Networking into a Design Research Career

Personal background and reflection on my education:

The decisions backing an individual choice to pursue a degree in anthropology are about as diverse as the careers in which graduates find themselves. I decided to study anthropology at Oregon State University for a few reasons, the first being that I had an innate curiosity about humanity that I just had to dig into. I began at OSU as a fisheries and wildlife science major but found out after my first fieldwork class that something wasn't working for me. Collecting samples of poop from elk in a local wildlife refuge felt like the opposite of what I was looking for in higher education. Anthropology drew me after a few years in limbo because of its focus on the identification of humanity and the diversity of human experiences. Another classmate in my capstone career development class, who's planning on pursuing an entirely different career than I, captured my predicament perfectly one day in class. To paraphrase: "I come from a really small community and graduating high school class. Most of the people in my community either stayed home after high school and worked or went into the local industry. It was always important to me, from early in my schooling, that I stand out from that crowd; that I demonstrate my innate difference and openness to the rest of the world, outside of this rural place." Coming from a town with a population of around five hundred, her statement felt like words of my own.

The second reason was that it was the most practical choice after a floundering first few years of college. I couldn't afford to make an attempt to transfer to another institution and I'd completed all of my core curriculum by the time I felt I was ready for what higher education demanded. I had a timeframe I wanted to stick to, and I was firm about that, so staying at OSU was the best way to make sure that was fulfilled. This is not to say that my education at OSU wasn't fulfilling in and of itself; indeed, it was. The point of this decision statement is to say that studying anthropology at OSU – a land grant institution with well-known forestry and engineering departments – isn't the typical first choice for students who want to pursue

an education in the arts, humanities or social sciences.

Studying anthropology at OSU has helped me tremendously in my preparation for a professional career. I've gained organizational and critical thinking skills that I've realized are invaluable in any facet of the workforce. I can write, converse and communicate effectively with anyone I might encounter; and as an anthropologist, I've developed a unique perspective when it comes to problem-solving, with an adaptability that has already allowed me to learn about, and work effectively with those who I might not understand right away. I've gained a respect for, as well as a broad and deep understanding of what culture actually is; how it's more than how we appear and what we do, but it's a force with centrifugal momentum that molds individuals and groups who continuously shape and recreate it. I'm unable to view the differences between myself and others with different values and beliefs as a barrier to cooperation and understanding; these differences are what make interaction and cooperation wholesome and worthwhile. I've developed the sensitivity to look for the subtle and meaningful nuances of culture, both in individual people and in broader contexts. I've developed a contemporary and holistic understanding of diversity; how it encompasses cultural identity and ethnic background, yet scopes even further into personal identity; and I understand the tremendous value that diverse perspectives contribute to the world's natural, social and economic systems. I feel confident in my ability to work alongside a range of different people both professionally and culturally, to understand and adapt to differences, and create harmony in collaboration; this kind of perspective is useful especially in an increasingly multicultural and globalized world.

With my double degree in sustainability, I've gained an appreciation for more than just the cultural and societal aspects of humanity. The three core tenets of sustainability–the social, economic, and environmental–further indoctrinate the holism that anthropology seeks to instill in its students, but in a pragmatic sense for the twenty-first century; human impacts on ecosystems are driving severe changes to the world we inhabit, shaping the way every organization and society must think and operate.

All these skills have been learned alongside the practice of collecting and recording cultural and behavioral information. I've learned the ethnographic method of analyzing and presenting details in meaningful and understandable ways and relating quality data to larger and more impactful issues. With the ability to think in terms of systems and "the larger picture," I've noticed myself often critically examining not just subjects

at hand, but questions being asked about subjects: who is asking the questions, and why? Who am I presenting my information to, and how might it be received?

Career path, development and criticisms:

What career these skills and perspectives have prepared me for is still yet to be fully determined. Being a graduate in the COVID-19 era, it'd be fallacious to leave out the impact the pandemic had on my educational and career path. Opportunities and notions that once had momentum were stripped, and a network of connections that relied on interpersonal communication followed suit. In the before times, I was looking ahead to graduate programs in public policy and international relations. After the pandemic grasped the last two years of my undergraduate programs, those options began to sound less and less appealing to me.

I'm currently tailoring my experiences, skills and interests for a hopeful career in design research. Having a keen interest in art, culture, design of all kinds, and aesthetics–one that has never subsided throughout my life–working in a design industry with like-minded and creative people feels to me like a career that would be a great fit. Design and innovation companies, marketing firms and even architecture firms, are all companies who work with people and design for people. They're increasingly investing in human-centered product development research. Applied anthropology in the design industries has grown as a legitimate domain of work and opportunities to break into these industries are out there, if you can get your foot in the door.

Networking has been the catalyst for me in the decision to charge forward in my search for a career in design research. My one to two-year goal: get an internship or entry-level position at a design innovation company, and tack on some experience applying my education in this domain, all while traveling the world with my laptop and notebook working vineyard harvests. My five-year goal: be part of a creative team at a design and innovation firm, doing qualitative research; be in a position of career security, or with enough experience to feel confident about finding work.

If there's one thing that I've learned during the pandemic, it's that online networking is very real. As a skeptic of some of the effects of contemporary social media, and someone who strictly uses Instagram for the

photography aspect, having to go fully virtual was infuriating. Real life interpersonal communication is my strong suit. My social media is private, and prior to COVID, I had a neglected LinkedIn account, garnering a few measly emails a year in my @oregonstate.edu inbox. During COVID I decided to embrace LinkedIn just to see what happened. My prior understanding of the platform was that it was used mainly by people working in finance and other fields uninteresting to me. To my surprise, LinkedIn happened to be utilized by tons of people working in applied anthropology and just about everything else I was curious about.

LinkedIn is a resource that I've used daily since succumbing to the new normal. It's not something that I regret, either. It's very similar to other social media platforms in that I can search up just about any company and any person but has a tangible professional etiquette that leaves no room for doom scrolling, allowing me to use it as a serious piece of my career development. The networking platform "OSU Connections," created to connect recent graduates with OSU alumni who have established professional careers, is still in its development phases and has yet to offer me or anyone I know a legitimate connection to the job force. Especially compared to LinkedIn, it's not been worth spending my time on in my attempts to build a network.

LinkedIn has given me access to the world of applied anthropology and helped me understand more about what professional roles my skillset has the potential to fit into. I wonder what might have happened had I known about careers in applied anthropology before my last academic year at OSU… but with that being said, I'll list some resources that I never quite utilized, namely the American Anthropological Association and other professional associations in anthropology, which I'm sure could have provided some connections of some kind over the years.

One thing I wish my education had been capable of providing me is a larger network of connections and a visible scope of the career possibilities that anthropology students have. The anthropology department at OSU feels disconnected from the rest of campus; a characteristic that I've read is common among anthropology programs around the country, operating with a focus on inward departmental maintenance, lacking funding, and inadvertently neglecting contemporary changes and developments in anthropology happening outside. Applied qualitative research can be done in so many of the domains that exist right here on our campus, making me wonder why our department doesn't have some focus on harboring interdisciplinary collaborations for

interested undergraduate students. Although not the focus of my curiosity during my first few years in the program, this kind of experience and collaboration is what I crave today, and what I wish I had in some form beyond a term paper for my methodology classes.

Other wishes and wants include some organizational classes focusing on time management, organizational skills, and courses focused on "designing one's life." Such classes, I've heard from peers, exist within design innovation and other college of business (which I could never have been more disinterested in being part of) majors, yet in no format for our major. Organizational skills and path visualization are skills that any student would benefit from learning, not just business students!