

Who Moved My Watering Hole?

Digging Wells in a Professional Drought

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Ask any trader: every situation has potential winners and losers, and fortunes have been made when market values drop. Ask any engineer: necessity is the mother of invention, and some of the most successful new technologies have been created during hard times. There's no denying the pain of our current recession. The crisis continues to damage capitalist economies worldwide the way a prolonged drought withers agricultural communities. Yet amid such gloom, it's helpful to adopt an optimistic outlook in scouting for opportunities.

As a business anthropologist, I'm often asked to review projects and identify artifacts of value (ideas, processes, talented people) that can be put to use constructively in the future. Lately, many anthropology colleagues have been subjecting our own discipline to a similar scrutiny. In seeking new directions and opportunities for our field, I suggest focusing on how our four-field body of knowledge provides a unique set of insights, methods and values not available through other social sciences, and how our research encompasses training in real-world skills such as project management, fundraising, team leadership, data analysis and software implementation. Here I propose action items for academic departments, professional organizations and individuals, with the goal of developing public awareness about anthropology, and promoting its utility in diverse contexts.

Academic Departments and Professional Organizations

Create more interdisciplinary courses, programs and degrees. Leaders of our professional associations should expand alliances with other groups (representing various industries and occupations) while a parallel initiative occurs on campus. To prioritize development efforts, an anthropology department representative might conduct a survey of students who are enrolled in anthropology courses but majoring in other subjects, and vice versa, to see where the most overlap already exists. Department chairs and senior faculty from other areas could be invited to brainstorm with their anthropology colleagues about mutually beneficial additions to curricula.

Invest in research methods training and offer public courses. Anthropology's qualitative and quantitative research methods are an undervalued resource and students' future employment prospects are enhanced by greater investment in methods training. Presently, NSF sponsors several intensive full-time methodology "boot camps" for PhD students held during academic vacations. With leadership from AAA, support from NSF, and guidance from industry, these intensive methodology courses

could be expanded and replicated. They could be made available not only to undergraduates and continuing education students, but also to working people through corporate training programs and classes for the general public.

Develop relationships with business and industry. Both faculty and students can become more personally proactive in demonstrating the value of anthropology to commercial enterprises. One strategy might be to identify top employers within a reasonable commuting distance of campus and to discuss with them opportunities for faculty consulting engagements or student internships. Developing such relationships can be beneficial for creating future employment opportunities within those firms and their larger industries. While anthropologists have earned recognition in market and consumer research and usability engineering, our expertise is also of value in fields such as business analysis, quality assurance, risk management and strategic planning.

Encourage research among business and virtual communities. We should devote more effort and resources to educating students in how to study business and industry, as well as virtual communities who have no face-to-face interaction. During the past decade, anthropologists have published an increasing number of studies on investment bankers, securities traders, software engineers, and other powerful groups within private enterprise. These projects must manage logistical issues, including background checks, drug tests, and securing ID badges. Researchers may be bound by confidentiality agreements, non-disclosure rules, and intellectual property constraints that require challenging negotiation and ethical consideration. Research on virtual communities such as Facebook, Second Life and online dating services entails different logistical challenges, including acquiring technological expertise, cultivating rapport with subjects without face-to-face interaction, and verifying validity of responses. Nevertheless, the insights these types of work have produced have been worth the effort.

Individuals

Encourage professors to consider the real-world applications of course topics. Students can help foster a more practical perspective in the classroom by asking questions such as: How could we apply what we've learned to our relationships with co-workers, neighbors and family? What sorts of problems could we help solve using what we've learned? Who in our community would benefit from learning what we've discussed? What tasks could we perform better using what we've learned? In what occupations and roles could we apply what we've learned?

Identify how anthropological expertise helped solve a problem on the job. For many anthropology alumni, their official roles and daily to-do lists bear little resemblance to their

former coursework or research projects. Their identity as anthropologists may be obscured by a more businesslike title. Yet it's likely that at some point the knowledge and skills of an anthropologist have guided them in resolving work-related issues. No matter what the context might be, these occasions provide opportunities to explain anthropology to colleagues, supervisors and clients, which might promote the future hiring of additional anthropology graduates. We can't know when the current hiring drought will end. Like all groups impacted by dramatic change, anthropologists will do all we can to help each other adapt and survive in this challenging economic climate.



Patricia Ensworth is a business anthropologist who has managed software projects at global financial services firms. She is the author of The Accidental Project Manager (2001), and her essays have appeared in Salon, CIO and Natural History. She joined AAA's Committee on Practicing, Applied and Public Interest Anthropology in 2008.

2010 Alfred Kidder Award

Call for Nominations

The Alfred Vincent Kidder Award for Eminence in the Field of American Archaeology is given every two years to an outstanding archaeologist specializing in the archaeology of the Americas. The award is given alternately to specialists in Mesoamerican archaeology and the archaeology of the Southwestern US, regions central to the pioneering work of AV Kidder. The award is presented by the AAA but managed by the Archeology Division (AD). We are now seeking nominations for a specialist in the Southwestern US for the 2010 award.

A nomination should consist of: (1) a detailed letter of nomination, explicitly describing the qualifications and accomplishments of the nominee; (2) a complete CV for the nominee; (3) up to two additional supporting letters (optional, with no more than two considered).

Send nomination materials to AD Secretary James Skibo (jmskibo@ilstu.edu) as pdf files attached to an email with the subject line "Kidder Nomination." Although email is preferred, you may send paper copies via surface mail to: Prof James Skibo, Anthropology Program, Campus Box 4640, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4640. Nomination materials will be forwarded to the Kidder Award committee.

The deadline for nominations is February 10, 2010. If you have questions, contact AD President Janet Levy at jlevy@uncc.edu or 704/687-4282. The award will be presented at the 2010 AAA Annual Meeting in New Orleans.