Anthropology Training and Career Preparation: Key Takeaways from Focus Groups

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Recommendations for anthropology programs from the Anthropology Career Readiness Network

In January 2023, the [Anthropology Career Readiness Network](#) conducted two illuminating focus groups with undergraduate and graduate anthropology students to gain insight into their perspectives on career preparation and the transition from school to work. The conversations revealed several common themes and concerns that led to recommendations for enhancing anthropology education, thereby setting up students for long-term career success.

Lack of Practical Experience

A significant point of discussion across both focus groups was the need for more practical experience opportunities integrated into academic anthropology programs. Students overwhelmingly felt underprepared for job searches and workplace demands due to limited hands-on learning and chances to apply their anthropological skills in real-world settings.

Many participants expressed a desire for more opportunities to put their anthropological knowledge into practice through projects, practicum experiences, and other forms of applied learning. For example, one student said, "it would've been much more useful coming out of the program if we had had more of like a practicum experience. . . . This is the valuable experience and also tools that I have that I actually know how to use. That's something that I don't feel like I can say at this point."

This gap between theoretical education and practical application was identified as a primary reason students feel ill-equipped to enter the workforce. While they anticipate exiting programs with anthropological expertise, they lack tangible deliverables for their portfolios and concrete examples of utilizing that knowledge

in different workplaces. As another student said, "Even though I have this degree, I don't feel like I can actually use it."

To improve student preparation, anthropology programs should incorporate more practical components that provide opportunities to apply concepts through on-the-ground projects and initiatives. Potential ideas include partnering with local community organizations or businesses to conduct ethnographic research studies as part of a course or providing the option of a practicum course that offers students the ability to design and carry out their projects under the supervision of their advisors.

The key is ensuring students can point to completed projects and reports, ideally with tangible outcomes on their resumes, to demonstrate their ability to conduct anthropological research and apply their skills to real-world problems. This practical edge gives them an immense advantage in showcasing their capabilities to employers.

Need for Career-Focused Models and Mentorship

Another prominent theme was the lack of access to working anthropology professionals who could offer career-specific guidance. Students expressed having few opportunities to connect with or "pick the brains" of mentors with direct experience in industry, nonprofits, or government.

In particular, they emphasized the value of connecting with anthropologists who could offer advice on identifying job opportunities and insight on translating their anthropological skills during the job application process. The students indicated

their lack of familiarity with industry terminology and confusion about the ways in which anthropological expertise applies in workplace settings.

Decoding ambiguous job descriptions poses a formidable challenge for students accustomed to academic language and contexts. As one student described, "I know the term anthropology will not be in the job description most of the time, and you have to kind of dig for that."

Schools must take steps to illuminate potential career directions and bridge the gap between academic and industry languages. Resources like skills dictionaries, profiles of those in relevant roles, mapped career pathways, and sample job descriptions help orient students to employment opportunities and help decode employer needs. Students can tailor their materials intentionally and be ready to explain how their background satisfies, if not exceeds, recruitment criteria.

Destigmatizing paths beyond academia through exposure to diverse alumni career trajectories also expands student perceptions of possibilities. The goal is to equip students to evaluate opportunities strategically, articulate the value of their anthropology training, and enable them to craft persuasive, employer-centered applications.

To accomplish this, students and faculty might benefit from greater awareness of existing resources, including, but not limited to:

- The ACRN's Student Tools and Exercises
- NAPA sNAPAshots
- The AAA's Captivating and Curious Careers of Anthropology
- The AAA's Career Development Webinars
- The AAA's Pathways to Careers Webinar Series
- The Anthropology in Business and Anthro to UX podcasts
- The AAA's *Anthro News* practice articles
- Anthropologists at Work Video

The Value of Building Peer Support Networks

A clear takeaway from both focus groups was the substantial benefit students gained from connecting with fellow students and sharing their experiences. Participants valued learning that they were not alone in their uncertainties and frustrations. Exchanging insights, tips, and strategies with peers boosted morale and expanded their perspectives. As one student described, "I'm looking for groups to join . . . or just looking for places to kind of connect and build community and try to find a way."

Peer communities create safe spaces for students to discuss career pressures openly, voice their anxieties, and gain motivation during demanding transitions. Schools should actively facilitate these support networks through networking events, forums, and learning communities. Reaching out to learn from alumni, particularly recent graduates, can be a relevant and useful experience for current students.

Sustained peer-to-peer exchanges are invaluable for advice, accountability, resource sharing, networking, and reassurance. The communities formed empower students to navigate daunting career transitions collectively. Their bonds also enrich educational experiences and help realize the broader applications of anthropological perspectives. Through these linkages, students learn the importance of developing their own professional networks.

Need for Better Preparation Early in the Program

A consistent refrain was that career-focused support came too little and too late. Students emphasized that career readiness should be woven into programs beginning from year one, not hastily introduced in their final semester. As one student bluntly said, "how to position myself with getting internships early on would've been really helpful."

For example, learning to create professional portfolios and building networks are essential job-search skills. These skills are best introduced early in anthropological training so that students can apply tips immediately, refine their materials based on new information, and develop their proficiency over time. Gradually honing these skills in conjunction with their academic growth allows holistic preparation that will enable them to use their training after graduation.

Participants also noted that earlier exposure could have helped them make more strategic degree and course choices. They lamented feeling blindsided late in their programs by the competitive job landscape. One student bluntly stated, "career readiness is something that I also agree with and [in] not being prepared in."

This sentiment underscores the need for career training from the start. When career readiness is built into the curriculum from day one, students can be proactive in developing skills and establishing connections needed for smooth school-to-work transitions.

Recommendations for Anthropology Programs

Anthropology students are typically passionate about their chosen field, yet simultaneously unprepared to navigate the job-search process. The insightful

focus group discussions led to key recommendations for anthropology programs to enable students to apply their anthropological training in the workplace and position them for career success.

- Incorporate substantive practical components into the curriculum through research projects, practicum experiences, and other applied learning activities. These activities provide students with concrete deliverables and proof of competencies.
- Connect students with anthropologists across work sectors, including program alumni, who can share details of their careers, offer advice and networking opportunities, and serve as mentors.
- Offer resources and seminars to help students understand workplace applications of anthropology and translate their capabilities into industry terminology on applications.
- Foster peer networking through events, forums, and learning communities so that students learn that their classmates are also sources of knowledge and contacts.
- Integrate various aspects of professional development throughout the curriculum, beginning at the start of the program.

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