

The power of human connection cannot be exaggerated. Here, we tell the story of how a professor, a librarian, a community activist, and a university student came together to uncover the untold history of the Owens Valley water wars.

## Shift Course: Revealing Hidden Histories and Cultural Contributions

### The Professor

**PATRICIA STEENLAND WAS** in the first cohort of faculty and instructors to teach a new kind of undergraduate course at Berkeley called **American Cultures Engaged Scholarship** (ACES) that sought to connect academic research and scholarly work with on-the-ground efforts of community leaders and organizations. The courses began in 2010 with funding from the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund as part of the \$16 million gift to the Berkeley Initiative on Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity. ACES created 40 new undergraduate courses that all fulfilled the American Cultures requirement, Berkeley's only undergraduate breadth requirement.

In 2011, Steenland was designing College Writing, "Researching Water in the West," with a goal of giving her students firsthand experience with original source documents and as a way to explore the intersection of communities in the Owens Valley. The water stories of Owens Valley became infamous in the 1970s film *Chinatown*, which told the story of Los Angeles County diverting the Owens River to build the LA aqueduct to nourish the growing metropolis. These water stories were perfect for an ACES course because they allowed students to track the different populations whose lives intersected in Owens Valley, from the indigenous Native American Paiute tribe, to the farmers and ranchers, to the Japanese Americans interred in Manzanar during World War II.

"I ran into a curious roadblock," Steenland said. "It was well known that the Paiute were the first to dwell in the Owens Valley. What was their part in the water story? I was looking for something from their perspective — materials that represented the firsthand

views of the people, not what had been said about them. And I could not find such a source."

A colleague told her about an elder in the Paiute tribe, Harry Williams, who had come to Berkeley to explore repatriation of the human remains of his ancestors archived in a university museum. Steenland called Williams. "I don't think either of us had any idea what would result," she said.

### The Community Organizer

When Harry Williams was a boy growing up on the Bishop Paiute Reservation, he played among the tule — a wild plant found in watery lands and marshes — and watersheds of Owens Valley. When two LA aqueducts were constructed in the 1970s, the valley dried up, and dust storms blew directly into his Paiute reservation.

Williams vaguely knew that, prior to the arrival of white people, the Paiute had learned how to engineer the water into carefully constructed irrigation ditches or channels designed to irrigate the land, thus raising the valley's water table. The Paiute planted and harvested food crops, and the community thrived. The history of this ecosystem in harmony was not well understood because the Paiute community had been systematically displaced after a war with the US Army and native children being removed from families for "assimilation education" in Federal boarding schools. "Our history seemed lost," Williams said.

Recognizing that his homeland and way of life might disappear, Williams got into "water politics" and joined the Owens Valley Committee in 1996. The committee's purpose was and is to seek the



Patricia Steenland (left)  
and Theresa Salazar

just and sustainable management of Owens Valley land and water resources.

Little by little, Williams began uncovering bits and pieces of this history. He spent his free time walking the irrigations, ravines, and gullies, identifying historic irrigation ditches along the way. He read everything he could find about the water history of the valley. He was eager to share his findings so that the committee could document its water rights. “But no one wanted to listen to this Indian guy,” Williams said. “I didn’t have a degree. I wasn’t a doctor. I wasn’t a lawyer. If I was a white guy, they’d want to listen to me.” Then Williams received a phone call from Berkeley’s Steenland.

Steenland invited Williams to speak to Berkeley students about the culture and history of the Owens Valley Paiute. He spoke of playing in the watersheds, watching the river dry up and the dust storms move in, and of becoming involved in water politics. He told his people’s stories, and the students listened.

### The Curator

Theresa Salazar is a librarian and curator of the Western Americana collection at the Bancroft, Berkeley’s archive of rare documents. The Bancroft’s mission is to document nothing less than the history

of human activity west of the Rockies. Salazar sees herself as a friendly gatekeeper. “Our caretaking role is to preserve these collections for current and future generations. We’re also a public repository open to Berkeley faculty, students, and staff, and to a broad community of local and international users and researchers.”

Steenland approached Salazar for help in giving students access to archival materials to read and interpret as original source documents. Salazar uncovered scores of deep and rich resources to demonstrate water use in the Owens Valley: maps, photos, diaries, journals, field notes, linguistic grammars, correspondence, drawings, genealogical tables, and drawings. Two collections proved invaluable to the ACES course and held evidence that supports Williams’ narrative of his people’s achievements.

Two Berkeley anthropologists who traveled to the Owens Valley in the 1930s compiled the first collection and worked with the younger Paiute members to translate the elders’ life stories, myths, stories, and recipes. These “generational transfers,” as Salazar called them, were never published and sat unnoticed in the Bancroft for two generations. As part of the ACES course, Salazar brought the notebooks for the students and Williams to see. Williams studied them silently and pointed out that he recognized the

names of the young translators. They were no longer alive — they were elders when he was growing up. “This moment had a big impact on my students and influenced some of them to research these notebooks,” Steenland said. “The Bancroft

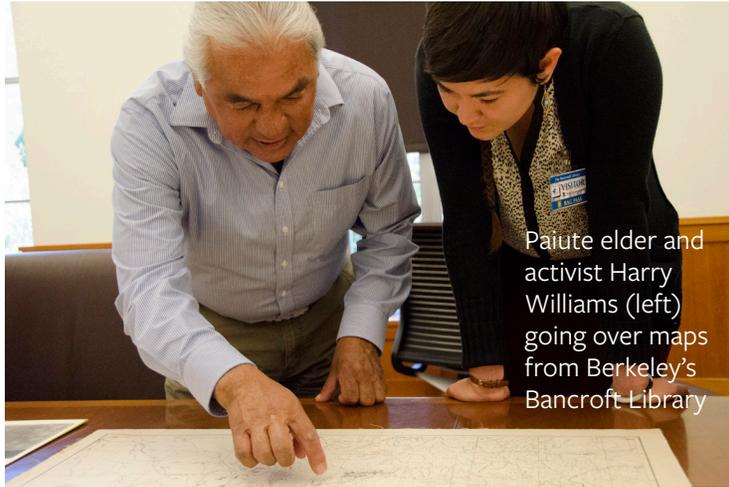
archives opened up doors to things I never thought about learning,” Williams said.

The second collection the students reviewed was a series of maps made by 19th century surveyor Von Schmidt, who had drawn maps to document the California-Nevada border in the 1860s. This collection contained hand-drawn maps of the ancient Paiute irrigation ditches in Owens Valley. Over 150 years later, a student of Steenland, in partnership with Harry Williams, overlaid these maps onto modern maps to pinpoint the exact location of the historic irrigation ditches. Williams now had evidence to document his people’s legacy and water rights.

## The Student

One of the students listening to Harry Williams’ lecture in the first year of “Researching Water in the West” was Jenna Cavelle ’12. In her junior year at Berkeley, Cavelle was hardly a typical undergraduate. A community college transfer, she was a first-generation college student who re-entered college in her thirties after working for years as an environmental journalist and travel writer. While at Berkeley, she was selected as a **George A. Miller Scholar** and a **Haas Scholar**, earning a stipend to conduct independent research and gain access to mentoring from faculty related to that research.

Interested in how water and indigenous communities intersect, Cavelle researched the Paiute’s water



Paiute elder and activist Harry Williams (left) going over maps from Berkeley’s Bancroft Library

techniques in the Owens Valley. Finding original source documents — one of the requirements of the course — was a challenge. Historians had written little on the issue and what had been recorded was poorly documented. “It

took a month before I finally realized that they were under my nose the whole time at Berkeley in the Bancroft library.”

When Williams came to speak to the class, Cavelle was shocked to learn that the ditches still existed. She jumped at the opportunity to visit them with Williams. “It was absolutely life changing. That was a moment that continues to reverberate in my life,” Cavelle said.

Cavelle became devoted to researching the ancient irrigation system built by the Paiute. She graduated summa cum laude from Conservation & Resource studies, won the American Cultures Research Prize, and was awarded the prestigious Judith Lee Stronach Baccalaureate Prize, a \$25,000 grant to conduct a nine-month community service project that combined education, outreach, and technology. Cavelle’s work centered around engaging the Paiute community in restoring cultural memories associated with their ancient irrigation systems. Using the proceeds from the grant to buy an old trailer, she lived on the Paiute reservation for more than a year and worked with Williams to map the exact location of the irrigation ditches. Cavelle and Williams also conducted open water literacy seminars on the different Paiute reservations on the subject of Paiute water history, drawing on the primary sources from the Bancroft Library. As a consequence, this water history is now well known among the Paiute throughout the valley.

Three years later, Cavelle is now a graduate student in the University of Southern California's film school working on the documentary *Paya: the Water Story of the Paiute*. Her goal for the film is to mobilize the three Paiute tribes of Owens Valley to fight for their water rights. "Until the tribes come together, they won't get their water rights, no matter how much research I do," Cavelle said.

While Williams and Cavelle continue their activism in the water politics of the Owens Valley, Steenland and Salazar continue their teaching and research on the water of the West. "Researching Water in The West" is now in its fourth year, and more than 50 Berkeley students have completed the course. Next year, Berkeley will host a symposium bringing Paiute tribal elders and youth from the Valley to meet with Steenland's students to view the notebooks in person and receive oral history training. This is all part of a larger goal to establish a more collaborative and equitable relationship between the university and one of the state's native peoples.

This sustained partnership between the university and the community is a testament to the power of the ACES program. "It is so critical for healing, for the students, for the cultures we serve," Cavelle said. "I tell my students that history as we know it is written by historians, but that the vast majority of the past contains things that don't make it into the historical records," Steenland said. "Sometimes if we are fortunate, incredible parts of that history can be found in our libraries, waiting quietly for a new generation."

## The Catalyst Moment

Facilitating connections between the historical resources of Berkeley and the intellectual curiosity of a faculty member, librarian, and student helped a Native American tribal leader preserve the history and legacy of his tribe.

### Best Practices

- » **Program design must provide curricular support.** ACES courses receive a faculty research grant

of \$3,000, up to \$1,500 in additional funds for community project costs, logistical support from one or more students, and staff consulting services.

- » **Identify community partners.** Berkeley's Public Service Center is a key partner with ACES, providing the logistical and operational support to develop and sustain partnerships with community agencies that wish to become part of an ACES course.

### Lessons Learned

- » **Community-based scholarship and research projects** can be hard to implement or sustain in lecture classes of more than 200 students. These large courses require discussion sections led by graduate students, and funding for the sections is not always available.
- » **Infrastructure support is required.** In the ACES model, staff and graduate students are needed to initiate and sustain the community partnership and provide curricular resources such as travel and course materials. Ongoing funding will be needed to sustain the current model.

### What's Next

- » After the original grant from the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund ended in 2015, the administration provided funding to ACES, enabling the program to develop and offer 12 new courses across 10 departments. This funding and further course development is expected to continue, which will allow ACES to serve as a model in broader discussions about undergraduate education, community engagement, and public service at Berkeley.

*Interviews in this case study were excerpted from a panel presentation on "Exploring an Untold California Water Story: A Community Partnership at UC Berkeley" held at Berkeley on April 18, 2015.*