

# A CAREER READY CURRICULUM FOR ANTHROPOLOGISTS

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## Abstract

Anthropology has never had an organizing framework or template for teaching an agreed-upon set of courses, a sequence in which those courses should be offered, or the knowledge, skills, and experiences that should be acquired in those courses. Instead, teaching has been left up to individual instructors. Significant changes in the job market for graduates, involving a decrease in academic opportunities and the growth of opportunities

in industry, non-profits, and government, have led to a reconceptualization of how and what we teach to prepare students for successful careers. With that in mind, we draw on recent work by the Anthropology Career Readiness Network, as well as earlier research, to construct a framework for curriculum change focused on bringing issues of practice and application into our teaching. We believe this framework will improve the career readiness of all students, whether they intend to become academics or practitioners.

**Keywords:** practice, application, curriculum

## Background

Anthropology departments are increasingly recognizing the need to address practice in their programs. But the discipline as a whole has no clear template or framework for doing so.

The Anthropology Career Readiness Network has been doing research on the integration of practice in anthropology programs and what practitioners in the field say is necessary for professional preparation. We have also reviewed some of the previous work on what makes an applied program successful; those references appear at the end of this document.

We would like to offer some thoughts here on a possible template for an applied and

practice-oriented curriculum that would also benefit academic job seekers. While our goal is to help instructors and department chairs by providing a framework for what adequate career preparation might look like, it is not our intention to be prescriptive since each anthropology program will develop in its own unique way. Instead, we want to set out those elements, based on our research and that of others, which characterize successful and effective programs. By incorporating these elements into individual coursework as well as program activities, we anticipate a greater emphasis on skill building (e.g., methods, communication) that will enhance the substantive content of anthropology programs.

To begin with, we should repeat something that Erve Chambers said long ago: *good applied anthropology is, first and foremost, good anthropology*. But programs that integrate practice will look somewhat different from traditional anthropology programs. Although anthropologists working in industry, non-profits, and government perform a wide variety of different job functions, they share five key characteristics or value orientations, which set them apart from their academically-based colleagues.

- They are successful in the workplace not only for what they know but for what they can **do** with what they know. Practitioners, in other words, are expected to focus on problems and produce workable **results**.

- They work with and for **clients**—groups and individuals who are willing to pay them for their efforts and who, in turn, are partially responsible for setting the terms and conditions under which the work will be done. These terms often involve short timelines.
- Much of their work is intended to produce **change** and **improvement**. Practitioners work on issues, problems, and challenges of interest and concern to others. Their work is focused not just on research, analysis, and critique but on generating positive solutions and often implementing and/or evaluating those solutions.
- Practitioners usually work in **collaboration** with diverse others, integrating their own work with that of others, including specialists from other disciplines. They disseminate this work in a variety of ways, often without attribution.
- Practitioners must work quickly, cognizant of deadlines, budgets, and quality output. Thus, the value placed on **speed** serves as an important parameter to focus their attention on the problem at hand and develop and implement solutions in a timely fashion.

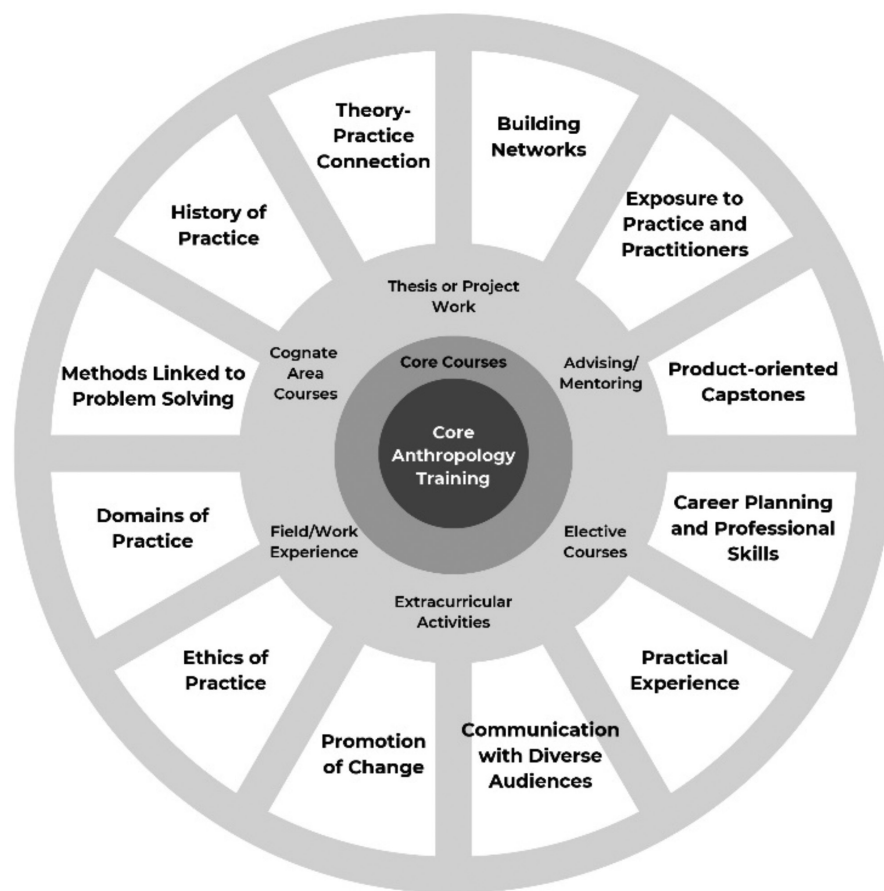
It should be immediately obvious that these five value orientations are quite different from those of many traditionally trained anthropologists, who value knowledge for its own sake, work largely independently on projects of their own choosing, and tend, by and large, to be wary of leading any kind of change process. In contrast, most practitioners are, at one level or another, agents of change.

### Program Elements

Our framework is the result of a long-term effort to understand

Figure 1

*A Career-Ready Curriculum Framework*



what practitioners do and how their academic training contributes to their work. We looked at selected academic programs to understand why and how they have been successful (see, e.g., Briody & Nolan 2011, 2013). We reviewed work by others on aspects of practice and academic training (see, e.g., Fiske et al., 2010; Hawvermale et al., 2021; Nolan, 2001; Price, 2001). We conducted preliminary research on practitioner attitudes toward this training (Nolan et al., 2021, 2022). And we have reflected—including innumerable conversations and interviews with practitioners, employers, and instructors over the years.

A consistent pattern or framework began to emerge from this work. The framework highlights elements of training

seen as helpful for the preparation of practitioners but which were not always, or even often, part of the academic curriculum (see Figure 1). We illustrate our framework using a hub-and-spoke graphic. The hub, or center, contains those elements common to most academic programs in anthropology. The spokes represent those additional elements that we believe are important for practitioner training. None of these additional features is intended to be a replacement for those curricular elements central to anthropology as a discipline. Some of them, however, serve as enhancements, extensions, or improvements on existing aspects of the curriculum. Other elements may be, for some programs, entirely new.

## 1. Theory-Practice Connection

Students need to understand how theory informs practice and how practice helps build theory. They should have an opportunity to see how the continuum between theoretical and practical knowledge works by exploring examples from contemporary practice situations in a variety of contexts.

## 2. History of Practice

It is highly relevant that students know something about how practice has developed up to the present. Understanding the historical roots of practice as well as the various milestones, controversies, and changes that have occurred over the years can help inform their own approaches to their work. Similarly, understanding how these issues have influenced the relationship of practice with the academic side of the discipline enables students and their instructors to place practice in an appropriate context.

## 3. Methods Linked to Problem-Solving

If methods are taught at all, especially analytical methods (e.g., content, statistical), they function primarily as a skill set for dissertation fieldwork. But practitioners use a much wider variety of methods than are taught in most programs. It is not necessary to teach all methods, but it is necessary to teach students how methods relate to problem-solving so that they understand how methods are chosen, how they are used in the field, and how results are used in problem-solving.

## 4. Domains of Practice

Early in their program, students should be exposed to the wide variety of domains in which practitioners work. Such exposure provides them with

an understanding of what they might do with their degree. Within these domains, students should also be introduced to some of the main activities, concerns, and preoccupations of practitioners, as well as some of the more salient issues surrounding their work.

## 5. Ethics of Practice

Ethics is a fundamental part of anthropological training. Yet, ethics discussions within some university departments tend to focus largely on academic concerns and, in particular, on the production of scholarship. Practitioners face other ethical challenges in the workplace, need to make decisions that are as well-informed as possible, and then move on. In the past, such challenges have sometimes been dismissed by academics, although they are shared by others in the workplace who are not anthropologists. It is important, therefore, to bring the ethics of everyday practice into the classroom and to base significant discussion on the experiences of practitioners themselves.

## 6. Promotion of Change

Most departments emphasize theory in their course offerings, but theories of change in communities and organizations are not usually prominent in the curriculum. Students need exposure to how theory and research are linked to plans, programs, and policies and how change efforts are implemented, managed, and assessed.

## 7. Communication with Diverse Audiences

In most of our programs, little emphasis is given to communication with non-anthropologists. Attention should be given to (1) building skills in writing, speaking, and presenting to diverse audiences; (2) explaining anthropology to other people; and (3) getting ideas publicized through

op-eds, broadcast interviews, blogs, and social media.

## 8. Practical Experience

Students need opportunities in organizations or communities to practice and extend their skills. Internships and class projects for clients function as “real jobs” or project-based work, which can appear on a resume and produce letters of recommendation from non-academic supervisors.

## 9. Career Planning and Professional Skills

Students need opportunities to learn how to plan a career in line with their values, interests, and skills. They also need opportunities to learn a range of work-related competencies not unique to anthropology, such as teamwork, cross-disciplinary collaboration, project or program management, mediation and conflict management, professional networking, resume preparation, and job-hunting.

## 10. Product-oriented Capstones

Students should have the opportunity to produce something more than a library research paper as their capstone or thesis project. In this way, they will have the opportunity to put their learning to work to produce a tangible result, which becomes part of their professional experience.

## 11. Exposure to Practice and Practitioners

Bringing practitioners into the program and introducing them to students is an excellent way to help prepare students for practice careers. There are many ways to build in these experiences, ranging from Zoom or Teams sessions to classroom lectures, visiting scholar appointments,

Figure 2

*A Continuum of Training Options*

and/or internship placements. The precise way such integration is done will depend on each program.

## 12. Building Networks

Opportunities should exist for students to begin to build their own professional networks with practitioners, their peers, and others as part of their academic program. Instructors have much to offer students on how to network, given their field research experiences. Teaching students how to build networks while they are still in school will help with their job search.

### Formats

Every anthropology department is different, and each department presents a distinctive context for education and training. A department wishing to integrate any of the elements listed above into its curriculum can do so in any number of ways based on its preferences, capabilities, and opportunities. As such, this framework is easily scalable. Modules can be designed, and training can be integrated into existing courses. Individual dedicated courses can be prepared. Several courses can be linked together. Some of the possibilities that the Anthropology Career Readiness Network research turned up are outlined in the continuum shown in Figure 2.

As one moves along the continuum, the level of effort

increases, as does the complexity of the activities. It is relatively straightforward to design a module to go inside an existing course. By contrast, creating an internship program or a community outreach project is much more involved and may require the engagement of multiple instructors, as well as administrative support. Some departments will choose to incorporate most, if not all, of the framework's elements; others will choose only one or two components. Having a comprehensive set of elements—a framework—to support their choices provides a much-needed measure of coherence for the overall program, as well as serving as a guide to future planning and development.

Whatever the level of program development, strong applied programs do three things:

1. **Keep track** of where their graduates go;
2. **Build alumni networks** with them; and
3. **Create a departmental vision or strategy** for future program development.

These practices enable the department to keep up to date with developments in the field. They also give students a chance to interact with alumni practitioners and get advice and assistance from them in the form of contacts, mentoring, and internships, among others.

## Final Thoughts

This framework is merely an outline, a set of suggestions derived from departmental experience and the experience of practitioners. Not all departments will have the energy, time, and resources to implement everything at once, but many departments can make a start with even limited resources and then develop their program over time. The time is ripe for departments to seek resources to implement this framework, particularly as universities are increasingly identifying and evaluating career readiness among their students.

Here are a few final suggestions from the experience of others:

- Be aware of where your graduates go, and get your alumni involved in your program.
- Be clear-eyed about the potential obstacles in your way. Fix whatever ones you can, and design around the others. Academic change is always difficult. Some of the Network's one-page tools for instructors may be helpful such as: [<https://anthrocareerready.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ACRN-Dealing-with-Opposing-Forces-02102023.pdf>].
- Bring as many people into the effort as possible, including members of the senior administration. The more allies you have, the better.



- Try not to have practice as a separate and isolated part of your program; infuse it with as much of the department's activities as you can.
- Build in sustainability wherever possible, as suggested in this tool for instructors: [<https://anthrocareerready.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ACRN-Anthro-Program-Options-02102023.pdf>]. Experience has shown that without continued support, departmental innovations tend to disappear with time as faculty cycle through.

Your departmental and institutional contexts are unique, and your attempts to bring practice into your curriculum can take full account of that context. One important virtue of implementing this framework is that it can be equally helpful to those students who intend to follow the academic path since it will help them learn about practice and teach it. In the words of Wendell Berry, you are "solving for pattern"—situating solutions within the surrounding environment in such a way that wider connections are not ignored.

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### Some Background Sources on the Design of Applied Programs

Here are a few of the more salient publications relating to the

training of anthropology students for careers in practice.

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