this question, several mentioned that these were familiar issues they regularly confronted in their work; however, they were happy to see them discussed, be reminded of them, and given opportunities to practice talking about them.
- Even those who did not feel this work was directly applicable to their work seemed interested in implementing some of the strategies discussed.

Selected comments:

- “These are all skills I need! But things I already know. I want to get better at them.”
- “Difficult to apply to my specialty but will try.”

Response to the question: “If you regularly work with indigenous/Native cultural heritage, did this session offer you new skills or perspectives? How?”

Selected comments:

- “I gained a greater understanding of Native perspectives of museum collections and interactions between Native people and non-native museum staff. I now have a better idea of what is and is not a good collaborative interaction with Native visitors/researchers.”
- “My institution is just beginning to find partnerships and this gave me some starting tools for how to bring the topic of conservation into the conversation.”
- “It provided a valuable and thought provoking framework to bring back to my institution - one which I hope will open more conversations.”
- “I have worked extensively with Native communities in the past, but I found the review/introduction to terminology particularly important and helpful, along with the ‘consulting is talking’ exercise.”
- “I don’t regularly work with them, but in the future if I do I will feel more prepared.”
- “I haven’t worked regularly with native folks in about a decade and I was pleased just how much further this panel was pushing established norms that were pretty edgy 15-20 years ago. The tips offered for making conservation work appropriate for collaboration with indigenous communities are clear and I’ll do my best to include them in my divisions.”
- “Not really but the information was beautifully presented and well said. Always good to have this information reinforced. We can always improve.”

Response to the question: “If you regularly work with indigenous/Native cultural heritage, did this session offer you new skills or perspectives? How?”

Additional selected comments:

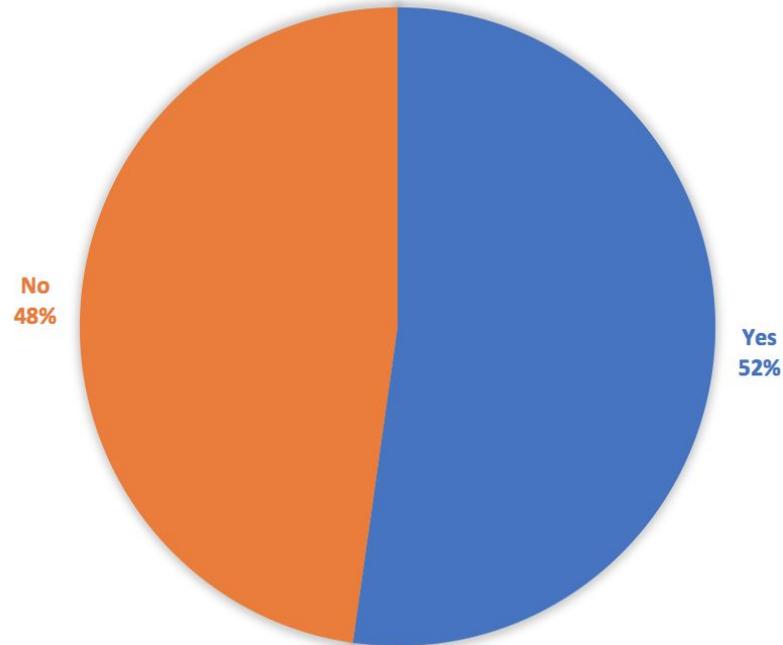
- “While they were familiar methods, it's always good to hear these things again, and I like that I can have tools and materials to share with colleagues who may not be.”
- “Not really, but a good reminder. I really valued the discussion of Native history in what is now New England, ‘ground zero’ (and often ignored.) The video clips were super.”
- “I do not regularly work with indigenous/Native cultural heritage, but if/when I do I will feel more prepared with the necessary language and skills to begin that dialogue.”
- “Yes it encouraged me to interact with Native people and communities in explicitly non-work-related contexts--helped me realize that asking Native people to give without receiving replicates colonial violence.”
- “I don't in my job now, but my work is still occupying indigenous lands, and should engage with that.”
- “Absolutely! Do's and Don'ts was very helpful in terms of active collaboration.”
- “Videos were so relevant and powerful. Look forward to sharing. Otherwise everything was powerfully articulated but not new ideas to me.”

Response to the question: “If you DO NOT regularly work with indigenous/Native cultural heritage, did this session offer you new skills or perspectives? How?”

Selected comments:

- “Completely changed and opened up a much needed perspective for our field.”
- “This session (and workshop dialogues) introduced me to appropriate terminology, culturally sensitive questions, and resources to consult for additional information.”
- “Most of us work within institutions that have participated in colonial endeavors and it is important to recognize and work to combat that.”
- “Yes, it made me think more about contacting indigenous people and gave me skills for the best way to go about that if I have future projects that would benefit from this contact.”
- “Yes, this provided me with a framework to approach work with teams from or a part of other underrepresented and suppressed communities.”
- “It did give me a framework of acknowledgement and actionable skills.”
- “Yes-gave me the tools to approach the treatment of indigenous materials when I do eventually encounter them. And to think about how these approaches can be applied elsewhere.”
- “This enlightened me and as a non-indigenous American I feel empowered to take action to achieve positive change.”

Response to: “Did this session change how you feel about the conservation field, or our professional organization and its annual meeting? If so, how?”



Selected comments:

- “This is the direction AIC needs to move in to continue to have my support, stay relevant, and enact positive change in the field and beyond.”
- “This was the highlight of the meeting.”
- “It has helped highlight how conservation is not a neutral practice and that we have a lot of work to do.”
- “I so appreciate the statement made by making the closing session so inclusive, sensitive, and thoughtful. It made me feel more positive about the entire meeting.”
- “I was pleased that AIC invited a session that could produce discomfort and challenge status quo.”
- “I am heartened to know that the organization is making concrete, good faith efforts to partner with local communities and organizations to effect collaborative partnerships that acknowledge and address historic imbalances of power- I would very much support additional and expanded workshops at future meetings that address these themes.”
- “It didn’t change my feelings as much as make me think that these sessions that provide concrete tips and action items for how to approach our work (especially those that push us to do something non-traditional in the field) are needed and we should be working harder to incorporate such programming into the meetings.”

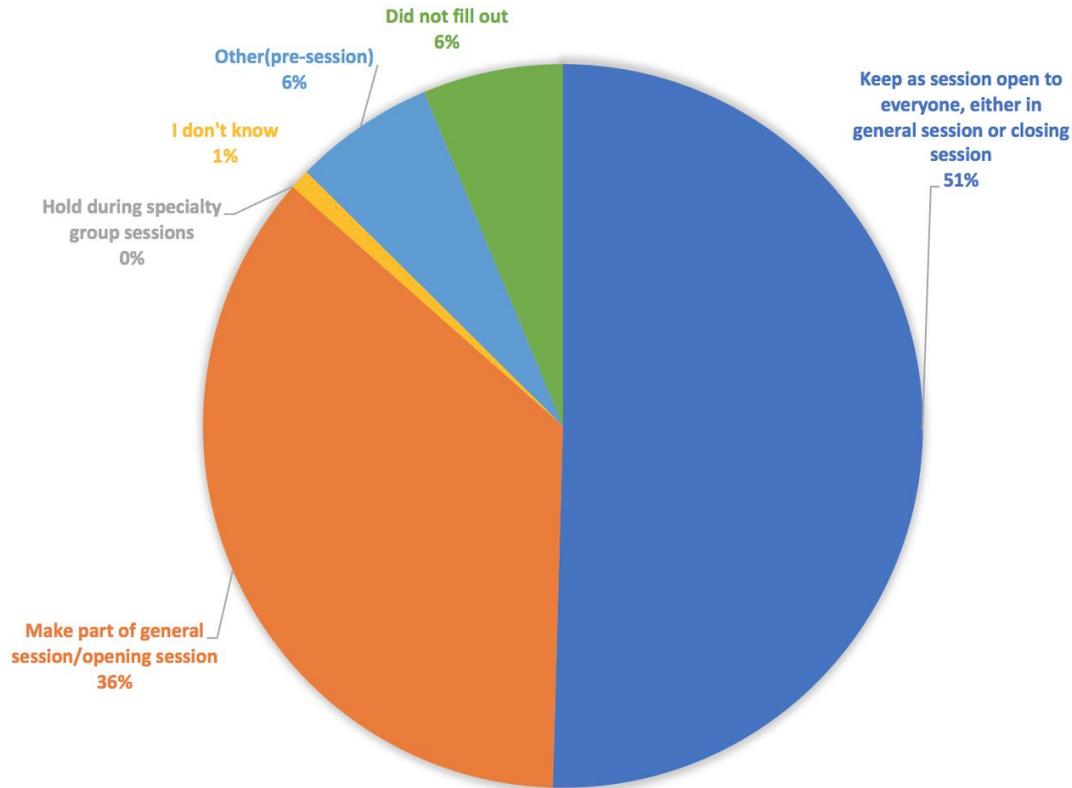
Response to: “Did this session change how you feel about the conservation field, or our professional organization and its annual meeting? If so, how?”

Additional selected comments:

- “Took great advantage of venue as a learning opportunity.”
- “We have a responsibility regardless of what our professional members are at on this topic.”
- “It just made me think, ‘Why was this the first time we did this?’”
- “It allowed me to be more mindful to the work I do as a conservator and to understand that it is my responsibility to be more mindful.”
- “It was good to be reminded of these considerations, and I appreciate that our professional organization recognized them.”
- “Very glad you made people uncomfortable, more aware of issues and steps to take. Also, concerned that some will remain nervous and stick to “safe” objects of colonial origin and the continued structural economic barrier to pre-program students of color, but the presence of a Native conservator on the panel gave me hope.”
- “This made me more mindful and empathetic toward [a] new approach to the care and stewardship of artworks from all cultures.”
- “Only that it made me more grateful how our field is perfectly positioned to help share, and pass on these important sentiments.”
- “Field seems to be evolving to be more inclusive of a broader take on what heritage means.”
- “It was about time to have this here at AIC- been intrinsic to ATALM (Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums) - glad to see it here. Thank you all.”

This year's event was the AIC Closing Session. Participants' responses to this time slot and visibility:

Selected comments:



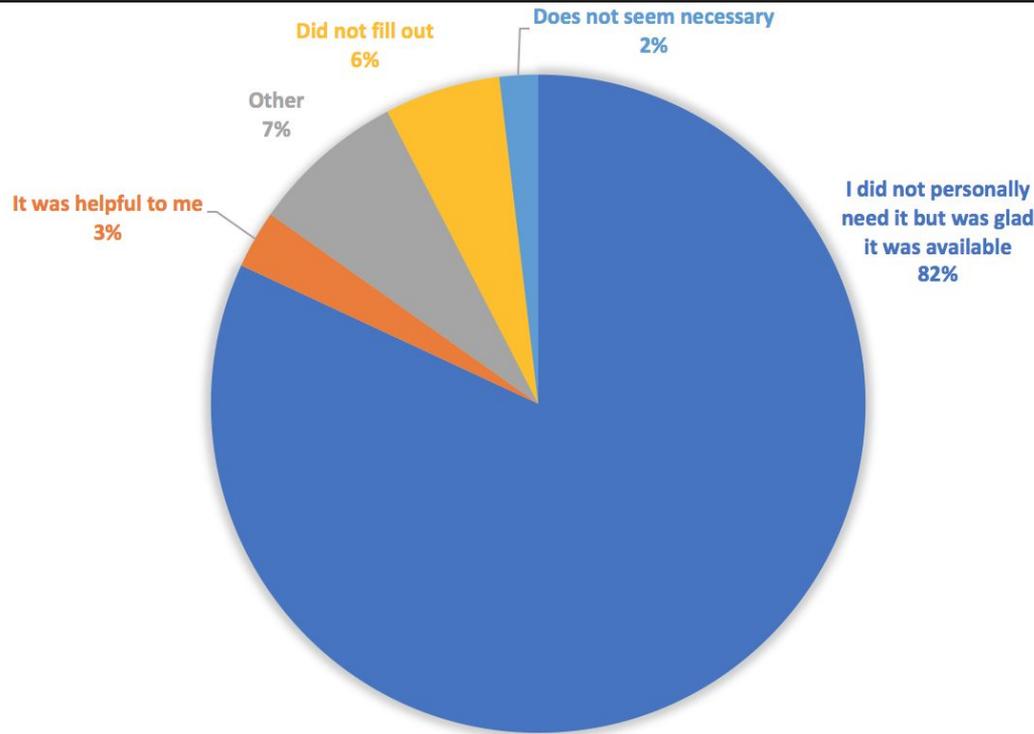
- “This comes way too late in the conference schedule. This should have been at the beginning of the conference. It is disrespectful to hold it as an afterthought, especially since the conference was held on tribal land.”
- “I feel it should definitely be held as a general or closing session to ensure as many attendees [to] attend/participate. I think these are valuable discussions that need to be continually had.”
- “Make it part of the general session earlier in the conference. Better than the opening session, should be switched. Attend[ance] was lower since people left early and this was more significant than anything I heard in the opening session.”
- “I believe this topic deserved to be a part of the welcoming / opening remarks, especially since we are located here.”

This year's session featured American Sign Language interpretation.

Responses to ASL at the event:

Three participants identified that ASL interpretation was helpful to them.

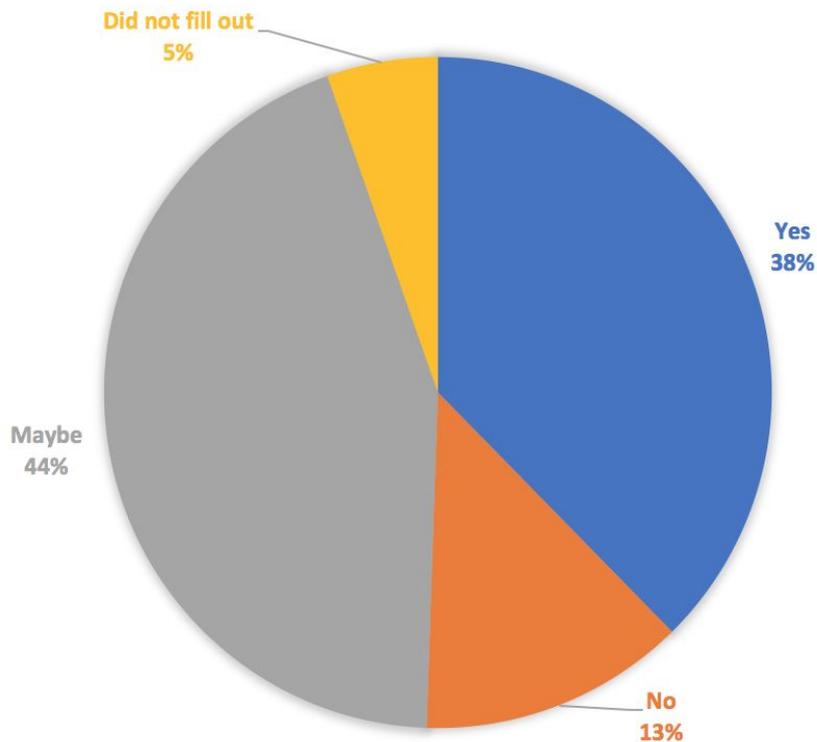
Selected comments:



- “I appreciated it but it made me wonder if providing simultaneous translation or closed captioning would reach more people - I know there were many non-native English speakers in the audience who might have benefited from that.”
- “I appreciate how inclusive this event was.”
- “I noted the absence of ASL throughout and, while I'm happy it was available at this session, AIC should invest in reliable interpretation for more sessions.”
- “Keeping to the theme of being inclusive, I feel it was a good addition, that regardless of whether anyone of the formal attendees needed it, it was made available to those present or participating online/digitally.”
- “Not sure how many benefit: if 1 does, do it.”

Percentages based on 105 survey responses

Participants' responses to: "Would you have live-streamed this event if you could not have attended in person?"

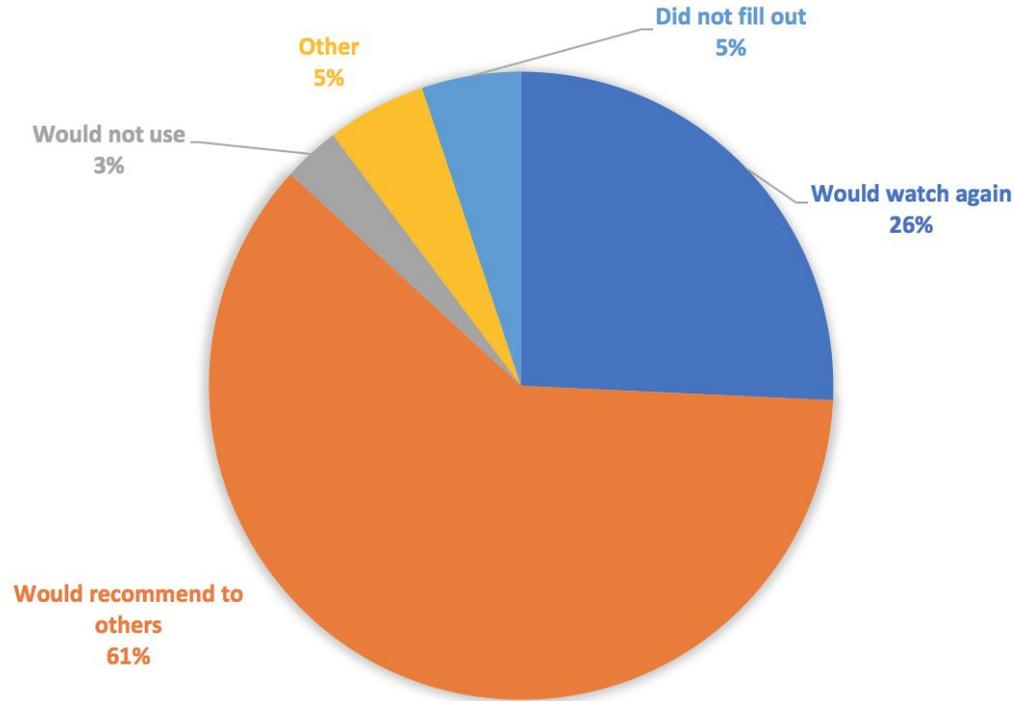


The responses to this question suggest that live-streaming (at no cost, or low cost) could be an important tool for reaching AIC members and non-members who might be interested in the topics being discussed. It has the potential to reach people who cannot afford to attend the annual meeting, or do not wish to do so.

Our FB viewership for this year's event was lower than last year, possibly because of the different type of session and differences in the public profiles of the speakers between the two years. However, the majority of those who viewed the live stream saw nearly an hour of the program.

Given recent concerns about FB as a platform (security, data harvesting, advertising, etc.), it may have discouraged some potential viewers. Perhaps alternative platforms should be considered, though continuing to use an AIC-associated platform would maximize a conservation viewership.

This event was recorded for the Untold Stories Website. These are participants' expected use of this free online resource:

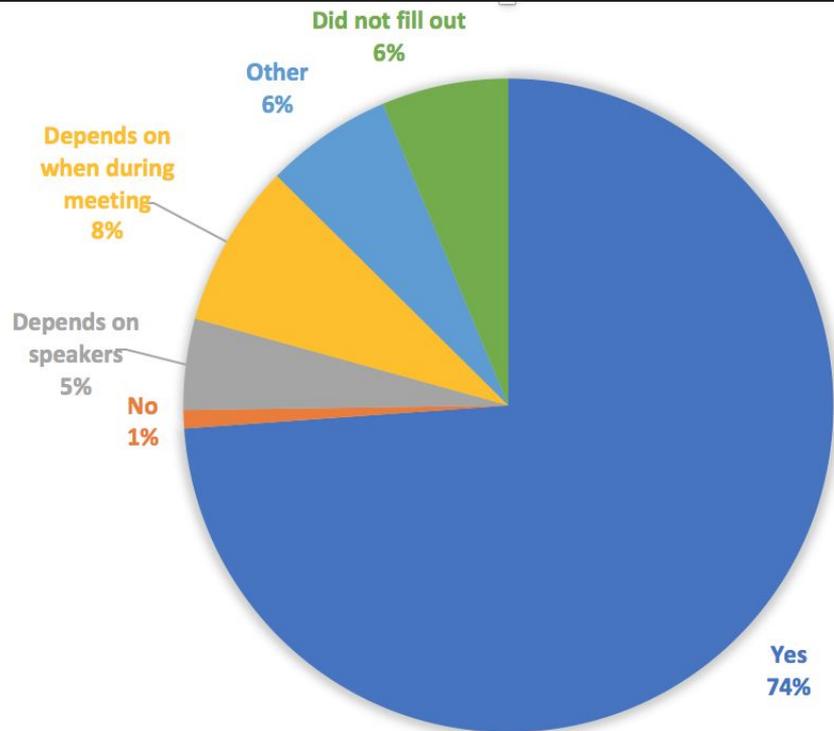


This year's data was similar to last year's response (where 71% of the participants said they would recommend the video to colleagues, and 26% said they would re-watch it.)

Analytics of the Untold Stories website and youtube channel shows that the Houston event webpage and video have been accessed 442 times since the event in 2018.

Given the relatively low cost of the videorecording and the high quality of the final product--especially relative to Facebook Live video-- it is worth continuing in 2020.

Participants' response to the question: "Would you attend a similar event next year?"



Participants nearly unanimously selected the option of attending future events. However, event participation depended on the time slot of the session for a significant percentage of participants, as was the case in the 2018 survey.

Holding this session so late in the conference may have significantly impacted the number of people who attended, either due to the cost and/or inconvenience of staying through the end of the conference, or exhaustion ("conference fatigue") by the end of the long conference.

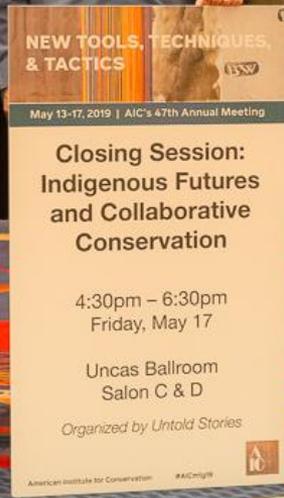
However, those who attended were clearly committed to the topic, and the numbers of those attendees may not have been affected. Possibly the area where we lost participation was in the more broad membership, i.e., people who might have attended such an event somewhat casually because it was available and free, but did not specifically plan to do so; this was an important factor for increased attendance at the 2018 event.

*NB: Participants could select more than one option

Additional comments from participants:

- “Loved the panel. Loved the films. Very valuable for all conservators whether or not they work with native indigenous collections.”
- “[We need] More indigenous scholars dispersed throughout the event. [We need] Greater exploration of research methods and model from extractive to fully indigenous.”
- “[We need] More info on indigenous culture, traditions, objects and their care.”
- “I would strongly prefer earlier in meeting to engage with ideas throughout the conference.”
- “I am a first time attendee and I was surprised and impressed by the tone/themes of inclusiveness and respect. I was not expecting that to be an aspect of the conference and I am pleased that this field is concerned not only with the physical objects and pieces but the humankind that is connected to them.”
- “Thanks for incorporating this tone of inclusive content into the annual meeting. It helps to make AIC and conservation a more sensitive and inclusive environment.”
- “I think the Untold Stories is an amazingly valuable event and I hope it can continue!”

Thank you
for reading!



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From left to right: Tamia Anaya, Sanchita Balachandran, Chris Newell, Jason Mancini, endawnis Spears, and Nicole Passerotti