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Report on the graduate program, years 2-4
Department of Anthropology

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Introduction

Discipline-specific requirements for the Ph.D. in anthropology must be mentioned at the outset as crucial context for assessing the program's effectiveness during students' 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years.

Save for a few whose work is done in the laboratory, anthropologists do research in distant, sometimes exotic locations: "the field." Fieldwork is a defining stage in students' professional development: a crucial means for gathering material for a dissertation and, in some cases, for years of writing and teaching; an important point of entry into the larger community of professionals; a place to develop techniques for gathering knowledge which are unique in the academy.

From the first review of application dossiers to completion of degrees, faculty evaluate (potential) students with an eye to their fieldwork preparation, execution, and analysis. Students for their part recognize that from beginning to end fieldwork is focal in their programs of study.

For this report's purposes, then, it is important to situate years 2-4 in a normative trajectory used to plan Ph.D. programs in three broad stages:

- Years 1-2: Classes, qualifying exams, and collateral preparation (gaining language competences, site visits, etc.) for fieldwork.
- Years 3-4: Working as teaching fellows, preparing dissertation prospectuses and funding proposals, and departing for fieldwork (optimally, in the middle or at the end of year 3).
- Years 5-6: Completing fieldwork and returning to Yale to write dissertation. This period often requires extensive review of notes and pre-writing preparation, often carried out while working as a teaching fellow.

Used flexibly, this framework can accommodate unforeseeable developments and "real world" conditions which can enable or prevent fieldwork, but are often beyond anyone's control. It aligns well enough with actualities of individual programs to frame the following discussion of years 2-4 as broadly transitional from work on campus to research in the field.

Evaluation methods for this report

Meetings held over the last month--among faculty, by the DGS and chair with students, in a "town meeting" of the anthropology community—served to gather ideas and opinions about years 2-4 of the program, as well as for developing a departmental response to the report of an external review committee last spring. We present here edited, synoptic versions of some of the more widely shared opinions and responses to queries in these meetings. The DGS also solicited ideas and reactions by email, with a promise of strict confidentiality, but in the event only two responses were forthcoming.

Years 1-2:

1. Students were concerned about mentoring problems which arise when faculty are not on campus, either while on leave or after having resigned from the department. Some expressed a need for earlier notice of such developments, and for redressing the consequences.

These concerns testify to (1) students' recognition of the need for close collaborative relations with faculty over the entire course of their program, (2) the relatively small number of faculty able to do so in each subfield, and (3) the effects of unavoidable faculty absences. In the current scheme of things, we can only continue to urge students to make better use of all members of three person advisory committees which they are mandated to convene every semester during their first two years. So too we urge committee members who are not primary advisors to work more proactively to fill gaps caused primary advisors' absences.

2. Students in the sociocultural subfield raised interrelated questions about the number and content of core courses, and the structure of qualifying exams which, as a rule, are taken in the 4th semester of the program. (These issues are largely moot in biological anthropology and archaeology.)

These and related questions are discussed in the departmental response to the provost's external committee report. Here it suffices to observe that revisions in the sociocultural curriculum are likely to define a core body of material which will be covered in common seminars, and serve as the basis for qualifying exams at the end of the second year.

Students raised few questions about and gave little support to the notion that qualifying exams could be moved from Spring of second year to Fall semester of third year. Little discussion or encouragement arose in response to the possibility of changing the number or timing of required courses for the degree.

Years 3-4:

No meeting, email, or private conversation suggested a sense among students that they are inadequately advised or mentored when writing their prospectuses and funding proposals for field research during the 3rd year. Our students' success in procuring funding for fieldwork is indirect evidence that this phase of their programs goes relatively smoothly. However, the faculty is currently discussing a workshop format which will help to mentor them during this important phase of the program. So too students produce prospectuses in timely manner, and leave for fieldwork during year 3.5 or 4.

Although this report is centered on years 2-4 of the program, the centrality of fieldwork to the program makes it impossible to separate them from years 5 and 6.

Years 5-6:

As a group, students in the post-fieldwork phase of their program evinced little dissatisfaction with efforts or abilities of advisors to mentor their time in the field. This is in part due to shared awareness of the ways distance and difficulty of communication can impede strong lines of contact.

Another issue they raised, however, arises after they return, which is discussed below as a symptom of difference between the Graduate School's norms on one hand, and anthropology's on the other.

Two problems and recommendations***1. Institutional memory***

One problem raised at the meeting is another indirect result of fieldwork: the difficulty of maintaining institutional memory across years of students in the program. When entire cohorts of students leave campus for most of years 3 and 4, gaps occur in the kinds of informal, cross-year lines of communication which otherwise help students to apprise each other of goings on in the department, institutional and otherwise. So too, a transfer of administrative duties from one faculty member to another can make it difficult for an incoming DGS to be fully aware of circumstances surrounding any given student's course of study.

One way of addressing these problems, suggested by several students, is to post the department's graduate program handbook on its website for easy updating and consultation. This will help students to be aware of expectations, and make it easier to notify them of structural changes in the program. So too at least a semi-formal meeting between an outgoing and incoming DGS would ensure a smoother transition.

2. The "double bind" of RIA

Because relatively few 5th and 6th year students attended meetings with the DGS and chair, few questions were raised about problematic administrative categories which, the faculty firmly believes, have recurring, unfortunate effects on student progress during and after fieldwork.

During their 4th year, designated a "teaching year" by the graduate school, most anthropology students are in the field, drawing no financial nor institutional support (stipends, library, health plan, etc.) from the university. Thus on their return they can only work as teaching fellows during their 5th year of the program (or, if in their 6th, while forgoing a dissertation fellowship).

This normative timetable has the effect of placing an extrinsic limit of nine to twelve months on the fieldwork period. Faculty and students in the department share misgivings about this limitation, and especially the lack of flexibility it imposes in the face of many "real world" circumstances -- bureaucratic, health, weather, etc.— which can delay or impede research, but which are outside a fieldworker's control.

The faculty, as fieldworkers and advisors, judge this six-year timetable insufficiently flexible for students confronted by unique challenges, and find that it can have serious effects on the substance of their work, and their morale in the post-fieldwork period. The faculty also believes that an administrative remedy for this problem is already in place: were students permitted a year of non-cumulative registration to do their fieldwork—when they are drawing no resources from the university--they would then have the needed flexibility and time to do maximally effective fieldwork and, on their return to New Haven, to work as teaching fellows and write dissertations on the same timetable as others in the graduate school.