

Business Anthropology on the Road

National Association for the Practice of Anthropology

Robert J. Morais and Elizabeth K. Briody May 28, 2019

An opportunity for departments and students

In practice and scholarship, the application of anthropology in and on business has seen substantial growth in recent years. Beyond the industries that employ anthropologists and the scholarly studies, the sheer number of people engaged in the field appears to be increasing exponentially. Of particular note, based upon registrations, the May 2019 Global Business Anthropology Summit will have more than twice the number of attendees as the 2018 Summit.

Business anthropology education

With so much activity emanating from business anthropology, it is surprising that so few anthropology departments in the United States offer courses on the topic, or any preparation at all for students who want to enter industry or engage in other organizational work. Among the notable exceptions are the University of North Texas, Wayne State University, Clemson University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Minnesota. Interestingly, business anthropology is taught in some sociology departments, at Duke University, for example, as well as in business schools at universities such as Fordham, Columbia, Notre Dame, and the University of South Carolina. Ethnography, essentially decoupled from anthropology, is taught in business schools and design programs, as well as in other academic departments. Recognizing the need to assess the state of business anthropology education, a project is underway with the American Anthropological Association's Education, Research and Professional Development team to produce metrics on business anthropology in anthropology departments, including courses and student career paths.

Taking business anthropology on the road

To bolster the number of US-based anthropology departments capable of teaching business anthropology and preparing their students for business careers as well as organizational careers generally, a new initiative, Business Anthropology on the Road, was designed in 2018. Under the auspices of the Consortium of Practicing and Applied Anthropology (COPAA), Business Anthropology on the Road aims to help fill a gap in anthropology departments lacking dedicated courses on business anthropology and/or with limited ability to guide students in pursuing careers outside the academy. This initiative addresses these needs through on-site seminars and workshops on various components of business anthropology and on career preparation, including the process of seeking internships and employment in jobs that appreciate anthropological training.

The initiative has a dual purpose: (1) provide training in business anthropology to faculty who want to learn about it, teach it, and develop expertise in preparing students for the job market and (2) offer job market preparation for students who want to apply their anthropological knowledge, methods, and skills in business and/or in other organizational settings after graduation. Faculty emerge from the sessions with a plan-of-action for teaching business anthropology and creating practice-oriented opportunities, while students gain skills in preparing for and presenting themselves in the job market.

The pilot program



Business Anthropology on the Road participants at the University of Memphis. Elizabeth K. Briody

A three-phase pilot of Business Anthropology on the Road was conducted late 2018 through early 2019. The purpose was to assess the perceived value of the initiative and optimize the content. Two business anthropologists (Robert Morais and Elizabeth K. Briody) customized seminars and workshops in collaboration with anthropology departmental leadership. The domains covered included marketing/advertising, organizational culture and change, and design. The seminars provided an overview of the field of business anthropology, while the workshops focused on assistance in course preparation, small-group engagement with real case studies, and strategies for marketing anthropological skills in the workplace. Selection of the pilot institutions was done to represent three academic segments:

- Large, established, applied anthropology program without a business anthropology focus: University of Memphis, September 20–21, 2018
- Small or combined department with no active program but an interest in business anthropology: Monmouth University, October 11, 2018
- Elite anthropology department with at least one faculty member friendly to business anthropology: University of Pennsylvania, February 18–19, 2019

Anthropologists who liaised with the team leaders responded to the invitation to participate in the pilot with enthusiasm; administrative support for the events was superb, and attendance was robust. The pilot institutions covered travel-related expenses for the presenters; no other costs were incurred. Attendee evaluations revealed that interactive discussions with the presenters and active/experiential learning opportunities, such as team problem solving, resulted in especially strong interest and engagement.

Increasing business anthropology road trips

Recruitment for additional Business Anthropology on the Road team leaders is underway, and we invite interested business anthropologists to contact us to learn more. We also encourage anthropology departments open to business anthropology to contact us for information about hosting Business Anthropology on the Road. Modest fees and reimbursement for travel expenses will be involved as the

program moves ahead, but we believe that faculty and students will receive a high return on the investment.

Career opportunities in business anthropology for anthropology graduates at all levels will likely increase. This is the time for anthropology departments to prepare their faculty and their students for the road ahead.

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