

Careers in Cultural Anthropology

Anthropology: Education for the 21st Century

So you want to study anthropology, eh? There are two great reasons why studying anthropology should be considered by undergraduate and master's students.

First, the material is intellectually exciting: anthropology students enthusiastically complete their courses of study.

Second, anthropology prepares students for excellent jobs and opens doors to various career paths: the course of study provides global information and thinking skills critical to succeeding in the 21st century in business, research, teaching, advocacy, and public service.

What Is Anthropology?

Anthropology is the study of human behavior. That exploration of what it means to be human ranges from the study of culture and social relations, to human biology and evolution, to languages, to music, art and architecture, and to vestiges of human habitation. It considers such fascinating questions as how peoples' behavior changes over time, how people move about the world, why and how people from distant parts of the world and dissimilar cultures are different and the same, how the human species has evolved over millions of years, and how individuals understand and operate successfully in distinct cultural settings. Anthropology includes four broad fields--cultural anthropology, linguistics, physical anthropology and archaeology. Each of the four fields teaches distinctive skills, such as applying theories, employing research methodologies, formulating and testing hypotheses, and developing extensive sets of data.

Anthropologists often specialize in one or more geographic areas of the world--for example, West Africa, Latin America, the British Isles, Eastern Europe, North America and Oceania. In addition, anthropology studies focus on populations in a locale or region. Some anthropologists study cultural practices, such as Pyrennes' Basques use of cooperatives in their economic system, which must be modified to fit the overarching Spanish or French legal structures. Other examples of cultural practices studied by anthropologists include marriage rituals among Scots-Irish Americans in a suburban North Carolina community, Morris dancing on May Day among southwestern English village inhabitants, and aesthetic and linguistic aspects of Trinidadian calypso and "road songs." Physical anthropologists observe biological behavior, attempting to understand ongoing human evolution and the human adaptations to particular environments, such as maternal physiological response to pregnancy, the effects of altitude on maternal and fetal well-being, perhaps performing comparative studies of physiological responses to short-term high altitude residence (e.g., Euro-Americans and African Americans in Colorado) versus longer-term high altitude residence (e.g., indigenous Quechua-speakers in Peru or Sherpas in Nepal). Historical archaeologists help preserve aspects of the recent past, such as settlement patterns in the western U.S. plains. Archaeological studies generally involve teams of specialists who work with domesticated plant remains, indicators of animal life, and the manmade artifacts produced or imported into a particular area.

Anthropologists are careful observers of humans and their behavior, maintaining an intense curiosity: What does it mean to be human? Why do people behave in particular ways? What are the historical and environmental pressures that helped shape the experience and behavior of a specific group of people? What are universal facts of human life?

What Does Anthropology Teach That Is Useful outside the College Setting?

Careful record-keeping, attention to details, analytical reading, and clear thinking are taught by anthropological courses. Social ease in strange situations, critical thinking, and strong skills in oral and written expression are

cultivated by anthropological training. Using a range of social, behavioral, biological and other scientific research methods, anthropology majors learn to supplement statistical findings with descriptive data gathered through participant observation, interviewing, and ethnographic study. An anthropologist is a trained observer who knows the importance of collecting data, in listening and watching what others are doing, in reflecting on what has actually as well as apparently occurred, in researching the context, in applying various explanatory models, and in adopting a broad perspective for framing an understanding. Whatever the topic of research, anthropologists share a holistic vision that requires using a repertoire of methods in order to forge a deeper understanding of situations. This holism characterizes the best anthropology and imparts the perspective for which the profession is valued.

While the job market for academic anthropologists is relatively steady, demand for anthropologists is increasing in other areas, stimulated by a growing need for analysts and researchers with sharp thinking skills who can manage, evaluate, and interpret the large volume of data on human behavior. The extent of occupational flexibility reflects the emphasis on breadth, diversity, and independence of thought. What we know about the future marketplace indicates the type of global, holistic knowledge which an anthropological perspective brings.

Anthropology as a Major: Its Fascinating Subject Matter and Utility for Careers and Subsequent Education

What Options Does an Undergraduate Anthropology Major Have after the Bachelor's Degree?

There are many career and educational options for anthropology majors. Further anthropological study leads to both traditional anthropological careers of teaching and research as well as in applied anthropology. Academic anthropologists find careers in anthropology departments, social science departments, and a variety of other departments or programs, such as medicine, epidemiology, public health, ethnic, community or area studies, linguistics, cognitive psychology, and neural science.

Applying anthropology offers many opportunities to use anthropological perspectives and skills. Jobs filled by anthropology majors include researchers, evaluators, and administrators. Cultural anthropologists have the range of careers filled by other social scientists; biological and medical anthropologists have other skills which are useful in the growing sector of health-related occupations. Many archaeologists are employed in American cultural resource management projects which are required by federal and state laws before major building ventures.

Further study in graduate or professional school are common paths for anthropology undergraduate majors. Anthropology provides a strong basis for subsequent graduate level education and training in international law, public health, and other areas as well as the social sciences.

What Job Opportunities Will Anthropology Afford the New Graduate?

Job opportunities are generally forged by the individual, not by the program which one follows in college. The best college program encourages the performance skills which anthropology excels in molding in its students. The prudent undergraduate will take a well-rounded course of study, with a few practical career-skill courses interwoven in her or his overall program. Anthropology provides a good counterpoint to business courses, foreign language study, technical training, fine arts, and so forth. In addition to imparting invaluable core knowledge about the human animal and its cultural and biological history, anthropology lends itself flexibly as a tool to refine whatever other interests one brings to the higher-educational process.

Anthropological study provides training particularly well suited to the 21st century. The economy will be increasingly international; workforces and markets, increasingly diverse; participatory management and decision making, increasingly important; communication skills, increasingly in demand. Anthropology is the only contemporary discipline that approaches human questions from historical, biological, linguistic, and

cultural perspectives. The intellectual excitement and relevance of the wide range of information presented in anthropology assures that students are engaged and challenged. Moreover, it complements other scientific and liberal arts courses by helping students understand the interconnectivity of knowledge about people and their cultures. Increasingly, undergraduate and master's students are coming to understand that the issues affecting their futures and the information they will need to prosper cannot be found in narrow programs of study.

The undergraduate anthropology major will be exposed to archaeology, biological anthropology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology. They learn how to study people and how communities and organizations work. The master's degree candidate receives additional training in how to combine these perspectives and skills to solve problems. Many undergraduates have difficulty selecting their major, changing their minds several times as they search for a course of study which interests them and can lead to post college employment. That search sometimes results in costly extra years of study. The undergraduates choosing to major in anthropology can be comfortable that their choice is both exciting and practical.

Career Paths: Academic, Corporate, Nonprofit, or Government

Most of America's professional anthropologists have traditionally worked in higher educational institutions, teaching and researching, but today there are many other career options for trained anthropologists. Many anthropologists with master's degrees or bachelor's degrees work for contract archaeology firms at archaeological sites, in physical anthropology laboratories, and in museums in a wide range of areas. Similarly, there are many opportunities as social science researchers and in other areas available to anthropologists at every level of training. A doctorate is required for most academic jobs. The nonacademic employment of cultural anthropologists is greatly expanding as the demand for research on humans and their behavior increases. Since 1985, over half of all new PhDs in anthropology have taken nonacademic positions in research institutes, nonprofit associations, government agencies, world organizations, and private corporations. While the job market for academic anthropologists is relatively steady, demand for anthropologists is increasing in other areas, stimulated by a growing need for analysts and researchers with sharp thinking skills who can manage, evaluate and interpret the large volume of data on human behavior.

Academic. On campuses, in departments of anthropology, and in research laboratories, anthropologists teach and conduct research. They spend a great deal of time preparing for classes, writing lectures, grading papers, working with individual students, composing scholarly articles, and writing longer monographs and books. A number of academic anthropologists find careers in other departments or university programs, such as schools of medicine, epidemiology, public health, ethnic studies, cultural studies, community or area studies, linguistics, education, ecology, cognitive psychology and neural science.

Corporations, Nonprofit organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations, and Federal, State and Local Government. Anthropology offers many lucrative applications of anthropological knowledge in a variety of occupational settings, in both the public and private sectors. Non-governmental organizations, such as international health organizations and development banks employ anthropologists to help design and implement a wide variety of programs, worldwide and nationwide. State and local governmental organizations use anthropologists in planning, research and managerial capacities. Many corporations look explicitly for anthropologists, recognizing the utility of their perspective on a corporate team. Contract archaeology has been a growth occupation with state and federal legislative mandates to assess cultural resources affected by government funded projects. Forensic anthropologists, in careers glamorized by Hollywood and popular novels, not only work with police departments to help identify mysterious or unknown remains but work in university and museum settings. A corporate anthropologist working in market research might conduct targeted focus groups to examine consumer preference patterns not readily apparent through statistical or survey methods.

Anthropologists fill the range of career niches occupied by other social scientists in corporations, government, nonprofit corporations, and various trade and business settings. Most jobs filled by anthropologists don't mention the word anthropologist in the job announcement; such positions are broadly defined to attract

researchers, evaluators and project managers. Anthropologists' unique training and perspective enable them to compete successfully for these jobs. Whatever anthropologists' titles, their research and analysis skills lead to a wide variety of career options, ranging from the oddly fascinating to the routinely bureaucratic.

Educational Program

Anthropology is not a large discipline. There are about 15,000 anthropologists actively engaged in the profession. About 6,000 bachelor's degrees were awarded in anthropology in 1995 and many of those degree holders use their anthropological training in their post collegiate experiences, both in further education and in the world of work. Approximately 1,000 master's degrees and 400 doctorates were awarded through American universities that year.

The average post baccalaureate time needed to obtain the master's degree is two years and the PhD, about eight years. The lengthy time required for an anthropology master's and doctorate is due in part to the custom of completing a field project for the thesis or dissertation and mastering several bodies of knowledge about the area, including comprehensive language training, before departing for the field site. The field research is generally several months for the master's student and 12 to 30 months for the doctoral student.

High school students interested in a career in anthropology should develop a firm background in social studies and history, math, science, biology and languages, both English and foreign. The computer has become an important research tool and computer skills are useful.

Anthropology's Career Advantages

Diversity. Anthropology is a career that embraces people of all kinds. It is a discipline that thrives with heterogeneity--in people, ideas and research methods. Anthropologists know the wisdom of listening to multiple voices and linking the work coming from researchers who bring different backgrounds and apply various approaches to their endeavors. The American Anthropological Association is committed to increasing the diversity of the profession.

Career Options. The following careers illustrate the range of choices that an anthropology student might explore after graduation. Social facility, critical thinking, and skills in oral and written expression are cultivated by anthropological training. The range of occupations reflects the emphasis on breadth, diversity, and independence of thought.

American Anthropological Association

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updated 2020