A DELPHI SURVEY OF PRACTITIONERS

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Why This Report?

The overall goal of the Career Readiness Commission is to improve the quality of the academic training that anthropology students receive. This is particularly important for those students who seek careers in business, non-profits, and government agencies as practitioners.

Anthropology graduates have been entering practice for decades now. By most estimates, there are now more practitioners than academics, working in an increasing variety of jobs and sectors. How well prepared are they for practice work? What is the connection between their academic preparation and job success?

Previous studies of anthropological practitioners have given us some insight into these questions. Probably the most comprehensive survey of practitioners is that first carried out by CoPAPIA (Fiske et al. 2010) and revised a decade later (Hawvermale et al. 2021). Other useful summaries are provided by Ginsberg (2016), Aiken (2020) and Collins (2020).

The good news is that, to an increasing extent, some US anthropology programs are beginning to take notice of the opportunities and promises presented by practice. A few programs have painstakingly built programs devoted largely or wholly to the training of practitioners, and they lead the discipline in this regard.

The bad news is that most departments have not responded to the needs of intending practitioners in any significant way. Most anthropology departments are remarkably siloed, separated not only from other professional programs on their own campus, but at the same time, largely unconnected with – and unaware of – developments in other programs on other campuses. As a result, innovation and the hard-won lessons of experience learned in one program do not travel well.

A key problem in training anthropology students to become practitioners is the fact that few US faculty members have much personal experience with practice. Many of them have gone straight from graduate school into tenure-track or adjunct positions. Follis and Rogler (2015: 104) comment:

> ". . . senior anthropologists who mentor the next generation have very limited knowledge of opportunities beyond teaching and research, and consequently little ability (and possibly interest) to advise on alternative careers."

One result, obviously, is that if instructors are interested in teaching their students about application and practice, they are often doing so from a weak experiential base. And some instructors may be disinclined to enter an arena where they have little or no expertise, where there is no obvious or easy way to gain that expertise, and few institutional incentives to do so.

The Commission seeks to address this problem in a straightforward way, by using the experience of practitioners to build capacity among instructors, which, if successful, will improve training for all students.

Although several studies mentioned here have explored the issue of practitioner preparedness, there is still work to be done to develop a fuller picture of what improvements in anthropological training might be made.

Anthropological Practitioners → Anthropology Instructors → Anthropology Students →
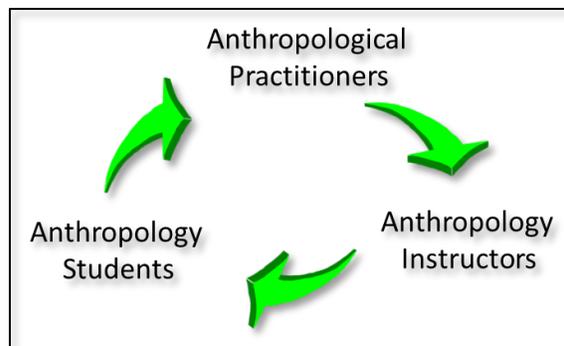
We decided to explore the question of deficiencies in training, by asking practitioners themselves. At this stage of our work, the Commission is engaged in what might be termed "rapid assessment." Our group decided that a Delphi survey of practitioners was a good way to begin to find out about how training relates to the realities of practice.

The Delphi Technique

The Delphi technique is a relatively quick and simple way of charting unknown territory (see Delp 1977, Hsu & Sandford 2007, and Linstone & Turoff 1975 for descriptions). It is qualitative in nature, designed to pull together diverse viewpoints and experiences to construct a preliminary map of an issue, domain or challenge, in order to determine what salient features it has. It is, therefore, a technique of discovery, rather than of verification.

The success of Delphi depends largely on identifying a small number of domain experts, and focusing their responses on a small number of questions. It is not designed to be the final, definitive word regarding a research problem. Rather, it is the initial phase in what may very well be a longer and more complex investigation. But until investigators have a clear idea of what the salient questions are with regard to an issue, more qualitative techniques like surveys or structured interviews are likely to be less informative than they could be.

Our intention was to collect information from practitioners about what was missing in their academic programs which would have been useful to them in practice. We wanted to let practitioners respond in their own words, rather than checking off questionnaire boxes. Finally, we wanted to develop insight that would allow us to chart our next steps and expand our understanding of how and why academic training might be strengthened.

Participants

Because Delphi relies on expert informed opinion, it is important to choose people who (a) are knowledgeable; (b) understand the purpose of the survey; and (c) are willing to participate. We queried the members of our working group for names of likely candidates, and eventually settled on a list of just under 100 possible respondents. They were all younger practitioners, with degrees from US universities, who had been active in their jobs for several years. We then pared that group down to 40 possible candidates, focusing on full-time practitioners with degrees from US universities.

We contacted these 40 anthropologists to see if they would be willing to participate. Thirty-seven responded affirmatively, and of these, 34 returned completed surveys. Of the 34 respondents, 20 are female, and 14 are male. In terms of academic background, 3 have a bachelor's degree, 18 have the

master's, and 13 have doctorates. We asked respondents to state how many years it had been since their last degree in anthropology. Twelve had been in practice for 1-5 years, 16 had been in practice for between 6 and 10 years, and 6 had been in practice for 11 years or more.

What We Asked Them

We asked everyone two questions:

2) *In terms of equipping you to **find your job** in practice, what specific things would have been helpful for you to have learned as part of your academic program? Please write down up to 10 specific things, using one- or two-word descriptors.*

2) *In terms of **being able to do your job** in a successful and satisfactory manner, what specific things would have been helpful for you to have learned as part of your academic program? Please write down up to 10 specific things, using one- or two-word descriptors.*

We received 227 responses to Question 1, and 237 responses to Question 2. The responses were analyzed separately.

Responses to Question 1:

Question 1 asked about finding a job, and what would have been helpful in one's academic program. The 227 responses sorted themselves into 16 distinct categories. As is often the case with Delphi data, certain responses predominated, with others as outliers. The table below gives the categories of response, as well as the frequency of mention.

Frequency Counts: Question 1, Getting a Job (n=227)
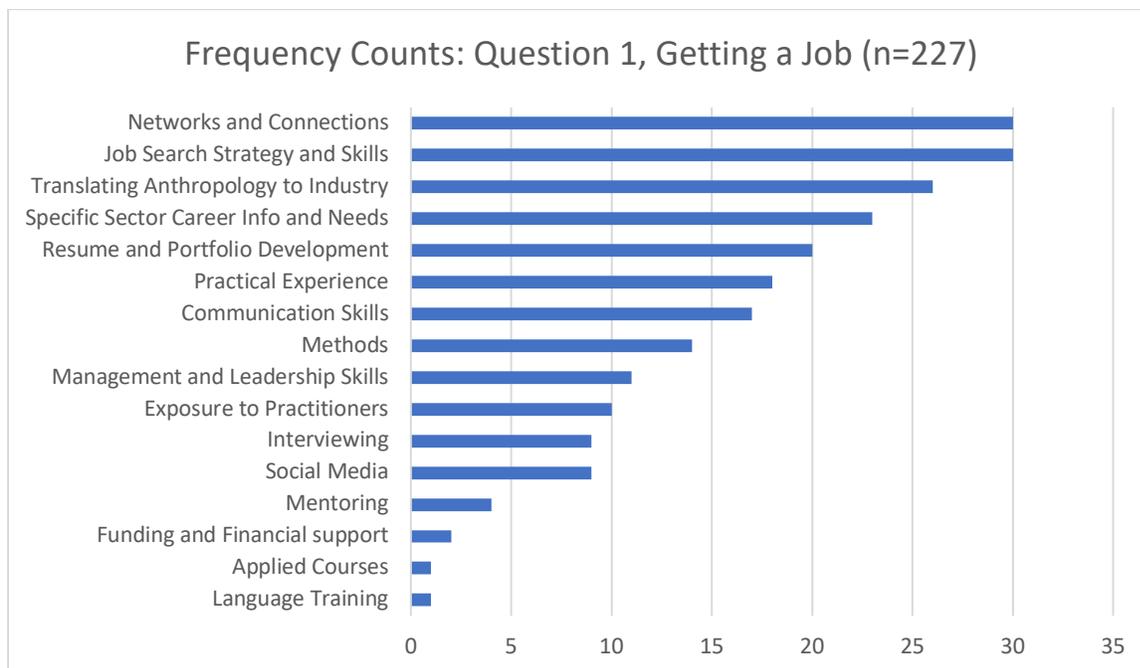
If we look at the top level of responses (i.e., things that were noted 15 times or more), the priority needs are clear. Practitioners want help and guidance in developing professional networks. They want training in job-hunting skills tailored specifically for careers in the business sector, non-profits, and/or government. They want information about what various sectors of practice are like, and how they differ from one another. They want to learn how to translate their anthropological skills and experience into

the language of diverse workplace settings, to make the case for anthropology, and to "pitch" themselves to potential employers. They want to develop resumes which reflect these skills, perspectives, and experiences and which relate to employer expectations, rather than being an academic CV. They want opportunties for extramural practical experience during their program, often in the form of an internship or projects. And finally, they want to learn how to communicate orally, visually and in writing with diverse professional audiences in persuasive and professional ways.

Responses to Question 2:

Question 2 asked about doing a job, and what would have been helpful in one's academic program to prepare for the workplace. There were 237 responses, 10 more than for Question 1. Some clear groupings emerged which we divided into 10 categories. As before, there was a core of robust responses, together with some outliers.

The table below gives the categories of response, as well as the frequency of mention.

Frequency Counts, Question 2: Doing a Job (n = 237)
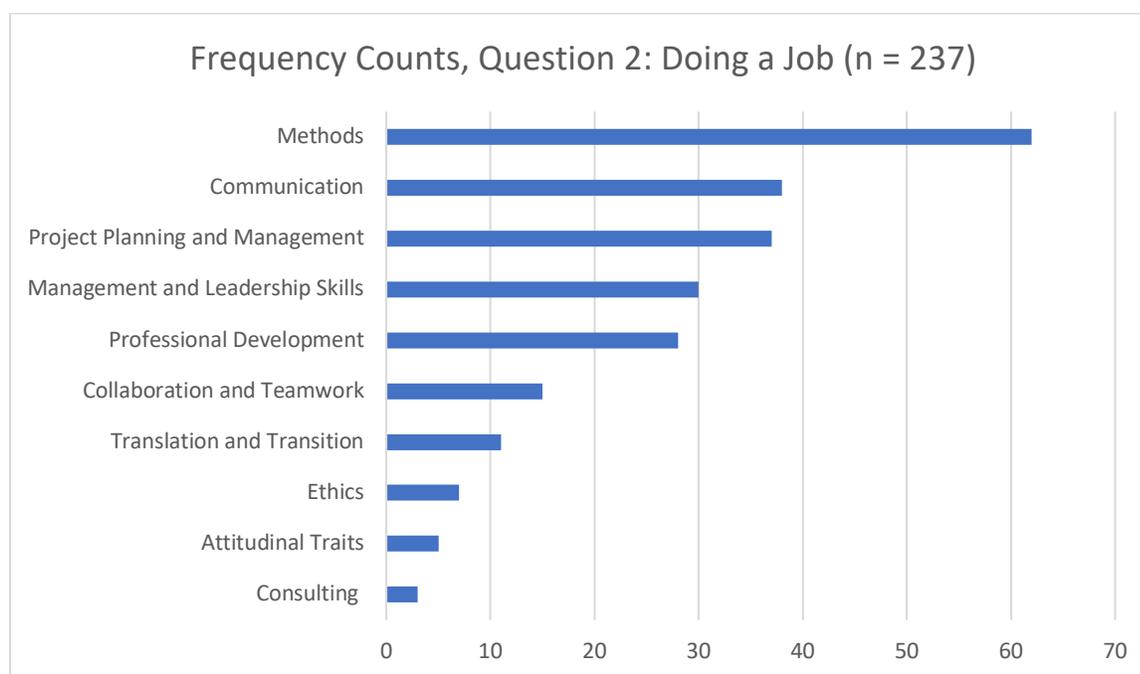
Several points should be noted here. Although some of the earlier categories (i.e., responses to Question 1) re-appear here (notably communication and the translation of anthropology into the workplace), the profile of responses is quite different. Methods, as can be seen, predominates in the responses. Communication skills and skills in project planning and management also loom large, followed by management and leadership skills and professional development.

This set of responses seems quite intuitive. Practitioner accounts of their work often emphasize that they are valued for their methods – i.e., their ability to find things out. Practitioners also often state that success in their jobs depends in large part on being able to explain the value of their approach and their findings to non-anthropologists, many of whom are highly trained quantitative technical experts. Finally – and again, as practitioners have repeatedly told us – much of what they do at work is project-based, requiring both skills in project planning and management, and more broadly, management skills in general.

Discussion

In terms of **finding a job**, the top three attributes missing in academic programs were 1) networking; 2) job search strategies; and 3) the translation of anthropology to the workplace.

With a few notable exceptions, these three areas of emphasis are missing from our graduate programs. To the extent that they are covered at all, training is almost always focused on how to get an academic position. Most graduate students know – or are quickly made aware – of the importance of networks and connections in getting an academic job. They are coached in how to present and explain their research skills and accomplishments to search committees, and how to develop CVs which reflect them. They are also encouraged to have teaching and research assistant experience as part of their graduate program, since both are favorably viewed by academic departments hiring assistant professors.

In their responses to the question of **doing a job**, respondents emphasized different points – or in a few cases, the same things very differently. "Methods" and "communication" led the list. Although they both appeared in responses to Question 1, here they were mentioned much more often – twice as often for communication, and about four times more often for methods.

"Methods" in Question 2 encompasses a wide range of techniques, some highly specialized. Most practitioners get their jobs in part because of methods; they are valued because they know how to search and discover insights. The Commission intends to explore the topic of methods in more depth, with a follow-up survey.

"Communication" came across in these responses somewhat differently than in Question 1, where it was framed in terms of explaining the value of anthropology to employers and colleagues. Here, the emphasis was on communication with a wider group of people, including clients, colleagues, and other stakeholders. The Commission also plans to investigate this topic in more detail.

Finally, many of the other responses to Question 2 focused on management skills, and in particular, project planning and implementation. We know that practitioners are almost always involved in change efforts – either to fix something, to improve something, or to create something. Most of our graduate training programs do not include this skill set.

It is worth taking a moment to underscore how well these results fit with earlier examinations of academic preparation for anthropological practice. That academic preparation is largely lacking is not really news and has been a frequent finding of previous studies (Brondo et al. 2015, Follis & Rogler 2015, Rudd et al. 2008, Aiken 2020, Fiske et al. 2010, and Hawvermale et al. 2021).

These and other studies generally return a fairly consistent list of skills that practitioners say they need, but which are usually lacking in their academic programs. These skills are related to research, management, networking, communication, project management, and job search. In addition, opportunities for teamwork and for an internship/practicum are highly valued. Practitioners also mention the need to learn on the job. Networking seems especially important, given that an exceptionally low percentage of practitioners say that they got assistance from their college program (Fiske et al. 2010, Hawvermale et al. 2021).

Questions Arising

A qualitative Delphi survey of this kind cannot provide statistically valid information, but it can – and does – provide us with a clear sense of what some of the salient questions are surrounding the way our

graduates are trained for practice. Based on what we learned from this survey, instructors teaching in anthropology programs might want to ask themselves these questions:

> *How are students trained in career planning, particularly if they intend to be practitioners? What strategies and skills are taught as part of an academic program which are specifically linked to employment in the public, private, and non-profit sectors?*

> *How are students trained or taught to think about articulating the value of anthropology to others – clients, employers, or the public? What specific skills, knowledge, and experiences do they bring to the workplace? How are these skills, knowledge, and experiences communicated to prospective employers? How is this information updated as changes occur in the workplace?*

> *What opportunities do students have to develop and use professional networks in business, non-profits, and government? How are they being trained to build and use those networks?*

> *Are students in a program being taught to develop professional communication skills, to write and speak for wide audiences, and to use professional communication tools?*

> *What opportunities exist within an academic program for workplace experience? How is this experience tied into the broader curriculum, the anthropology program generally, or any co-curricular or extra-curricular activities?*

> *If methods are part of an academic training program, what sorts of methods are they? How do they relate to the kinds of jobs practitioners are likely to have after graduation?*

> *How much exposure to practitioners will students in a program have? How does this exposure occur?*

> *To what extent are students encouraged to develop skills in self-education so that they can take charge of their own professional learning once they have graduated?*

What's Next for the Commission?

The current survey has identified some of what seems to be missing in academic training, but there is more to be done. In particular, our working group has identified two issues, both arising from the current findings, that we would like to explore further.

The first of these issues is methods. "Methods" are taught in many, but not all, anthropology graduate programs. The methods which tend to be taught, to judge from this survey's responses, seem to be largely those intended for traditional fieldwork research. Respondents to this survey, however, mentioned other, more "modern" methods which, they said, needed to be taught as well. Many of these methods involved the use of various software packages, video, and GIS. It would be very helpful to know more about these other specialized, non-traditional methods.

The second issue is the articulation of anthropology's value to people outside the discipline. This point came up repeatedly in our responses and featured prominently in some of the earlier surveys cited. Practitioners note that they need to speak persuasively about the value of anthropology and its methods to a variety of different audiences, beginning with potential employers, but extending beyond that to include professional colleagues, clients, and the general public.

We intend to do a second round of the Delphi, focusing on these two questions. With methods, our aim is to understand the type and variety of methods in use in workplaces today, which practitioners are expected to be able to employ in their work. Some of these methods are likely to be highly specific, but

others may not be, leading to the question of whether they should be included in academic training programs.

With the articulation of anthropology, we are particularly interested in how practitioners themselves have crafted narratives about their discipline in response to the situations they encounter in the workplace. What common themes might there be? What specific responses have worked well in certain situations? What might instructors and students learn from practitioner experiences?

When we have completed the second round of the Delphi, we will be issuing a second report summarizing its findings.

In the months to come, we intend to focus on finding ways to bring these results to bear on the task of improving academic training. This effort will probably be easier said than done. After all, the deficiencies in training have been known for some time, but little has been done to improve the situation (some applied anthropology programs excepted).

The Commission will explore various ways to improve the preparation of those anthropologists who intend to enter practice. Some of the effort will focus on the academy, but the rest will concentrate on building capacity for professional exchange and development outside established academic structures.

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