



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

How career ready are your students?

Reflections on what we are (not) teaching anthropology students

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Abstract

Despite the growing market in industry, government, and non-profits for anthropologists, and their evident success there, anthropology has no real framework for teaching students about the practical applications of anthropology. This pattern appears at all degree levels—bachelor's, master's, and PhD. With that in mind, the Anthropology Career Readiness Network set out to investigate and identify some of the main gaps in academic training with respect to practice. Using Delphi surveys, we queried practitioners about perceived gaps in their training. The results showed that respondents felt quite underprepared in terms of job search strategies. They also lacked skills in transferring anthropology to workplace settings and explaining the value of their discipline to people in those settings. Although sobering on one level, our study points to a clear path ahead for curriculum development. The Network continues to work with practitioners, students, and instructors to build our collective capacity to prepare people to enter the workplace of their choice and to thrive there.

KEYWORDS

career ready curriculum, practice, workplace preparation

THE CRISIS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology today presents something of a paradox: a discipline seemingly on the wane, coupled with a vibrant market for its graduates. The last decades have seen stagnation in academic hiring for anthropologists, increasing pressure from university authorities for “relevance” in the liberal arts, and—most worrying of all—reduction in enrollments.

At the same time, we have seen the steady growth of anthropological practice—degree holders working outside the academy, in situations and under conditions very different from their academic brothers and sisters. Much of this work is innovative and ground-breaking. Practice could be said to be the leading edge of the discipline.

The response of the academy to practice has been, for the most part, indifference. Most academic departments offer little if anything in the way of training for practice. In addition, most make no attempt to learn from the experiences of their alumni who have chosen not to work within the academy.

The irony, then, is that although opportunities for anthropological practice abound, anthropological training takes little or no account of it. We have known about this issue for decades; previous studies have explored aspects of practice, training, and the relationship between the two. Probably the most comprehensive survey of practitioners is that first carried out by CoPAPIA (Fiske et al., 2010) and revised a decade later (Hawvermale et al., 2021). Other useful summaries are provided by Ginsberg (2016), Aiken (2020) and Collins (2020).

A key problem in training anthropology students to become practitioners is the fact that few US faculty members have much personal experience with practice. Many of them have gone straight from graduate school into tenure-track or adjunct positions. Follis and Rogler (2015, 104) comment: "... senior anthropologists who mentor the next generation have very limited knowledge of opportunities beyond teaching and research, and consequently little ability (and possibly interest) to advise on alternative careers."

One result is that if instructors are interested in teaching their students about application and practice, they are often doing so from a weak experiential base. And some instructors may be disinclined to enter an arena where they have little or no expertise, where there is no obvious or easy way to gain that expertise, and where there are few institutional incentives to do so.

If we are going to change this situation, however, we need to start orienting our training to a broader market that includes students who will enter the job market, and instructors who will play a role in their career preparation. Several years ago, a small group of anthropologists decided that the first step in addressing how anthropologists were trained was to find out what the trainees themselves thought about their academic preparation. From this, the Anthropology Career Readiness Network (ACRN) emerged.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY CAREER READINESS NETWORK

The Anthropology Career Readiness Network arose in response to the growing concern about lack of attention to practice within the discipline. The ACRN is not formally affiliated with any disciplinary association, although it maintains close relationships with many of them. It is, as the name applies, a loose network of over 550 students, practitioners and instructors, all of whom seek to improve the quality and breadth of academic training for practice. Although career readiness is particularly important for those students who seek careers in business, non-profits, and government, it is also relevant for students intending to be instructors since they are responsible for the academic curriculum.

We realized at the outset of our work that there was a lot we did not know about how anthropological training related to the realities of practice. We concluded that the most important findings, and the most important questions, were going to come from the experiences of practitioners themselves. The model we adopted was a simple one. We would investigate the experience of practitioners, and use this understanding to encourage the development of resources for both students and instructors. We would reach out to all three groups—practitioners, instructors, and students—and involve them in discussions about how to improve anthropological training. Research formed an important component of our early efforts, but

here, we adopted the principle of appropriate imprecision; we opted for a variety of rapid assessments approaches to data collection, rather than long-term, complex, and in-depth alternatives.

We also believed that it was important to keep the focus on practice and the experience of practitioners, and to avoid, if possible, re-centering the discussion primarily on the concerns and needs of academic instructors. Our assumption was that much of what would be learned from practitioners would fall well outside the experience of many faculty members. Consequently, in addition to improving training for students, we saw this work as an opportunity to help instructors build their own capacity for understanding, and responding to, the evolving field of practice.

Our early discussions with colleagues regarding where the Network might begin brought forth a number of comments of the “we’ve-already-looked-at-that” variety. Academics, in particular, were anxious to point out the previous studies, articles, and opinion pieces produced by them and others on various aspects of practice. But it became clear that there were large areas of ignorance, where we knew little about how anthropology actually “worked” in certain domains of practice. And we also became aware, as we talked, of the persistent tendency to re-center the Network’s focus, not so much on the practitioners, but on the concerns and preoccupations of the academy.

We decided to look again at aspects of practice, not by combing the literature, but by learning from practitioners themselves. And we wanted to conduct this investigation in a way which generated as much “ground truth” as possible, keeping the experiences of these practitioners in the foreground. Our goal here was not to develop either an in-depth or an all-encompassing understanding of practice, but rather to identify some of the most important questions and concerns that anthropologists employed in industry, government, and non-profits had. If we were able to do that, we reasoned, we could begin to work together to figure out ways to address those concerns.

We used an approach that is well-known to many anthropologists: rapid assessment. Rapid assessment is not a specific method, but a suite of methods commonly employed during the initial phase of a design investigation. Rapid assessment is usually team-based, largely qualitative, and fairly quick. It uses a variety of methods and techniques including interviews, focus groups, short surveys, transects, and on-site observation. Its purpose is to develop an understanding of salient aspects of the situation under investigation. In largely unknown environments—and we had decided at the outset that the practice arena was a largely unknown area—the results of rapid assessment activities tend more toward discovery than verification.

Thus, efforts are directed at identifying salient aspects of a situation, and within these aspects, the hope is to develop some idea of variability, priority, and scope or spread; without some idea of what to look for, counting things may not produce useful data. From these findings, other, more detailed investigations can be planned.

THE DELPHI SURVEYS

We did two surveys of practitioners using the Delphi technique. Developed at RAND in the 1950s as a forecasting technique, Delphi is a relatively quick and simple way of charting unknown territory (see Delp et al., 1977; Hsu & Sanford, 2007; Linstone & Turoff, 1975; and Williamson, 2002 for descriptions). Qualitative and exploratory in nature, Delphi relies on at-a-distance iterative questioning of a selected group of people to pull together diverse viewpoints and experiences.

A topic is chosen, and an initial round of questions (usually only a few) are sent to a carefully-selected set of respondents. Their written answers are collated and analyzed. From

these responses, a second round of questions is developed. If desired, more rounds can be designed and administered.

The goal is to construct a preliminary map of an issue, domain, or challenge to determine what salient features it has. Originally used to examine the impact of technology on warfare, its use eventually spread much more widely, to business, health, environmental science, and public administration.

Delphi is not designed to provide the final, definitive word regarding a research problem. Rather, it is useful at the initial phase of what may be a longer and more complex investigation. Until researchers have a clear idea of what the salient questions are with regard to an issue, more quantitative techniques like surveys or structured interviews are likely to be less informative than they could be.

There are a number of advantages to using a Delphi approach. The participants are anonymous and separated, eliminating many of the negative aspects of group dynamics. A potentially wider and more representative range of responses and insights can be gathered. Although Delphi often uses “experts” as respondents, the technique is very well suited to the investigation of public or “folk” knowledge, who are themselves “cultural experts.” The success of Delphi depends mainly on two elements: the formulation of questions and the selection of respondents. Selection should not only emphasize what respondents know, but whether they are willing to share what they know.

The technique fits very well with an anthropological approach to discovery in that it targets experience and “ground truth.” It is particularly well suited to the initial, exploratory phases of research on relatively unknown or unfamiliar topics, in that it tends to surface salient aspects of those situations which can then form the basis for more in-depth research.

Delphi also has limitations. It is a qualitative technique, designed for discovery more than verification. It does not lend itself to numerical tabulation. It does not draw on a random sample, but instead on specially chosen respondents. Its results cannot be statistically manipulated in any meaningful way. Although Delphi is sometimes used to build consensus among respondents, we did not take this approach, but instead used it to understand practitioner views of their academic preparation and its relation to their current work.

We chose Delphi in acknowledgement of the poor level of understanding that we have about the realities of anthropological practice. It is quite literally *terra incognita* in many important ways. Detailed surveys, in our view, would be quite premature. Instead, we opted for a form of rapid assessment, in an effort to begin to explore the topography of practice. Our goal was not to develop a comprehensive understanding of the extremely varied domain that is practice today, but to explore a few of the more interesting and important issues surrounding how well students are prepared for work outside the university.

We set out to collect information from practitioners about what was missing in their academic programs which would have been useful to them in their careers. We wanted to let practitioners respond in their own words, rather than checking off questionnaire boxes. Finally, we wanted to develop insights that would allow us to chart the ACRN's next steps, and expand our understanding of how and why academic training might be strengthened.

Participants

Because Delphi relies on expert informed opinion, it is important to choose people who (a) are knowledgeable; (b) understand the purpose of the survey; and (c) are willing to participate. We queried the members of our working group for names of likely candidates, and eventually settled on a list of just under 100 possible respondents. These individuals were all younger prac-

tioners, with degrees from US universities, who had been active in their jobs for several years. We then pared that group down to 40 possible candidates, focusing on full-time practitioners.

We contacted these 40 anthropologists to see if they would be willing to participate. Thirty-seven responded affirmatively, and of that group, 34 returned completed surveys. Of the 34 respondents, 20 were female, and 14 were male. In terms of academic background, three had a bachelor's degree, 18 had the master's, and 13 had doctorates. We asked them how many years it had been since their last degree in anthropology. Twelve had been in practice for between 1 and 5 years, 16 had been in practice for between 6 and 10 years, and six had been in practice for 11 years or more.

Twenty-two of our 34 respondents worked in the private sector, eight worked in the government/non-profit sector, and four were independent. Most of those working in the private sector were engaged in some aspect of marketing and/or user experience work.

Survey questions

We conducted our Delphi survey in two rounds. For Round 1, we asked our 34 respondents two questions:

Question 1. *In terms of equipping you to **find your job** in practice, what specific things would have been helpful for you to have learned as part of your academic program? Please write down up to 10 specific things, using one- or two-word descriptors.*

Question 2. *In terms of **being able to do your job** in a successful and satisfactory manner, what specific things would have been helpful for you to have learned as part of your academic program? Please write down up to 10 specific things, using one- or two-word descriptors.*

We received 227 responses to Question 1, and 237 responses to Question 2.

In Round 2, we focused in on two sets of responses from Round 1, one concerning methods and the other involving how practitioners explained anthropology to others; the latter appears as “Translating Anthropology at Work” and “Communication” (depicted in Figures 1 and 2, respectively). We chose these two topics because, in our Round 1 survey, they were among the two most frequently cited responses to our questions and because we wanted to learn more about them.

For Round 2, we surveyed 24 practitioners and received 316 responses. Once again, we asked two questions. Here was how we posed the first of our two questions to practitioners in Round 2:

Question 3. *In Round One, many of you indicated a need for more training in methods, particularly those methods not (yet) part of the “traditional” ethnographic research portfolio. Below, we’d like you to list up to ten different **methods that you use or have used in your work**, which were not necessarily part of your academic training. You can be as specific as you want here. Use key words or short phrases where possible.*

With respect to communicating anthropology to others, we were interested in knowing what sorts of questions practitioners got about their discipline from others. Here is how we asked the second of our two questions:

Question 4. *Many of you also indicated a need for more training in communication. For getting a job, the issue seemed to be finding better ways to articulate the nature and value of anthropology to prospective employers. For practitioners already on the job, there was an expressed need to communicate what anthropology is and how it works to colleagues, clients and the general public.*

*Could we therefore ask you to tell us what some of the **specific questions are that you have been asked about anthropology?** We'd like you to write down up to ten different questions that have been asked by prospective employers about anthropology; and then once on the job, up to ten different questions that have come from colleagues, teammates, clients and/or the public.*

FINDINGS

Question 1: Finding a job

Figure 1 displays the 227 responses for finding a job sorted into 16 distinct categories. As is often the case with Delphi data, certain responses predominated, with others as outliers. The frequency of mention is provided.

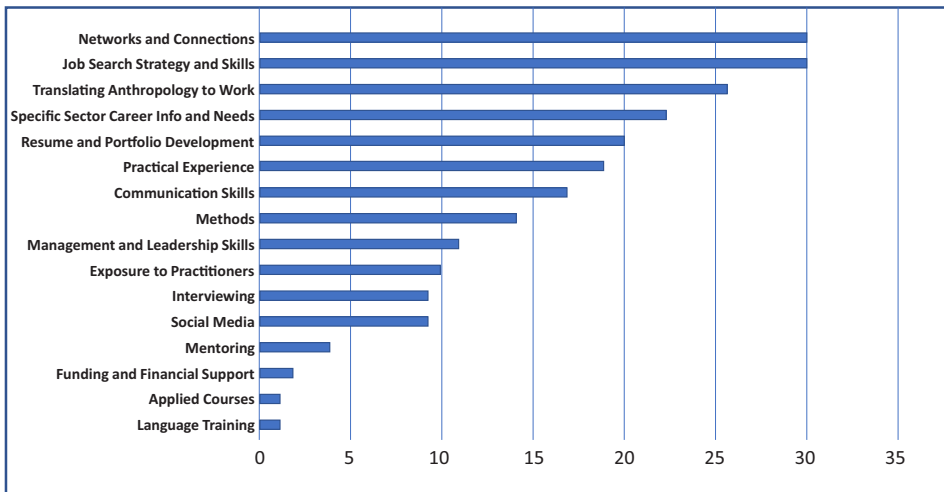


FIGURE 1 Skills and experience mentions for getting a job ($n=227$).

If we look at the top level of responses (i.e., things that were noted 15 times or more), the priority needs are clear. Practitioners want help and guidance in **developing professional networks**. They want **training in job-hunting skills** tailored specifically for careers in the business sector, non-profits, and/or government. **Information on sectors of practice**, along with how those sectors differ from one another, is important. Practitioners want to **learn how to translate their anthropological skills and experience** into the language of diverse workplace settings, to make the case for anthropology's relevance, and to "pitch" themselves to potential employers. They want to **develop resumes** (not academic CVs) which reflect these skills, perspectives, and experiences and which relate to employer expectations. Opportunities for **practical experience** during their program, often in the form of an internship or projects, matters to them. And finally, practitioners want to learn how to **communicate orally, visually and in writing** with diverse professional audiences in persuasive and professional ways.

Question 2: Doing a job

This question asked about doing a job, and what would have been helpful in one's academic program to prepare for being in the workplace (See Figure 2). There were 237 responses, 10 more than for Question 1. Some clear groupings emerged which we divided into 10 categories and provided the frequency of mention. As before, there was a core of robust responses, together with some outliers.

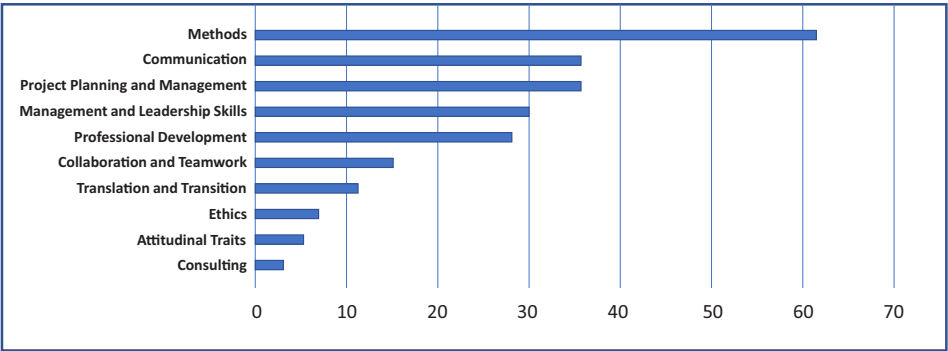


FIGURE 2 Skills and experience mentions for doing a job ($n=237$).

Several points should be noted here. Although some of the earlier categories (i.e., responses to Question 1) re-appear here (notably communication and the translation of anthropology into the workplace), the profile of responses is different. **Methods**, as can be seen, predominates in the responses. **Communication skills** and skills in **project planning and management** also loom large, followed by **management and leadership skills** and **professional development**.

This set of responses seems intuitive. Practitioner accounts of their work often emphasize that they are valued for their methods (i.e., their ability to find things out). Practitioners also often state that success in their jobs depends in large part on being able to explain the value of their approach and their findings to non-anthropologists, many of whom are highly trained quantitative technical experts. Finally, as practitioners have repeatedly told us, much of what they do at work is project-based, requiring both skills in project planning and management, and more broadly, management skills in general.

Question 3: Methods

For the first question on methods, we received a total of 159 responses from 24 people (see Figure 3). The responses fell into three fairly distinct categories.

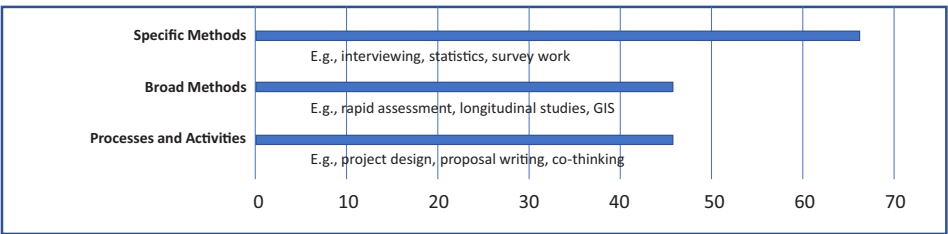


FIGURE 3 Mentions of methods practitioners use ($n=159$).

Practitioners mentioned a wide variety of methods they felt were important for their work. Although some of them were the traditional data collection methods commonly employed by anthropologists in the past (e.g., interviewing, participant observation), others were techniques not commonly taught in anthropology programs. Many of these less common methods could be characterized as emphasizing the visual, the online, and the digital. And in contrast to the more traditional methods, many of them also emphasized speed.

Specific methods

This group of methods, of which there 67 responses, included fairly specific techniques that most older, more traditional anthropologists would be aware of, such as interviewing, statistics, and survey work. Participants suggested a number of newer techniques, however, such as sketching and wireframing, digital ethnography, and video analysis.

Broad methods

This group of general methods included 46 responses, techniques which could be done (and are done) in different ways. “Rapid assessment” is a typical example while longitudinal studies, usability studies, GIS (Geographic Information System), and web-scraping are others.

Processes or activities

The specific methods and the broad methods are almost exclusively centered on “finding things out,” such as through focus groups and market research. Although this category of processes or activities may include a component of data collection, it is really focused on something different: “getting things done.” Most of the 46 responses concerned project design and management, workshops, co-thinking and co-creation, and crafting pitches or proposals to clients.

Summary

The responses sorted themselves into two basic types of methods: methods designed to **find things out**, and methods designed to **get things done**. This last category might not be considered “methods” at all in anthropology programs, but rather processes that involve collections of methods. Nevertheless, the responses we got emphasize that practitioners are engaged in activities related to change.

We have two observations. First, many of the methods mentioned by our respondents are not taught in most anthropology programs. Second, many of the processes or activities for which the methods are seen as useful are also not being taught.

Judging from these responses, there is still a need for what we might term more “traditional methods”—particularly interviewing, participant observation and survey work—but there are quite a few newer approaches which many respondents said they used or needed. These newer methods were overwhelmingly visual, digital, and rapid, often involving online operations as well as face-to-face contact. Given the wide range of different methods, and their rapid evolution in the workplace, it probably makes sense in an academic program to cover the basics and then to teach students how to evaluate, choose, and learn new methods themselves, once they are on the job.

Question 4: What you are asked about anthropology

Figure 4 shows the 141 responses to this question which sorted themselves into three main categories: basic questions of the “what’s that?” type (30 responses); more focused questions about the approaches and methods used by anthropologists (27 responses); and, significantly, questions about how anthropology was going to help people solve a particular problem or accomplish a specific task (68 responses). Another 12 responses concerned personal questions (e.g., “Why did you choose to study anthropology?” “Have you enjoyed your career?”). Finally, respondents indicated in four responses that no one at work cared about anthropology, only about whether they could do the job well.

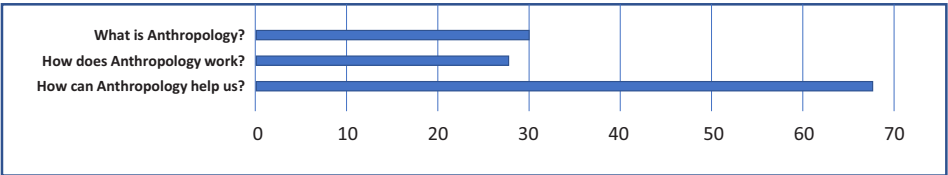


FIGURE 4 Mentions of questions practitioners answer (n=141).

Two obvious patterns arise here. Many people do not know much about anthropology. Additionally, most people in the workplace basically want to know how anthropology is going to be able to help them with their workplace tasks and problems.

Two takeaways also emerge from these findings. First, students need to articulate clearly and concisely the nature and value of their discipline. Second, they need to offer clear and specific examples of how anthropology has made a difference. Employers and clients do not want generalities. Instead, they need specifics on how anthropology can help with their work.

DISCUSSION

Delphi 1

In terms of **finding a job**, the top three attributes missing in academic programs are (1) networking; (2) job search strategies; and (3) the translation of anthropology to the workplace. With a few notable exceptions, these three areas of emphasis are almost entirely missing from anthropology programs. With the exception of a few applied anthropology programs, graduates with bachelor’s, master’s, and PhD degrees do not typically receive the training and experience necessary for bringing anthropology into industry, non-profits, and government and explaining it to clients, supervisors, and co-workers.

To the extent that these attributes are covered in anthropology programs, training is almost always focused on how to get an academic position. Most doctoral students know, or are quickly made aware, of the importance of networks and connections in getting an academic job. They are coached in how to present and explain their research skills and accomplishments to search committees, and how to develop CVs which reflect them. They are also encouraged to have teaching and research assistant experience as part of their graduate program, since both are favorably viewed by academic departments hiring assistant professors.

In their responses to the question of **doing a job**, respondents emphasized several different points, or in a few cases, the same things very differently. “Methods” and “communication” led

the list. Although they both appeared in responses to Question 1, here they were mentioned much more often: twice as often for communication, and about four times more often for methods.

“Methods” in Question 2, as practitioners noted in their responses, encompasses a wide range of techniques, some highly specialized. Most practitioners get their jobs in part because of methods; they are valued because they know how to search and discover insights. For this reason, we decided to make methods one of the focal points of our second-round Delphi.

“Communication” came across in these responses somewhat differently than in Question 1, where it was framed in terms of explaining the value of anthropology to employers and colleagues. The emphasis was on communication with a wider group of people, including clients, colleagues, and other stakeholders. Consequently, we decided to make this a focus of the second round of our Delphi.

Finally, many of the other responses to Question 2 emphasized management skills, and in particular, project planning and implementation. We know that practitioners are almost always involved in change efforts—either to fix something, to improve something, or to create something. Most anthropology training programs do not include this skill set.

It is worth taking a moment to underscore how well these results fit with earlier examinations of academic preparation for anthropological practice. That career preparation is largely lacking is not really news, and has been a frequent finding of previous studies (Aiken, 2020; Brondo et al., 2015; Fiske et al., 2010; Follis & Rogler, 2015; Hawvermale et al., 2021; and Rudd et al., 2008).

These and other studies generally return a fairly consistent list of skills that practitioners say they need, but which are usually lacking in their academic programs. These skills are related to research, management, networking, communication, project management, and job search. In addition, opportunities for teamwork and for an internship/practicum are highly valued. Practitioners also mention the need to learn on the job. Networking seems especially important, given that an exceptionally low percentage of practitioners say that they got assistance from their anthropology program (Fiske et al. 2010; Hawvermale et al. 2021).

Delphi 2

Regarding **methods**, the responses we gathered indicate that practitioners use methods for specific purposes, most of which involve change, improvement, and problem-solving. This orientation to change may seem obvious, but equally obvious is the fact that many of the anthropology programs that teach methods—and not all anthropology programs do—make little effort to link methods to problem-solving action. Although research is an important and necessary part of a practitioner’s skillset, the ability to use the data gathered in planning for change is equally important for many of them. This insight ought to be recognized and supported by those who teach methods.

Our responses also indicate that although traditional methods are still seen as important, a host of newer approaches to data collection have emerged, many of which are digital and/or computer-based and emphasize speed and visualization. Most of these techniques appear not to be taught in anthropology programs.

Instructors confront several problems. In terms of traditional methods, instruction might need to move away from teaching methods solely as a way to produce a thesis or dissertation. Far more useful for students at any level would be to learn to pair the research (or client) problem and workplace constraints to an appropriate set of techniques. For example, a client may not be open to observation at meetings due to proprietary concerns. However, that same

client may support a combination of interviews and advanced ethnographic techniques (e.g., free lists, pile sorts), or an electronic survey followed by a series of focus groups.

As regards newer, emerging methods, more investigation is probably needed to learn more about the types of methods now being used in the workplace. At the same time, we recognize that these newer methods are not necessarily uniform in nature, and that they are developing in many cases far faster than they can be folded into an academic curriculum. It would seem sensible, therefore, to take two actions. First, encourage the development of a regular information pipeline from practice into the academy so that instructors can keep up with recent developments; this idea could be piloted by the Anthropology Career Readiness Network. Second, at the same time, develop ways to teach students to be self-directed learners, so that they can acquire new skills on their own.

Regarding the **anthropology narrative**, the need for practitioners to explain their discipline to other people goes well beyond the elevator pitch. Practitioners need to know their discipline and its characteristics, understand its advantages, and be specific about its usefulness.

People in the workplace, to judge from the Delphi responses, care less about anthropology *per se* than they do about whether an anthropological approach will be helpful in their work. Training students to understand how and why anthropology can contribute to problem-solving—in specific, rather than general or theoretical ways—would enable them to operate more effectively in the workplace.

It would be good, therefore, to ensure that students in a program understand the nature of their discipline and are able to articulate what anthropology is in a clear, concise, and professional manner to other people. They should also be able to explain how anthropology does its work—its approaches, methods, and perspectives—and what kinds of data, insights, and understandings it can generate. Perhaps most importantly, students should be able to provide others with specific examples based on their own or other's experience, including published cases of how anthropology has contributed to problem-solving. Most of the questions coming from the workplace about anthropology relate, in one way or another, to aspects of "getting things done." And this focus, unfortunately, is not something that most academic anthropology programs train students to do.

NEXT STEPS

Questions for reflection

We have presented some preliminary findings from simple surveys, focusing on what was taught to anthropology graduates who became practitioners, and how it related (or not) to their experiences in the workplace. Based on what we learned, instructors teaching in anthropology programs might want to ask themselves these questions:

- How are students trained in career planning? What strategies and skills are taught as part of an academic program which are specifically linked to employment in the public, private, and non-profit sectors?
- How are students trained or taught to think about articulating the value of anthropology to others—clients, employers, or the public? What specific skills, knowledge, and experiences do they bring to the workplace? How are these skills, knowledge, and experiences communicated to prospective employers? How is this teaching updated as changes occur in the workplace?

- What opportunities do students have to develop and use professional networks in business, non-profits, and government before they enter a particular workplace? How are they being trained to build and use those networks?
- Are students being taught to develop professional communication skills, to write and speak for wide audiences, and to use professional communication tools?
- What opportunities exist within an academic program for workplace experience? How are these experiences tied into the broader curriculum, the anthropology program generally, or any co-curricular or extra-curricular activities?
- If methods are part of an academic training program, what sorts of methods are they? How do they relate to the kinds of jobs practitioners are likely to have after graduation?
- How much exposure to practitioners will students in a program have? How does this exposure occur?
- To what extent are students encouraged to develop skills in self-education so that they can take charge of their own professional learning once they have graduated?

Planning and implementing curricular change

Our findings are disturbing, indicating a significant gap between the academic curriculum and the actual requirements of practice. There are many different ways to go about addressing this situation; these decisions will be made at the ground level by individual instructors and individual departments. However, we would like to conclude by offering several sobering observations relating to the actual planning and implementation of curricular change.

The first observation is that there is no overall disciplinary framework for teaching anthropology in general, let alone anthropological practice. Departments construct their curricula based on historical experience, and draw on textbooks from well-known authors to frame their courses. Departments look to individual scholars and other departments for clues as to how to improve, develop, or extend their offerings. Often, any changes come through program reviews, headed by individuals picked by the department itself.

There is even less coherence around what is necessary to prepare an anthropology graduate for a career in the public, private, and non-profit sectors. The ACRN conducted a series of focus groups and discussions around this topic, producing a Career Ready Curriculum tool and a subsequent article (Nolan & Briody, 2023). These materials are intended as an overall guide or roadmap of the types of topics that could go into a curriculum. Departments, and individual instructors, can use elements of the framework to guide their planning, keeping in mind their circumstances and goals. Moreover, these materials do not replace existing content in departmental curricula (e.g., theory, cognate area courses), but rather enhance what is already there in new ways.

The second observation is that most anthropology instructors have little experience with practice, and therefore find it difficult, or risky, to attempt to teach it. Added to this is the fact that in many departments, tenure and promotion policies do not necessarily reward practice-based activities.

A third observation is that anthropologists in the academy communicate primarily with other academics through journal articles, ethnographies, and other scholarly writings. Since the pandemic, more anthropologists have been open to sharing their insights on important issues of the day through media interviews, op-ed articles, and other general-public-friendly modes of dissemination. The anthropology magazine *Sapiens* comes to mind as does the podcast *This Anthro Life*. Yet, with few exceptions, anthropology students are not routinely trained to

speak to or write for members of the general public. One group took notice and developed a web-based training program, [Anthropologists on the Public Stage](#), to build clear, crisp, and confident communicators among us.

Given the extent and array of issues new graduates face in entering the job market, the Anthropology Career Readiness Network has begun producing a set of [instructor tools](#) of how to introduce practice into the curriculum. Two tools come to mind immediately. One involves tapping into [alumni networks](#) and inviting graduates to share their work experiences through an in-person or virtual panel, seminar, or workshop. Another tool entails setting up a [class project](#) for a client—say, a local business, non-profit, or city agency. To date, the Network has worked with instructors and their students on class projects involving seven different bachelor and master's programs; it has plans to continue this form of assistance with other programs in the future.

The Network also has been organizing workshops, panels, and round table discussions at major anthropology meetings on topics pertaining to practice in anthropology programs, many of which are useful for students and job seekers. And, our newest offering, the [Departmental Advisory Initiative](#), is a low-cost way to improve anthropology enrollment. This initiative helps programs define and chart their own next steps as they familiarize themselves with workplace skills, knowledge, and experiences that their students will need. More of all of these programming options are necessary, with the overall goal of making instructors more familiar with aspects of practice and building their capacity to teach career planning techniques in the classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

A qualitative Delphi survey of this kind cannot provide statistically valid information. However, it can and does provide us with a clear sense of what some of the salient questions are surrounding the way anthropology graduates are trained. With few exceptions, anthropology programs have not prepared graduates for practice. We now are beginning to identify some of the specific ways in which we can improve this situation.

Our work with the Delphi has surfaced a variety of areas for further work, including methods and the anthropological narrative. Methods are taught in many, but not all, anthropology programs. The methods which tend to be taught, to judge from this survey's responses, seem to be largely those intended for traditional fieldwork research. Yet, respondents mentioned other, more recent methods which, they said, needed to be taught as well. Many of these methods involved the use of various software packages, video, and GIS. Future investigations might focus on these other specialized, non-traditional methods.

The second issue is the anthropological narrative—the articulation of anthropology's value to people outside the discipline. This point appeared repeatedly in the responses; it also featured prominently in some of the earlier surveys cited. Practitioners note that they need to be able to speak persuasively about the value and relevance of anthropology and its methods to a variety of different audiences—beginning with potential employers, but extending beyond that to include professional colleagues, clients, and the general public.

There is room for guarded optimism as regards the ability and willingness of the discipline to begin to focus on anthropological practice. But one thing in particular ought to be a major cause for alarm. The discipline, by and large, has no easy way of learning from the experience of practitioners, and does not appear to be particularly interested in doing so. Traditionally, anthropology sent its students out into the hinterlands, and used the resulting reports and ethnographies as the raw material for theory-building and the development of methods. This pattern is not being replicated, for the most part, with the experience of practice, and the discipline is the poorer for it.

Because so little attention is paid to the practitioners themselves, their strategies for entering and succeeding in the workplace have little or no impact on how academic training is done. But beyond that, the discipline loses much of the contextual “thick description” of contemporary settings which, traditionally, made it proud. Instead, the academy has emphasized what might be termed “criticism at a distance,” foregoing opportunities to develop insider insights and understandings, as well as solutions to many problems faced in organizations and communities.

Global grand challenges are complex and often daunting, but almost all of them are being addressed, well or badly, by organizations where anthropologists are increasingly present in key roles. The experience of these practitioners should be invaluable to a discipline which prides itself on understanding how human beings make sense of the world and operate within it. To the extent that anthropology chooses not to learn from the experience of its many thousands of practitioners, it risks drifting into irrelevance. We should all be able to agree that anthropology offers essential description, insights, and explanations. It is time to embrace practitioners fully, both to integrate their knowledge into the discipline, and to enhance anthropology’s contribution to the resolution of today and tomorrow’s challenges.

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