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# Applying Anthropology

FROM THE SERIES: [Academic Precarity in American Anthropology: A Forum](#)Photo by [Tim Sackton](#), licensed under [CC BY SA](#).By [Sarah Cunningham](#), [Drew Gerkey](#), [Kenneth Maes](#), [Bryan Tilt](#), [Emily Yates-Doerr](#), and [Shaozeng Zhang](#)

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We hope to add to recent discussions of academic precarity in American anthropology our story of a modest, but nonetheless significant, success in growing a graduate program in applied anthropology. [David Platzer and Anne Allison's essay](#) notes that applied anthropological work has been stigmatized within our discipline. Yet this stigmatizing attitude is by no means universal. It is our hunch that opposition to applied work is not as widespread these days as it was in previous decades, and that this new openness correlates with the expansion of career opportunities for applied anthropologists in recent years. We offer an overview of our graduate program as part of a collective effort to continue to rewrite and rethink this stigma.

In 1992, the Department of Anthropology at Oregon State University responded to student demand and started a master's program in applied anthropology. In 2006, we launched our doctoral program, aimed at filling a need for training social scientists to work in government, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors. As faculty at a public research university, our mandate has always been to serve our students. These students typically arrive with a deeply held commitment to social justice; they are drawn to anthropology because of how our field challenges biases in scientific knowledge and ethnonationalist thought alike. Still, most of our students do not have the financial stability to gamble on a career path. State schools, like ours, commonly attract first-generation college students who may be supporting families. Many of them are children of immigrants or immigrants themselves. Our students are passionate and brilliant; they would make great professors if this was their goal. But for many, they endure enough risk living in the United States as people of color, noncisnormative persons, or academic mothers. Other students, undeterred by the risks of academic precarity, simply want to work in the trenches of social change, practicing anthropology more directly than they can from a classroom.

We have designed our graduate program with the aim that those who enroll do not graduate overwhelmed by debt. We generally admit students only if we can offer them a paid Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) position over two years (for a master's) or 4 years (for a PhD). GTA positions come with union-protected benefits, including full tuition remission, a modest stipend, and health insurance (encompassing dental!) in exchange for teaching roughly twelve hours a week. GTAs receive teacher training tailored to both the brick-and-mortar and online classroom. We are able to extend GTA positions to about thirty-five students per term, including newly matriculating students (cohorts comprise eight to fifteen students each year). Some students self-fund through prestigious fellowships and

scholarships, including National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships and Fulbright awards as well as internal University Provost awards and Diversity Advancement Fellowships. To date, the program has awarded several hundred master's degrees and 10 PhDs.

At Oregon State, applied anthropology is not its own subfield, but entails a commitment to producing knowledge with real-world engagements (including, but not limited to, the real-world impacts of pedagogy). We admit applicants from all anthropological subfields, and so we have as many applied cultural anthropologists in our program as we do applied archaeologists. We offer training in feminist theory, critical biosocial health, translational competency, environmental sustainability, and science and technology studies without losing sight of the need for employment at the end of the degree. Here are some ways we have oriented our curriculum to meet applied needs:

- From the outset, we urge graduate students to envision multiple career pathways, within and outside the academy, and to take concrete steps down these paths as they progress through our programs. (Developing a skill set for work outside the academy is far easier as a student with a tuition remission than it is for a recent graduate, who may need to self-fund further training.)
- We train students to translate their research findings across multiple, diverse audiences using both writing and new media technologies to do so.
- Our courses examine what we call *cultures of policy*, with the aim of helping students to better understand how to work effectively within applied spaces.
- We review the dark histories of ethics in U.S. applied anthropology and prepare our students to maintain our disciplinary codes in applied settings.
- All students participate in a residency or internship, in which they receive on-the-job training—something that is increasingly attractive to employers.
- We work to constantly reimagine the role and work of “the anthropologist” (note that, in applied work, anthropologists often work in teams) and to cultivate innovative and experimental methodologies.

We also offer specialized certificate and training programs that give our students domain-specific skills and perspectives. For example, we offer a minor certificate in Food in Culture and Social Justice, which prepares students to be effective mobilizers of social change around food issues. Many students elect to complete an intensive “Difference, Power, and

Discrimination” training, in which they learn how to advocate for the inclusion of diverse perspectives in classrooms and workplaces while refusing “diversity” as a vacuous buzzword. Our archaeology students receive training in cultural resource management, which prepares them to advise public, private, and tribal organizations and to design research strategies for protecting cultural resources in the current political climate.

Because of entrenched racist and heteronormative political structures in the United States as well as changing economic winds, many of our students will not escape precarity—even once they are well-employed. For this reason, our conversations about applied anthropology are not only about securing income at the end of a degree. We also help our students to develop skills that are needed to encourage widespread and enduring social change. We hope that they will become critical thinkers, activists for justice, and radical visionaries. It strikes us as strange (and perhaps an incorrect assessment of anthropology today) that faculty in a field whose strength lies in bridging theory and practice would still prefer to hold apart critical inquiry and its application. Some of our luminaries worked hard to build these bridges; Margaret Mead, for example, served as president of the Society for Applied Anthropology, and Katherine Dunham, though never recognized with a degree for her graduate research, worked tirelessly to bring anthropology to a broad, public audience. We imagine that most anthropology professors feel rewarded when their graduate students find themselves in the kind of meaningfully engaged and socially relevant work that an anthropology degree can prepare them for—even or perhaps *especially* when this work falls outside the formal academy.

Our program, now twenty-six years in the running (twelve for the PhD), offers a counterpoint to the perspective articulated by others in this forum that anthropology graduate students are primarily trained to be professors. Our graduates go on to careers in the nonprofit sector; government agencies; tribal groups around the country; and the private sector. Several recent graduates have also opted for academic career paths and have secured full-time professorial positions both on and off the tenure track. Our graduate student funding resources are expanding, the graduate student union is strong, our enrollment is increasing, and our students secure satisfying employment upon graduation.

It is the case that state schools have often been leaders of both critical theory and the momentum for social justice that comes along with it; recall that the first ethnic studies program in the United States began at San Francisco State University, the first women’s

studies program began at San Diego State University, and so on. We speculate that there may be many other anthropology departments like ours that are already having conversations about how best to train students to do the work of translating anthropologists' critical, careful thinking to a range of audiences not based in the university. We hope that their voices, and their labor, are not forgotten in this conversation.

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