



CAREER DEVELOPMENT

ANTHROPOLOGY WORKS

A monthly column from the AAA Committee on Practicing, Applied and Public Interest Anthropology (CoPAPIA)

Student Perspectives on the Viability of an Applied Master's Degree

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Master's degree programs in anthropology, including applied anthropology, have been expanding since the 1970s and there are now over 25 anthropology master's degree programs in the US and Canada with an applied focus. However, incomplete data exist on both the exact number of such programs and the number of degrees they grant to students in each subfield. As part of this special *Anthropology News* issue on the student experience, we raise the hopefully constructive, if not heretical, question: How viable is a master's degree in anthropology with an applied focus for pursuing a meaningful and financially sustainable career?



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We hope to stimulate a dialogue with the 13,000 students who have received master's degrees since 2000 (from both applied and more "traditional" programs) and with their departments.

According to AAA statistics tracking master's degrees, the number awarded in an academic year increased from 26 in 1948 to 1,709 in 2007, with peaks in the mid-1970s and for every year since 2000. Master's degrees represented 52% of the graduate degrees awarded in 1948. In contrast, for each five year period since 1970, master's degrees have represented at least 70% of the graduate degrees granted (with 1985 an exception at 68%). The most recent data, 2007, show there were 699 PhDs, 1,709 master's degrees and 10,276 bachelor's degrees awarded. Given the significant number of master's graduates that our departments produce, including those from applied programs, we argue that too little attention has been devoted to under-

standing (1) their post-graduate experience; (2) the kinds of careers they have established; and (3) their reflections on their graduate education and the knowledge, experience and skills they obtained as master's students.

Beginning in the 1970s, another factor entered students' decision-making about pursuing master's degrees: the growth of new and re-focused degrees in applied anthropology. Most applied programs have stressed specific areas of expertise, such as archaeology, business, cultural resource management, economic development and impact, education, environment, forensics, cultural heritage, medicine, urban studies, or a combination of such areas of research and practice. The creation of the Consortium of Practicing and Applied Anthropology Programs (www.copaa.info) in 2000 reflects the notable expansion of applied anthropology programs, especially at the master's level.

In this column, we raise several questions: How well are master's programs and degrees serving the educational and employment needs of students graduating from them? Are alumni obtaining meaningful jobs that draw upon their anthropological training, and are they pleased with their career trajectories? How might master's programs be adjusted to make them even more effective? Do master's degrees meet the employment needs of alumni or do they desire additional skills and education?

As a first step to initiate this discussion, we contacted a dozen master's graduates with degrees from several applied anthropology programs and discuss here the feedback of three who are working in different applied areas: historic preservation and archaeology, housing and community development, and homeless services and issues. We posed two questions: (a) What has been your experience in finding and keeping a job with your master's degree in applied anthropology? and (b) What has been your experience in retaining your identity as an anthropologist throughout your career?

Janne Filsrand (MA from U Memphis, 2001) is director of operations at the Hawthorne Area Community Council in Minneapolis, MN. She has had her own consulting firm since graduating with her master's and has been successful

in community development project management. **Jack Garrett** (MA from CSU Long Beach, 2007) works as a program manager with the Homeless Coalition in Hillsborough County, FL. Building upon his internship and employment with a homeless coalition in Long Beach, he moved with his wife to Florida and found a job with homeless services in Tampa. **Erika Martin-Seibert** (MAA from U Maryland, 1998), who worked in historical archaeology during her graduate studies, has parlayed this into a job as the archaeologist for the National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmarks Program in Washington DC. We thank them for their comments.

All three alumni have had positive post-degree experience obtaining and retaining positions using their applied anthropology education and expertise. Because we are drawing upon only a few cases, we will not attempt to make generalizations. However, it is clear that these graduates have found certain aspects of their master's experiences to be especially important in their careers: internships and practica, learning and using qualitative and quantitative methodological skills, and maintaining contact with other anthropologists as their careers develop. These were mentioned by all three. As for their continuing identity as an anthropologist, they had positive things to report. Martin-Seibert notes, "I have had much success in retaining my identity as an anthropologist...I am often called upon to help in these evaluations because of my degrees in anthropology." Garrett reports, "My experience retaining my identity as an anthropologist has been fairly easy. I have met other applied anthropologists working as service providers, [in] NGOs and in government positions." Filsrand writes, "I think of myself as an anthropologist...For me, it doesn't feel like a struggle to maintain that identity."

Filsrand, Garrett and Martin-Seibert are among successful MA graduates in applied anthropology in terms of reaching career goals and maintaining a connection to the discipline. We now ask these questions of all master's alumni who have graduated from applied anthropology programs: How have your careers developed? Are you involved in professional anthropology meetings or local practitioner organizations? What feedback can you give about your educational experience and what lessons have you learned to pass on to current graduate students? Please submit your comments to CoPAPIA through Linda Bennett (lbennett@memphis.edu) or Shirley Fiske (sjfiske@yahoo.com), or submit a letter to *Anthropology News* about your experience. ■

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