



Who Majors in Anthropology, and Why?

Field Notes on the Profession

Daniel Ginsberg

November 3, 2017

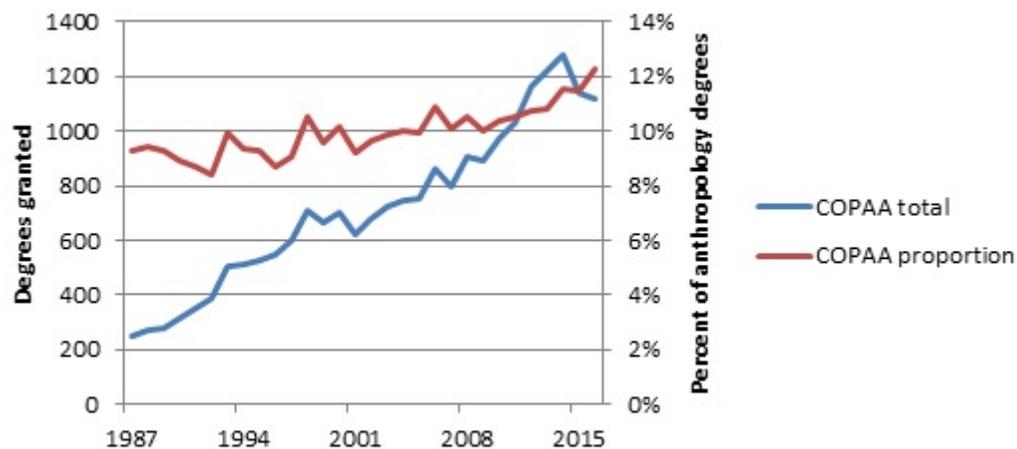
First, the bad news: After decades of solid growth, US anthropology bachelor's degree completions peaked at 11,270 in 2013 and have decreased sharply since then. The year 2016 saw only 9,135 anthropology degrees granted, the fewest since 2009. This is not due to programs shutting down—the number of colleges and universities granting four-year degrees in anthropology is higher than ever—but instead reflects decreasing enrollments within departments. Only half of US anthropology departments graduated 13 or more undergraduates last year, the fewest since 2007.

The social sciences in general, and anthropology in particular, are stronger when students understand that their degree will prepare them for a meaningful, respectable career.

There are some bright spots, though. Alongside the broader decline, the number of anthropology graduates of color has continued to increase, with a record 3,219 bachelor's degrees granted in 2016 to students who did not identify as white, accounting for over 35 percent of the total. Another success story is in applied anthropology programs: The [31 US departments that belong to the Consortium of Practicing and Applied Anthropology \(COPAA\)](#) account for an increasing proportion of all anthropology bachelor's degrees, reaching a record 12.3 percent in 2016.

The recent AAA report [Trends in Anthropology Bachelor's Degrees: A Review of Federal Data](#) expands on these trends. The goal of this report was to make observations at the national level, allowing us to identify common challenges and collaborate on strategies for promoting the value of an anthropology education. In this spirit, I'll offer a few thoughts on the recent decline, and highlight some ways in which the Association is responding.

The year 2013, of course, would be the graduation year of students who had applied to four-year programs during the 2008 financial crisis. Since the crash, we've seen declines not just in anthropology but also in many social science disciplines including history, sociology, and political science, while psychology, economics, and criminology have continued to grow. This observation, together with the continuing growth of COPAA, suggests that the social sciences in general, and anthropology in particular, are stronger when students understand that their degree will prepare them for a meaningful, respectable career. Anecdotal evidence seems to support this, as I've heard from faculty that establishing a new medical or business anthropology track may help to reverse the negative trend.



Degrees granted by COPAA Member Departments. NCES, IPEDS Collections, Completion Survey Component, 2003-2015 (Final) and 2016 (Provisional).

Not every department will be able to initiate new programs, but the core competencies of our discipline are themselves useful workplace skills. To make that case to non-anthropologists, though, we'll need to state exactly what those competencies are. Many departments have already done this, and AAA interns Palmyra Jackson and Karina Noguerras recently completed [a cross-departmental review](#), a sort of qualitative meta-analysis that identifies common trends across departments' undergraduate learning outcomes. These include not only liberal-arts skills such as critical thinking and writing but also anthropological perspectives such as cultural relativism and reflexivity, along with research practices including ethics as well as methodology. The goal of their project is to demonstrate to prospective anthropology majors and their families—as well as prospective employers of anthropology graduates—the value of the education that we provide.

Learning goals are important, but what about careers? When students ask us how anthropology can be useful in the workplace, we too often struggle to come up with specific examples, but as anthropologists we know that general principles are often best illustrated through particular stories.

For this reason, we recently approached a group of department chairs and asked them for the names of standout alumni who had gone on to do something other than anthropology. As of this writing, we are reaching out to those individuals and asking how their anthropology major led them to where they are today. While a given student may not see their own future self in these profiles, it may help them to think about how they might use their anthropology training after graduation.

Promoting the value of an anthropology degree is an ongoing conversation, and it is repeated anew with each cohort of undergraduates. To foster dialogue among departments, the Department Chairs' Breakfast at this year's AAA Annual Meeting will focus on career issues, featuring representatives of COPAA, the [Business Anthropology Matters! Initiative](#) , and [the American Historical Association's Career Diversity Initiative](#). To share your perspective on undergraduate career preparation as well as PhD career diversity, I encourage you to join us.

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Filiz Scandrett says:

November 12, 2017 at 3:16 am

I have bachelor and master's degree in Anthropology. I don't work on my field , I love to but I can't found a job. It is frustrating.

[Reply](#)

Daniel Ginsberg says:

November 15, 2017 at 11:31 am

When people ask me this question, the first thing I typically say is to ask what you mean by "work in your field." There are so many different ways of doing anthropology, and so many different workplaces where you might find something rewarding, but most anthropology departments could do better at helping their students to identify these opportunities. For example, a lot of your assigned readings report on research done in faraway locations, so many students default to thinking about development anthropology without recognizing all the ways they might be an anthropologist in their home country. Here are a few resources to help you think through your own situation:

The AAA website has [a page about careers in anthropology](#)

There are also some useful resources on the [NAPA website](#), including an "AnthroJob of the Week" to get you thinking

Jason Antrosio, who commented below, has [a good roundup of resources](#) on his blog

To learn more about applications in the private sector, check out

<http://www.businessanthro.com>

There are also a few books on this: *What Anthropologists Do* by Veronica Strang is a good introduction, and both *Designing an Anthropology Career* (Sherylyn Briller and Amy Goldmacher) and *The Anthropology Graduate's Guide* (Carol Ellick and Joe Watkins) give specific exercises you can do to find your own career direction

It may take a little creativity, but the jobs are out there. Good luck!

[Reply](#)

Jason Antrosio says:
November 3, 2017 at 10:50 am

Thank you for this important update. I've linked to it in a post I wrote in 2012 about the [Anthropology Major](#). As I say there, it is probably not a coincidence that the years 2011-2013 saw corporate and political attacks on the anthropology major as the "worst college major" for your career. However, anthropology's increasing appeal to a more diverse student body is encouraging.

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