Dear Archaeological Institute of America Donors,

My name is Hunter Omerzo, a senior archaeology and classics major at Dickinson College. I was chosen by the AIA as a recipient of the 2023 Waldbaum Scholarship so that I could attend the University of West Florida Combined Field School this summer. Because I had to pay out of state tuition, the figure that I had been told was tripled, but thanks to all of you the increased scholarship amount for this year covered the full cost of tuition, leaving only rent and food costs to be out of pocket. Having the full tuition paid for took a huge weight off of me and my family. Thank you again for your generosity!

The UWF combined field school that I got to attend for 8 weeks during June and July not only fulfilled my requirement to graduate with an archaeology major from Dickinson, but it also cemented in my mind my future career as an underwater archaeologist. I have wanted to be an archaeologist since middle-school, but I wasn’t introduced to underwater archaeology until my sophomore year of undergrad. Being from Ohio and going to school in Pennsylvania there wasn’t much opportunity to test whether underwater archaeology was truly what I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing. Up until this summer I was essentially banking on the fact that I loved archaeology, and I loved the water and that those two things would meld the way I envisioned. However, this field school without a doubt convinced me that they do, in fact, combine to create exactly what I had hoped. I not only got to dive and conduct operations underwater, but also on land as part of the terrestrial investigation included in the combined school. This allowed me to juxtapose what I used to imagine me doing with what I want to do now, and it only helped me to assure myself.

Aside from my own revelations about the whole experience, the school was amazing. Our main objectives were to conduct operations on the terrestrial and maritime sites of the Tristan De Luna y Arellano Expedition of 1559, which was the first attempted permanent settlement in the continental United States by any European Power. In the first half, I worked on the terrestrial site, the site of the attempted occupation. My team’s unit was 2x2m and by the time I left 4 weeks in to join the maritime team we had made it just past 40 CMBS. We found material evidence, mostly pottery sherds, of local native occupation as well as the short two-year Spanish occupation. Among the artifacts from the Spanish layer were sherds of Olive Jar, Majolica, and Aztec Redware which was brought from New Spain (Mexico) as well as lead Arquebus shot and two small, improvised lead weights. We were looking specifically for evidence of structure, primarily post holes. Our unit did not end up containing evidence of post holes, but we did find a large wrought iron spike at the bottom of the Spanish layer which is evidence of a structure of some sort.

While we didn’t find anything incredibly significant in the terrestrial portion, in the maritime portion we did end up finding what at this point seems to be an undiscovered debris field near the wreck of EPII, which was the second of the three known wrecks from Luna’s fleet which were brought down in a hurricane. The details are still largely under wraps because of the current unknown nature of the discovery. Luckily, I was on the dive that discovered the debris and was actually the one to feel the first artifact with my probe under the sand during the circle search of the target which was incredibly exciting. I got to participate in a total of nine dives, and while we were unable to excavate on EPIII like we had planned because the permit was tangled in a bureaucratic mess, we got a lot of experience target diving, surveying, and mapping known wrecks in both Pensacola Bay and Blackwater River.

Thanks to this experience I not only am going to fully pursue underwater archaeology as a career, but I am also going to pursue a master’s degree with the University of West Florida. I was very impressed by their program, and I am itching to do more work on the plethora of projects which they currently have available, which in underwater archaeology, especially in the United States, are rare opportunities. Thank you again for this scholarship, it has changed my life and hopefully one day in the future my work will change yours in return.