

## Coalition for Archaeological Synthesis Strategic Plan 2023-2027

Approved: 2023-03-23

### Background

The Coalition for Archaeological Synthesis (CfAS) is a non-profit organization established in 2017 as a coalition of Partner organizations and individual Associates. Partners and Associates share CfAS's vision of expanding knowledge of the past to shape a more secure and just future and are committed to assisting in our mission: fostering synthesis in archaeology to expand knowledge and benefit society. CfAS strives to promote synthetic research on important social science questions whose answers impact public policy and/or public discourse on contemporary social issues. Its synthesis efforts focus on socio-environmental processes resulting from collective actions that form patterns invisible to individual actors and immune to discovery using a shallow-time lens, but which are discernable if probed by the right questions at the right temporal and spatial scales. This approach allows us to discern changes in these processes that may take millennia to unfold. In that endeavor, we may uncover system states that are resilient—even if they have not been documented in the historical record—that provide insights into contemporary societal challenges.

In selecting participants for its projects, CfAS uses an approach that consciously breaks down institutional, disciplinary, and societal barriers, CfAS connects scholars and builds research teams best positioned to ask and answer the questions for which a long-term perspective is crucial and who can access pertinent parts of the enormous datasets from archaeology and allied fields collected over the last century. Intensive collaboration is essential to synthesis as pursued by CfAS. Collaborative research teams involve experts from the sciences and humanities as well as those with traditional knowledge and public policy experience. Sharing of the research results in accessible forms is directed not just to academic researchers and cultural heritage archaeologists, but also to all manner of stakeholders, including policy makers, members of the public, and Indigenous and descendant communities.

To accomplish its goals, CfAS leverages the varied capacities of more than 60 partner organizations across the world, including: professional organizations, cultural heritage firms, academic units, non-governmental organizations, governmental units, and archaeological informatics providers as well as the talents and energies of and more than 500 individual Associates. Past and current projects, and their products, are described on the CfAS website (<https://archsynth.org>)

CfAS works closely with the Center for Collaborative Synthesis in Archaeology (CCSA) within the Institute of Behavioral Science (IBS) at the University of Colorado, Boulder (CU). CCSA provides critical organizational infrastructure for CfAS, by administering CfAS grants, programs, and projects and facilitating CfAS communications and networking.

***Development of the Strategic Plan.*** The CfAS Board of Directors met November 7 and 8, 2022, at the Institute of Behavioral Science at the University of Colorado Boulder (CU), to develop a 5-year strategic plan. The strategic plan has two components. The first, Defining and Conducting Synthesis, describes a set of decisions about what kinds of synthesis activities CfAS intends to support and what models it intends to use in carrying out its mission. The second component, Promoting and Fostering Synthesis, consists of action items that the Coalition intends to pursue both within and beyond CfAS over the next five years in order to advance its mission.

## CfAS Strategic Plan: Defining and Conducting Synthesis

CfAS undertakes a number of different activities, including managing the organization; fostering communication among partners and associates; and facilitating or sponsoring synthetic research projects. In the discussion that follows, “CfAS projects” are the substantial research- and practice-focused projects that are directed to a particular question or theme, pursued by a limited group of individuals, and that have CfAS involvement (such as CfAS funds and/or recruitment of participants).

***Defining Synthesis.*** By synthesis CfAS means research that integrates multiple sources of data and ideas to develop novel understandings that would not be obtained through separate study of individual cases. CfAS-sponsored projects focus on research that seeks to understand specific social processes through the comparison and synthesis of cultural trajectories across a number of distinct spatiotemporal contexts. Those understandings include identifying common factors that contribute to and shape those social processes—acknowledging the import of particular social and historical contexts. Put differently, CfAS seeks to address “how” and “why” questions while relying on other research to answer the “who,” “what,” “where,” and “when” questions about events and social processes in the past. This focus on social science questions leads more directly to research that can be applied in ways that benefit today’s societies (thus aligning with the focus of the Grand Challenges for Archaeology [Kintigh et al. 2014a, 2014b]). This focus means that CfAS projects will often be transdisciplinary<sup>1</sup> rather than strictly archaeological.

***Data Integration.*** The integration of data from multiple sources is crucial for synthetic research. CfAS-supported research efforts generally produce integrated datasets. As a condition of funding, CfAS requires that these datasets be thoroughly documented and ordinarily made available open access through a responsible digital repository (e.g., certified by [CoreTrustSeal](#) and/or adhering to [FAIR data principles](#); see also [Plan S and cOAlition S](#) and [Wilkinson et al. 2016](#)) to support reproduction (consistent recalculation of results), replication (consistent results across studies), and new research (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine 2019). In its projects, CfAS seeks to incorporate the results of cultural heritage investigations that have enormously expanded our knowledge of the archaeological record worldwide.

CfAS also sees the need to develop approaches and tools that make big, complicated, and multidisciplinary data sets accessible and useable for problem-focused comparative research. To that end, CfAS supports—but does not intend to pursue—development of a general-purpose data integration infrastructure. CfAS will support and rely on the efforts of its organizational partners to advance data preservation and access and data integration in archaeology (Ortman and Altschul 2023). CfAS also recognizes that the development of data standards or interoperability protocols will encourage and facilitate synthesis in archaeology and adjacent disciplines. When it can play a useful role, CfAS will participate in efforts that lead to improved data interoperability.

***Expanding Knowledge and Benefiting Society.*** CfAS projects ideally work toward both advancing scientific understanding and benefiting society. The strongest projects are ones where those two goals are aligned—whereby the knowledge gained has the direct potential to be applied. CfAS expects its projects, at a minimum, to articulate in their deliverables (publications, white papers,

---

<sup>1</sup> Transdisciplinary research integrates the approaches of multiple disciplines to address research questions that are shared across the collaborating disciplines.

public-oriented presentations) the benefits that could result and, where possible, to take steps toward those applications.

CfAS recognizes that it is a major challenge to translate sound research results into actionable policy proposals and move them to implementation. While some CfAS projects will result in changes to existing policy, others will focus on incrementally shifting the way the public views policy. An example of the former is the [People, Fire, and Pines](#) project, in which CfAS sponsored a collaboration among geographers, dendrochronologists, archaeologists, traditional knowledge experts, and forest managers to develop a fire history of the Border Lakes region of North America which was then used to rewrite federal, state, and local fire management plans and provided the impetus to reintroduce traditional fire as a form of restorative justice. The incremental approach is exemplified by the CfAS working group on [wealth inequality](#). The Global Dynamics of Inequality, or GINI, project, which is studying the long-term dynamics of inequality, is not proposing specific policy changes, but instead is designed to insert into the public debate evidenced-based results that will challenge ill-conceived, “common sense” solutions to social inequality and lead to public policies which are more likely to succeed. Between these two extremes is a range of public engagement. Regardless of the exact form, each CfAS project requires a plan to advance public policy and/or the public debate on the critical issue underlying the research. Policy-relevant individuals may be included as collaborators and working groups may employ the organizational capacities of CfAS partners in government and media relations.

***Costs and Benefits.*** CfAS both initiates synthetic research projects and may choose to participate in compatible efforts developed elsewhere. This plan provides guidance to CfAS as it prioritizes its own investments and considers participating in other opportunities that may arise. As a general rule, CfAS will not invest its own funds in projects that government agencies are mandated and funded to perform. However, we may contract with such agencies to perform particular aspects of those projects that align with our mission and for which collaborative synthetic research is best suited. In considering all such opportunities, CfAS will weigh the relative costs and benefits of a proposed initiative as to the opportunity best articulates with CfAS vision and mission.

***Synthesis Project Mechanics.*** To date, CfAS has funded or sponsored working group research efforts, a design workshop, and a mini-conference (described on the [CfAS website](#)). These efforts advance collaborative synthetic research differently, and all have proven their worth. CfAS will continue to employ such models going forward, refining them to best suit data generated by archaeologists in both the academic and heritage sectors as well as allied sciences. (Priorities for project topics are discussed in a subsequent section.)

A *working group* project (as described in Altschul et al. 2017, 2018) is focused on answering a specific, well-defined research question. Fashioned from the model of collaborative research developed by the National Center for Ecological Synthesis and Analysis (NCEAS), researchers respond to a widely distributed CfAS Request for Proposals. Responses propose working groups with 6-12 individuals with diverse positions and backgrounds that meet for about a week 3 or 4 times over a 2- or 3-year period. Proposals are reviewed by an evaluation committee established by CfAS. Working group participants contribute relevant data sets that are integrated as a part of the research effort and made publicly available in a responsible digital repository following their initial publication. The cost of a working group effort can vary from about \$50,000 to \$200,000. At the lower end, CfAS helps established groups that need limited funding to make on-going synthetic efforts reach their full potential. At the other end of the spectrum, CfAS works with team leaders to select project participants and facilitates meetings on data integration and synthetic research until the project is complete.

In the NCEAS model, the research question is posed and answered with the working group then disbanded. CfAS has found that our working groups may find answers to their original questions, but invariably the answers lead to new ones. CfAS working groups may live on past their original purpose, and if they do, CfAS will consider continuing to sponsor them. However, our general policy will be for these projects to find a new sponsor and funding source.

A *design workshop* incubates research projects by bringing together diverse individuals interested in and with data relevant to a specific topic for about a week. Participants are selected by a CfAS evaluation committee based on individual responses to a widely distributed Request for Information (RFI). The result of the design workshop is one or more collaborative research projects. Some projects begin immediately. For example, after the design workshop on human migration in 2019, a set of participants from North America, Europe, and Africa started collaborating via Zoom. In 2022, the group met for the first time since the design workshop in [Abidjan](#), Côte d'Ivoire after securing funding from multiple sources. Subsequent to the Abidjan workshop, the working group revised its research objective and invited additional collaborators, who continue to meet virtually on a monthly basis. Most projects devised at design workshops, however, will require funding to proceed. For these projects, the outcome of the design workshop will be an outlined and partially drafted proposal to an external funder. The cost of a design workshop is on the order of \$35,000 to \$50,000.

*Mini-conferences* are one-time meetings on a focused topic that engages researchers from other disciplines with archaeologists. Mini-conferences have a limited number of participants from a number of disciplines and backgrounds. In many cases, mini-conferences would be sponsored by the CCSA and held at the University of Colorado Boulder. We expect mini-conferences to be especially useful in building collaboration between archaeologists and researchers from other disciplines and backgrounds, and between CCSA and other units in the Institute of Behavioral Science and CU.

Finally, CfAS is open to sponsoring *externally initiated projects* that align with its mission (e.g., [The Database of Religious History](#)). What CfAS offers these projects is its ability to solicit interest in a project from more than 20,000 archaeologists, worldwide, that are CfAS Associates or members or employees of its Partner organizations. In addition, it may be able to offer organizational support through the CCSA. Depending on the request, the CfAS/CCSA services may or may not require some financial commitment from the project initiator.

***Engaging Transdisciplinary Research Teams.*** Engagement of research team participants from multiple disciplines is an important component of the NCEAS Working Group Model and one that CfAS embraces. One approach to meeting this goal is to focus recruitment of CfAS partners from organizations in other disciplines. Another is to purposely identify potential individual and organizational collaborators as part of the RFI process. The two are not mutually exclusive.

***Synthesis Project Funding.*** CfAS will seek flexible “program” funding that allows CfAS to fund the projects (working groups, design workshops, etc.) focused on topical priorities set by the Board. For the duration of this strategic plan, CfAS will also pursue external “project” funding for projects that align with the CfAS mission where the project format and focus are restricted by the potential funder. Program funding will be pursued from government funding sources and large, private foundations. Program funding from charitable giving will also be pursued should realistic opportunities arise.

Project funding could come from government programs (e.g., US National Science Foundation or National Endowment for the Humanities), private foundations, and/or CU<sup>2</sup> resources (generally seed funding or for small projects). In addition, CfAS may contract with US government agencies to effect alternative mitigations for projects conducted to comply with US National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 or for activities conducted under Section 110 of the NHPA.

There may also be international funding for synthetic planning efforts such as USAID, international financial institutions (e.g., the World Bank), or the U.S. Ambassador Fund for Cultural Preservation, though relevant partners would likely need to administer these funds. Of course, different countries offer different sources of relevant funding and varied constraints on seeking that funding. To take advantage of European Union (EU) or United Kingdom Funding opportunities, and to facilitate transatlantic collaborations, CfAS will welcome an opportunity to establish a university center (akin to CCSA) at a university in the United Kingdom or an EU country.

***Synthesis Project Priorities.*** Project priorities are set by the CfAS Board. To assist the board, the CfAS New Initiatives Committee was established in 2020 to identify and prioritize topics, with brief summaries, for synthesis projects. The priorities were ranked through a survey of CfAS Associates. Those topics, in priority order, were: 1) Colonialism, 2) Social Inequality, 3) Climate Change, 4) Food Security, 5) Infectious Disease, 6) Enslavement, Forced Labor, and Human Trafficking, 7) Demography, 8) Coping with Natural Disasters (“and the Impacts of Conflict,” might be added here), 9) Archaeology of Genetic Identities and Ancient DNA, 10) Town and Country / Urban and Rural, and 11) Creative Destruction/Resilience. These topics guide board decisions, but do not preclude others from being considered.

Beyond research topics, CfAS is mindful that archaeological research is intertwined with heritage concerns of local, Indigenous, and descendant communities. In a 2022 survey, the Society for American Archaeology, a CfAS partner, found that the most pressing concerns of the responding archaeologists to be engaging with descendant communities. CfAS favors projects that, when appropriate, readily lead to such engagement, as it already has with two projects ([Initiative for Sustainable Development in Africa: People, Fire and Pines](#)).

To a large extent, projects pursued by CfAS will be determined by available funding. CfAS will work with Partners and Associates to develop concise and well-referenced problem statements for each of these topics that can be used as CfAS evaluates and pursues funding opportunities. To aid with these statements and to reconsider periodically research priorities, the Board may reconstitute the New Initiatives Committee. Decisions on whether to pursue specific funding opportunities or externally initiated projects are made by the Executive Committee. It is essential that CfAS be flexible, adaptive, and open to new initiatives as well as nimble and responsive in meeting opportunities as they present themselves.

---

<sup>2</sup> Including CU Institute of Behavioral Science funding.

**Strategic Plan: Conducting, Promoting, and Fostering Synthesis**

**Conducting Synthesis**

<b>Action Item</b>	<b>Who is Responsible</b>	<b>Resources Required</b>	<b>Time frame for Implementation</b>
Bi-annual mini-conference with IBS/CCSA	CCSA/Scott Ortman	Money internal to IBS/CU; in future years dependent on funding landscape of IBS	2023 and biannual thereafter
CfAS-funded working group project or externally funded working group project	Potential working groups will be considered as they are proposed to the board by project leaders.	Project leaders, aided by CfAS and CCSA, will investigate grant funding. CfAS/IBS cost split possible.	2023 and at least biannual thereafter
Establish Request for Information (RFI)/Request for Proposal (RFP) infrastructure for CfAS projects	CfAS Executive Committee drafts RFI/RFP & appoints review panel to evaluate proposals. CCSA circulates RFI/RFP & administers the project.		As projects arise
Organize Amerind Design Workshop	Executive Committee	Amerind providing \$10K in travel + provide food and accommodations	Early 2023
Develop NSF grant proposal to fund 3 design workshops or a combination of design workshops (2) and working group project (1)	CCSA/Executive Committee		Submit in 2024 so existing projects have results/products
Explore design workshop on integrating Indigenous knowledge	CfAS Executive Board creates a Task Force. (Will Taylor has volunteered.)		2023
Develop process for tracking success/impact of projects	CCSA/Blake Vernon, with Board support		Regular check in with project teams/working groups to get updates
Develop concise & well-referenced problem statements for project topics	Partners and Associates		2023
Review priorities for project priority topics	New Initiatives Committee/Board		2025

**Strategic Plan: Conducting, Promoting, and Fostering Synthesis**

**Promoting and Fostering Synthesis within CfAS**

<b>Action Item</b>	<b>Who is Responsible</b>	<b>Resources Required</b>	<b>Timeframe for Implementation</b>
Recruit 10 new archaeological & 2 non-archaeological organization Partners/year (6 paid/6 unpaid)	Membership Committee	Daron to talk to ACRA about partnerships with CRM organizations	Ongoing; report at 2 <sup>nd</sup> 2023 Board meeting
Recruit 60 new Associates/year	Membership Committee		Ongoing; report at 2 <sup>nd</sup> 2023 Board meeting
Create interest-groups within CfAS	Executive Committee	CCSA Implements on Website	2024
Organize one YouTube "fireside chat" per ongoing CfAS Project per year with PI	Executive Committee to ask Tim Kohler to organize first "chat"	Organizational help from Communications Committee	2023
Solicit one post/week for blog/outreach.	Communications Committee	Associates & Partner email list	Ongoing
Develop system for gathering CfAS project-related products and publications	CCSA/Scott Ortman, Blake Vernon	contact current & past project PIs; develop procedure to check in products	2 <sup>nd</sup> 2023 Board meeting
Compile information on costs & possibility of supporting CCSA communications and impact-tracking staff position	CCSA/Scott Ortman		2 <sup>nd</sup> 2023 Board meeting
Encourage Partner members/employees to become Associates.	CCSA/Scott Ortman, Blake Vernon	CCSA include benefits of Associate status in emails to CfAS Partners	Early 2023



## Strategic Plan: Conducting, Promoting, and Fostering Synthesis

### Promoting and Fostering Synthesis Beyond CfAS

Action Item	Who is Responsible	Resources Required	Timeframe for Implementation
Promote synthesis to agencies through an Alternative Mitigation/Section 106/110 Task Force	Alternative Mitigation Task Force (Terry Klein, Michael Heilen, Daron Duke, Sarah Herr)	Written resources to outline approach (developed by task-force)	Ongoing, start 2023 with creation of Task Force
Put out a call for good examples of policy-relevant synthesis projects.	CfAS Presidents will put out call; CfAS Partners and Associates respond.	Blog post/email blast for call; IBS administrative help to collect responses	2023
Organize a session at one or more national/international conferences.	2023 Sessions in process. Future: Board reaches out to Partners or past fundees to submit/organize		2024 and annually thereafter
Reception or booth at one or more conferences of professional organization partners.	CCSA/Executive Committee	Funding transferred from SRI Foundation will pay for one reception	organize for 2023 or 2024
Create a list of CfAS funded products/publications and put on tDAR	CCSA, Blake Vernon, Chris Nicholson		end of 2023
Set up Awards Committee to create award opportunities with professional organization partners and to nominate synthetic research for existing awards.	CfAS Board to appoint Awards Committee		2023
Solicit information/posts for blog and email outreach.	Communications Committee		Ongoing
Identify and contact NGO/IGOs and governmental agencies associated with CfAS project themes.	Partners and Associates coordinated by CfAS Executive committee		Ongoing
Investigate creating Interest Groups or other forms of engagement at Partner Professional Societies	Jeff Altschul		2023



## References Cited

- Altschul, Jeffrey H., Keith W. Kintigh, Terry H. Klein, William H. Doelle, Kelley A. Hays-Gilpin, Sarah A. Herr, Timothy A. Kohler, Barbara J. Mills, Lindsay M. Montgomery, Margaret C. Nelson, Scott G. Ortman, John N. Parker, Matthew A. Peeples, and Jeremy A. Sabloff  
2017 Fostering Synthetic Research in Archaeology to Advance Science and Benefit Society. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114(42):10999-11002
- 2018 Fostering Collaborative Synthetic Research in Archaeology. *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 6(1):19-29
- Coalition-S.org  
2023 Plan S and cOAlition S: Making full and immediate Open Access a reality. <https://www.coalition-s.org/>
- CoreTrustSeal  
2023 CoreTrustSeal Trustworthy Data Repositories. <https://www.coretrustseal.org>
- GO-FAIR  
2023 FAIR Principles. <https://www.go-fair.org/fair-principles/>
- Kintigh, Keith W., Jeffrey H. Altschul, Mary C. Beaudry, Robert D. Drennan, Ann P. Kinzig, Timothy A. Kohler, W. Fredrick Limp, Herbert D.G. Maschner, William K. Michener, Timothy R. Pauketat, Peter Peregrine, Jeremy A. Sabloff, Tony J. Wilkinson, Henry T. Wright, and Melinda A. Zeder  
2014a Grand Challenges for Archaeology. *American Antiquity* 79(1): 5-24
- 2014b Grand Challenges for Archaeology. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 111(3): 879-880. [DOI:10.1073/pnas.1324000111](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1324000111)
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine  
2019 *Reproducibility and Replicability in Science*. The National Academies Press, Washington, DC.
- Ortman, Scott G., and Jeffrey H. Altschul  
2023 What North American Archaeology Needs to Take Advantage of the Digital Data Revolution. *Advances in Archaeological Practice*, Volume 11, Issue 1, February 2023, pp. 90 – 103. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2022.42>
- Wilkinson, M., Dumontier, M., Aalbersberg, I. *et al.*  
2016 The FAIR Guiding Principles for scientific data management and stewardship. *Sci Data* 3, 160018 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1038/sdata.2016.18>