

Anthropology and the Professions

The comparative and international basis of anthropological knowledge adds an important perspective to most other fields of study and thus makes anthropology an excellent major.

Medicine. Recently, medical schools have begun to reorganize their curricula to include international and multicultural issues. Medical school admissions committees are increasingly expressing their preference for students whose background includes the social sciences, and not merely the "hard" sciences, and for those who have gained cross-cultural experience through study abroad or volunteer work.

Anthropology's relevance to medicine can be seen most clearly in biological anthropology, the study of our evolutionary and genetic background. Some biological anthropologists study human anatomy and physiology and describe how humans respond and adapt physically to their cultural and natural environments. Others work in forensics. In 1993, anthropology faculty of The George Washington University headed the team that identified the victims of the fire at the Branch Davidian compound in Texas. Anthropological training is also useful in understanding cultural definitions of illness and health and in improving the delivery of medical and other services to poorly served groups. For example, the Urban League employs anthropologists to investigate pregnancy and pregnancy outcomes in Harlem.

Law and Business. Law and business schools follow the same pattern as medical schools, in part because leaders in these fields have become more aware of the value of international perspectives and of the need to communicate across cultural and national boundaries. Students with anthropology training have increased success in graduate programs and the job market. In recent years, cultural anthropologists have been instrumental in helping former Eastern Bloc countries to overhaul their legal and economic systems. Moreover, as business leaders discover "corporate culture," anthropologists have been hired to participate in systems analysis, human resources, and personnel management. One of the most promising areas of business for those trained in anthropology is advertising, where anthropologists have been hired for such projects as promoting breast-feeding in eastern Africa and educating newly enfranchised South Africans about elections.

Law-oriented work for anthropologists includes forensics (e.g., identifying criminals from physical traces) and intercultural work (e.g., enabling refugees to make use of the legal system). Physical anthropologists do applied anthropometry -- the practical use of information about the size, shape, and anatomy of the human body -- in the automotive and aerospace industries and in the military.

Education. Anthropology is an excellent major for students interested in a teaching career. Primary, secondary, and higher educational programs are now organizing multicultural curricula. These new curricula represent a greater diversity of cultures, and therefore of intellectual and artistic perspectives, than ever before. Archaeology enriches the perspectives of teachers of history by illuminating everyday life in the past, while biological anthropology contributes to the teaching of the life and earth sciences. Furthermore, as the makeup of our classrooms becomes more representative of the new global community in which we live, anthropology becomes of ever greater usefulness to classroom teachers and guidance counselors.

Museums and Cultural Resource Management. Anthropology is a part of all major natural history and historical museums, and of numerous zoos. As museums strive to more accurately and sensitively represent the cultures of the past and present, anthropologists work as curators, archivists, field researchers, conservators, and information managers. Zoos often need anthropologists with training in primate biology. Anthropologists working in the area of cultural resource management seek to protect and preserve cultural environments, especially those threatened by the impact of modern technology and environmental degradation.

Other Professions. Students who major in anthropology enter careers in architecture and urban planning, where they draw on their knowledge of the relationships among culture, space, and geography; in journalism, where writers must comprehend values and meanings very different from their own and interpret them for a diverse, often international, audience; in social work and clinical psychology, where anthropologically trained clinicians recognize that emotions and family structures vary across cultures, classes, and communities; in wildlife conservation, where sensitivity to cultural differences may be vital to preserving endangered species; in economic development, where anthropologists working for U.S. AID, the World Bank, the IMF, and other organizations strive to help people improve their lives. Other anthropologists use their knowledge of culture to write novels. The best-selling authors Michael Crichton and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. were anthropology majors in college.