Society for Applied Anthropology Annual Meetings 2013  

The Ideal Preparation for Admission to MA and PhD Programs in Applied Anthropology: A Roundtable Discussion with Graduate Faculty Members

Special session, March 21, 2013  Organized by Faith R. Warner (Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania) and Lisa Henry (University of North Texas); Discussants: DeeAnne Wymer; Gabrielle Vielhaeur (Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania)

Participant Institutions: University of South Florida (Nancy Romero-Daza); University of North Texas (Doug Henry); IUPUI (Wendy Vogt); University of Kansas (Don Stull); Oregon State University (Nancy Rosenberger); Northern Arizona University (Robert Trotter); University of Memphis (Linda Bennett; Keri Brondo). Other participants included undergraduate students, graduate students, other university faculty – approximately 60 individuals participated in the roundtable discussion.

Graduate program representatives were asked to comment on the following questions (given the time constraints of the session the comments and responses to the questions largely focused on the first, fourth, and fifth questions although comments were generated for all of the questions).

1. What should undergraduate faculty do to enhance their programs in order to better prepare students to be accepted into your programs?
2. Do you prefer that students enter your graduate programs directly after completing their undergraduate degrees?
3. How important are GREs and GPAs and how do your programs assess these measures?
4. What type of practical experience makes for a stronger applicant to your program?
5. How much value do you place on an applicant’s record on research experience, presentations at conferences, and publications?
6. How much value do you place on undergraduate coursework in programs outside of anthropology?

The remarks made by the participants tended to be quite similar and are summarized below.

Responses to opening of session and Question #1 (What should undergraduate faculty do to enhance their programs in order to better prepare students to be accepted into your programs?):

“APPLICANTS SHOULD HAVE...GOOD THEORY, GOOD METHODS, GOOD WRITING, PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE, & STATISTICS”
Students applying for graduate programs should have a good foundation in the discipline of anthropology (the classic ‘four-field’ approach of archaeology, biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, and linguistics). Many representatives, however, noted that linguistics is less relevant today, and not as important as the first three. Students were warned by several graduate school representatives that if there were gaps in their undergraduate preparation, such as a lack of statistics, languages, and linguistics, that they would be required to take courses in the subjects at the graduate level. Several schools welcomed majors outside anthropology, but did warn that it may mean taking courses in graduate school to close the gap.

All individuals agreed that they expect their applicants to have had a strong background in anthropological theory, as much training in methods as possible, and practical experience (tangible research/practical experience specifically within their chosen specialization or graduate interest).

“Theory and writing are skill sets with a value that cannot be underestimated”
“Good four-field training is essential”
“The ability to apply theory and critical thinking snfd writing skills are the best indicators of success in graduate school.”

A number of individuals also noted (and was agreed by all), that the graduate applicant should exhibit good writing skills. This should especially be revealed in a “strong personal statement” – several also noted that they require a writing sample from applicants.

“Polish those skills as much as possible”

“Practical experience” differs according to the specialization focus of the student and can include fieldschools, internships, laboratory experiences, and employment and volunteer activities.

A good personal statement is important (participants warned not to start with “how I discovered anthropology” but rather focus on how close of a fit you [the student] have to their program and/or the specializations of their faculty).

“The first job is to write a proposal in which they connect theory to methods with a well thought out research design”

Some noted a baseline GPA requirement of 3.2 or 3.5.

- “We have found that the GPA is good evidence that predicts how well a student will perform in graduate school and therefore selective attention is paid to the GPA”
- “We have found that the correlation between GREs and success in graduate school is zero and therefore do not require GREs.”
- “The GPA and the GRE are threshold criteria, everything else is much more important”
- “High GREs and a high GPA mean that we will pay close attention to the student’s portfolio…a low verbal score, for example, is a red flag.”
- “We require the GRE, but we take it with a grain of salt.”
- “We have a love/hate attitude towards GREs. Our university requires them for funding selection, especially fellowships, so they do matter.”
- "We require both and consider them favorably if they are very high.”
Letters of reference from anthropology faculty members are quite important. Several felt the letters were far more important than the GPA or GRE score.

Many representatives noted that a potential applicant must fit the overall program to which they are applying. The applicant must be able to work under faculty who share their research interests and specializations. A student who does not “fit” the department may waste time and resources in an application that cannot be accepted.

- “We turn away many qualified applicants because they do not show that they know the program very well.”
- “Graduate applicants should do their homework on the departments where they intend to apply.”
- “Become familiar with the information in the AAA Guide to Anthropology Departments”
- “Applicant consideration rises and falls on their personal statements”.

Robert Trotter from the University of Northern Arizona disagreed somewhat with their idea of fit, stating that their program tries to accommodate the interests of the applicant, rather than the opposite.

Applicants were urged to contact graduate faculty members directly to discuss their application and to introduce themselves to potential advisors and committee members. They are also urged to visit to the campus to speak with faculty and graduate students directly. However, students should ensure that their e-mails or letters are professional, as well as their attire and behavior during visits. Contacting potential graduate faculty members can be quite advantageous, but a negative first impression can be highly detrimental. Professionalism and preparedness were stressed as essential in making contact with potential graduate schools and faculty members.

Response to Question #3 (How important are GREs and GPAs and how do your programs assess these measures?):

Most individuals responded that, in reality, the GREs are not overly important, but that GRE scores are used by the larger university admission personnel to help determine which students receive funding for fellowships.

Some of the graduate programs do require GRE scores and some specializations (such as public health), consider high GRE scores important. Not all programs require a GRE score.

Most department representatives responded that they utilize a minimum threshold for GPAs (such as a 3.0 or 3.2 or 3.5), but that they also look at particular courses and the pattern of grades, for example, did the student’s grades improve over time and did that person do well
in theory and methods courses?

Responses to Question #2 (Do you prefer that students enter your graduate programs directly after completing their undergraduate degrees?):

✔ Students were warned that if they do not attend graduate school immediately after graduation, that they engage in activities that promote anthropological experience, such as the Peace Corps, study abroad, volunteer activities, or employment directly related to their long terms professional goals and graduate study.

✔ The responses to this question were variable, depending on the program, specialization, and the individual student.

✔ Waiting to apply to a graduate program makes sense if the individual is doing something that “is relevant life experience” to what they wish to do as a graduate student.
  ○ “We love late bloomers!”

In response to a question about whether students should let the graduate programs know that they require financial assistance, most of the representatives felt that it was appropriate for the student to indeed indicate financial need. Discussion over the issue of financial aid revealed quite a lot of variability in terms of what is available to students. For the most part, students should expect to pay at least a part of their graduate school expenses, even if their receive assistantships or fellowships.

- Some programs find funding for all students
- For some programs, funding priority is given to their doctoral students
- Many noted that tuition waivers are common
- Several noted that students received TA (teaching assistant) and RA (research assistant) awards and that prior teaching experience, such as acting as undergraduate assistants is desirable.

Ideal applicants should be “brilliant, committed, experienced, and engaged.” Finally, graduate programs are actively seeking a diverse applicant body, so one area that undergraduate programs can help is to increase the diversity of their own anthropology student population.
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experienced, engaged...”

*Robert Trotter*

*University of Northern*

*Arizona*