

# Anthropology of Higher Education TIG

## Newsletter

*By Brian L. Foster, University of Missouri - Columbia*

### Proposal for TIG in Anthropology of Higher Education

In the 2015 SfAA meeting in Pittsburgh, Don Brenneis and I organized a cluster of sessions concerning Anthropology of Higher Education. In addition, perhaps twenty other sessions with a significant focus on post-secondary education were offered at the meeting. In the “capstone” session for the cluster, and in an additional “informal discussion,” a significant number of participants from all sessions came together to talk about what “Anthropology of Higher Education” means and, given the impressive amount of attention that post-secondary education received, how we could carry the research forward in a coherent way.

One very interesting idea that received a lot of support was to establish an SfAA Topical Interest Group (TIG) on the subject of Anthropology of Higher Education. I (as a co-organizer of the cluster) have now submitted a proposal to SfAA, and given the positive feedback from SfAA leadership, I am optimistic that the proposal will be approved and the TIG will be formed in the near future.

It is important to address the question of why anthropological studies of

higher education should receive broad attention. Clearly, higher education is in a period of extremely volatile change. Far less clear to many observers is the complexity of the issues driving this volatility. Building on the papers and discussions in our sessions, some major dimensions of this complexity emerged: rapidly changing technology, the constantly changing environment (e.g., political, economic, social, cultural, demographic, and 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, tenure, and much more.

From the broadest perspective, Anthropology is uniquely positioned to address the complexity of the world of higher education—analogueous to the ways the discipline addresses broader human complexity. Moreover, interdisciplinary collaborations, which are very common, especially for

applied anthropologists, greatly enhance the scope and complexity of research on higher education. The cluster of sessions at the 2015 meeting in Pittsburgh, and the “capstone session” that began to frame just what Anthropology of Higher Education would consist of, focused on applications of anthropological research.

It is important to notice that there is a post-secondary anthropology group within AAA; it has a significantly different focus, which is more on basic research than applied. There emerged a broad consensus that the two groups could be complementary in many ways—could collaborate in ways that give rise to high-impact synergies. From the SfAA side, the TIG will play a major role in facilitating the collaboration of these two groups.

### Ideas for the Topical Interest Group

#### Possible activities for the TIG:

There was extensive discussion of the possible goals and activities for a TIG on Anthropology of Higher Education. One of the most important ideas is to develop a web presence, and get the word out not just to the anthropology community, but also engage educators, administrators, policy people, other constituents of anthropology and higher education broadly. Another foundational activity would be to organize a cluster

AAA and SfAA meetings and Joint sessions at other professional organizations—e.g., associations of professional educators. Other ideas included:

- Sponsor/organize seminars at universities and/or other organizations
- Hold a “business meeting” at the SfAA annual meeting
- Get a voice in the press

**Structural issues for a TIG:** TIGs are “informal” in SfAA, not highly structured by SfAA rules or protocols. Links to SfAA could include a link to the SfAA website and to SfAA Community (run by Neil Hann). There will be a formal list of members; it will not be necessary that they be members of SfAA. An Advisory “Board” (“Committee?”) will be formed; it should be diverse in many dimensions (ethnic/race, discipline background, academics, professional practice anthropologists, and a student presence). The Board would have a chair, a scribe, and a communication person. The question was posed on the side but not discussed: should there be a modest membership fee.

#### **Action items for the next year**

Discussions and organization of a cluster of sessions for the 2016 meeting in Vancouver was clearly a very high priority; organization of the sessions was to be started by Brian Foster. Many potential topics were identified, including:

- Bringing research to practice

- Ethnography of pedagogy
- Contingent faculty/non-tenure track faculty (break down by sector?)
- Sustainability of Anthropology: What is its future (if any)
- Universities/Colleges and community development
- The “Prestige Disease” (copying elite institutions, mission creep, etc.)

Discussions are going well—a number of scholars and people in practice have expressed interest in participating in the Vancouver meeting, many of whom are anthropologists and many who are in other disciplines. It is important to quickly begin to identify presenters and chairs/discussants for the sessions. An important first step is to communicate with everyone at the 2015 meeting whose presentation was related to higher education. Prospects for the Vancouver cluster seem very promising.

A significant foundation stone for these action items is to move forward with publication of the papers from the 2015 meeting; the book should be framed to be of interest not just to anthropologists, but to people from a wide range of people with an interest in the future of higher education (e.g., scholars, administrators, policy makers). The exploration of publication potential is moving along in a promising way.

#### **Concluding Thoughts:**

Clearly the idea of forming a formal interest group that could facilitate sustainable research on Higher Education is promising at a number of levels: the TIG, the Vancouver meeting, and the potential relation with the AAA group. We would be delighted to hear from anyone interested in affiliating with the TIG and/ or in presenting at the Vancouver meeting; please feel free to communicate with Brian Foster at the University of Missouri ([fosterbl@missouri.edu](mailto:fosterbl@missouri.edu)), who may be able to connect you with others who share your interests and/or with sessions that are being formed. address in an important way.

Perhaps the most important feature of the Vancouver sessions is that they are basically anthropological, but they are dramatically interdisciplinary, including people from mathematics, computer science, higher education, library science, professional librarian, administration, political science, rural sociology, extension, health sciences, deans, and other administrators.

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](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](mailto:lrhercki@andrew.cmu.edu))
- Jim McDonald (U of Montevallo, [jmcdonald@montevallo.edu](mailto:jmcdonald@montevallo.edu))

#### Co-Chair-elect

- Orit Tamir (New Mexico Highlands U, [otamir@nmhu.edu](mailto:otamir@nmhu.edu))

#### Vice Chairs:

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

#### Advisory Board Chair

- Brian Foster (U of Missouri, [fosterbl@missouri.edu](mailto:fosterbl@missouri.edu))

#### Advisory Board

- Diane Austin ([daustin@email.arizona.edu](mailto:daustin@email.arizona.edu))
- Karla Davis-Salazar ([karla.davis@usf.edu](mailto:karla.davis@usf.edu))
- Joe Donaldson ([DonaldsonJ@missouri.edu](mailto:DonaldsonJ@missouri.edu))
- Brian Foster ([fosterbl@missouri.edu](mailto:fosterbl@missouri.edu))
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- Kristen Vogt Veggeberg ([kristen.vogt@scouting.org](mailto:kristen.vogt@scouting.org))

#### Getting the Word Out

As applied anthropologists, we want our ideas and insights to influence thinking, action, and policy in the larger world of higher education. The TIG is intentionally breaking out of the trap of insularity that goes along with disciplinary comfort zones. The

