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## Resolving Commingling, Restoring Identity: An Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Ethical Study of Individuals from a Human Skeletal Teaching Collection

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# Resolving Commingling, Restoring Identity: An Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Ethical Study of Individuals from a Human Skeletal Teaching Collection

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## ABSTRACT

In Fall 2022, human skeletal remains were discovered in the Department of Biology's Comparative Vertebrate Anatomy Laboratory. No documentation about the acquisition or curation history was found. With no current protocols for repatriating individuals in university skeletal teaching collections, an interdisciplinary research team analyzed the skeletal remains to resolve to commingle and identify the people. Using standardized methods in forensic anthropology, we estimated the minimum number of individuals represented through taphonomic, demographic, paleopathological, and morphological variables and variation. Results indicated, minimally, 36 to 56 individuals represented by 250 bones. Of these individuals, 12 were estimated as probable female, 16 as probable male, 3 as intermediate, and 5 as indeterminate adults. All bones were associated with adult individuals, and estimated ages ranged from 20 to 50 years. Average stature estimates were below globally-reported average heights, and dentoalveolar conditions suggested poor oral health for at least five of the individuals. Cranial measurements from five individuals were consistent with variations recorded in modern and historical African and Asian populations. Taphonomic findings of postmortem bone processing (e.g., bleaching, articulation, and hardware features) identify these individuals as non-consenting bodies of the global (Carolina Biological Company) and local (anatomy departments and medical schools) bone trade. Their acquisition and postmortem treatment highlights a long history of objectification, exploitation, and dehumanization. In this skeletal analysis, we have endeavored to restore aspects of these individuals' identities by reassociating bones to individuals and presenting the biological variation embodied in these remains.