

Anthropology of Higher Education TIG

Newsletter

By Brian L. Foster, University of Missouri - Columbia

Update

When we last reported on the status of the initiative on Anthropology of Higher Education, we had proposed the creation of a Topical Interest Group (TIG) associated with the Society of Applied Anthropology. At that time, we had organized several sessions at the Pittsburgh meeting of SfAA—three sessions with presentation of scholarly papers and a “capstone” session that discussed the overlapping themes of the presentations and explored topics of interest for future meetings. And there was a TIG meeting to talk about the potential future of the TIG.

Things have developed substantially since then. The proposal for the TIG was approved by the SfAA administration and Board; it now has more than 200 affiliates (i.e., “members”). For the 2017 annual meeting of SfAA in Vancouver, there are 25 sessions that are attached to the TIG, with about 150 contributors—i.e., presenters or co-presenters of academic papers, chairs and discussants of sessions, and participants in roundtable discussions. Collectively, the subject matter of the many sessions is extraordinarily broad—a main indicator of the importance of the anthropological perspective on higher education.

As we have said repeatedly in our earlier discussions of the Anthro of Higher Ed initiative, our role is to bring a unique perspective to the extraordinary volatility of higher education today. The complexity of this volatility is breathtaking, driven by a broad range of influences, all interconnected, as stated in our earlier SfAA Newsletter article: “political, economic, social, cultural demographic, racial/ethnic/gender dynamics, constant innovation within higher education, the ever-changing differences among and relationships between the sectors, the increasing impact of global dynamics in higher education (e.g., multicultural issues, global competition in research and instruction domains), the complicated relations among the (ever-changing) disciplines, the growing importance of interdisciplinary research and instruction, and the centuries of sacred traditions and rituals that impact faculty roles, governance, assessment of quality, peer review, and much more.”

The point, or course, is that Anthropology brings a special perspective to this kind of complexity, given its long-term, broad interest in the holistic understanding of the complexity of the human experience: cultural, social, linguistic, historical, global, biological, and other aspects of being human. Only this kind of perspective can begin to address the

remarkable complexity of the current dynamics of higher education. There is, of course, a great deal of research on the issues facing higher education, but it tends to be focused on the particular areas of interest to related disciplines: e.g., instruction, funding, political and policy dynamics, demographics, athletics, traditions and rituals (e.g., P&T, graduation, admissions, dissertation defense), and prestige factors in publications [e.g. journal impact factors]).

The topics addressed in the Vancouver sessions cover a broad range of the issues raised in the 2015 capstone session. Curriculum and instruction are perhaps the most common subject matter areas of the sessions. Others include credentialing, preparing for jobs, collaboration across disciplines and professions, and training in anthropology and other areas for applied careers. Other areas are diversity (very broadly), health care, environmental issues, and dealing with change in higher education. And there are many intersections among the many subject matter areas. In short, we are arriving at the breadth of Higher Education issues that will help us bring together the complexity of Higher Education’s current situation in a coherent way...but there is still a lot to do. And it is this complexity that our Vancouver sessions begin to address in an important way. Perhaps the most important feature of the

That said, there are critical areas that have not received appropriate attention in the SfAA/TIG sessions. For example, there is relatively little about sector differences (e.g., private/public, four year/two year, research universities/regional, liberal arts colleges/universities, etc., although a key paper in Pittsburgh and a follow-up in Vancouver discuss the convergence of For Profit and Not For Profit institutions). Community colleges need a great deal more attention, especially in view of the fact that they serve more students today than the four-year colleges and universities. Other areas that need attention include international issues, athletics, and donor-related issues.

These are the kinds of issues that we need to discuss in the Capstone and TIG sessions in Vancouver as we begin to plan for sessions at the 2017 meeting in Santa Fe. And they are the kinds of issues we need to address in campus-based seminars, sessions at meetings of the relevant professional organizations (e.g., AERA, APLU, AAU, AAC&U, and GRE). One of the most important issues for the TIG meeting is to identify individuals who are interested in pursuing the possibility of sessions at other organizations, seminars on campuses, proposing grants to fund such seminars, bringing our research to policy makers, and more. In short, we need a clear, operational action plan for the next year that will bring us to achieving our broader goals—to

having positive impact on higher education in these volatile times. In summary, our progress is substantial, and there is potential to have real impact on Higher Education operations, on policy issues, on instruction, and much more. We invite all interested Vancouver attendees to join our TIG and Capstone sessions as well as the scholarly sessions. And we urge them to connect other anthropologists and higher education scholars in other disciplines to affiliate with the TIG and to join us at the 2017 SfAA meeting in Santa Fe.

- The role of athletics
- Internal and External Politics
- Changing Demographics
- Funding
- Sector Competition

SfAA On-Line Community
The Anthropology of Higher Education now has an SfAA Community page. Please go to the web page at: http://community.sfaa.net/group/anthropology-of-higher-education?xg_source=activity

If you do not already have one, create your own personal community page at: <http://community.sfaa.net/> Once you have your own personal SfAA on-line community page, you can join the TIG's page by simply going to the TIG's community page and clicking on a radio button in the upper right of the page that invites you to join.

Governance Structure

The TIG's new governance structure is now officially in place. The governance team is happy to field ideas about the upcoming meeting and the overall progress and direction of the TIG.

Co-Chairs:

- Lauren Herckis (Carnegie Mellon U, lrhercki@andrew.cmu.edu)
- Jim McDonald (U of Montevallo, jmcdonald@montevallo.edu)

Co-Chair-elect

- Orit Tamir (New Mexico Highlands U, otamir@nmhu.edu)

Vice Chairs:

- Nancy Uscher (U Nevada-Las Vegas, nancy.uscher@unlv.edu): mini-clusters, events, conferences outside of anthropology
- Jennifer Wies (Ball State U, jrwies@bsu.edu): publications
- Tazin Daniels (U of Michigan, tazindaniels@gmail.com): Database and conference sessions and schedule

Advisory Board Chair

- Brian Foster (U of Missouri, fosterbl@missouri.edu)

Advisory Board

- Diane Austin (daustin@email.arizona.edu)
- Karla Davis-Salazar (karla.davis@usf.edu)
- Joe Donaldson (DonaldsonJ@missouri.edu)
- Brian Foster (fosterbl@missouri.edu)
- Pablo Mendoza (medoza@iup.edu)
- Robert Rubenstein (rar@syr.edu)
- Susan Schalge (susan.schalge@mnsu.edu)

