

NEWS & OPINIONS

The Future of Anthropology

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The power of education extends beyond the development of skills we need for economic success. It can contribute to nation-building and reconciliation. Our previous system emphasized the physical and other differences of South Africans with devastating effects. We are steadily but surely introducing education that enables our children to exploit their similarities and common goals, while appreciating the strength in their diversity. We need to educate our young people to become adults who cherish the values of respect for women and children proclaimed in the National Men's March today. In short we need a system . . . that is geared to the realities of our country and the ideals of our people.

Nelson Mandela
November 22, 1997
*The Education Africa Presidential
and Premier Education Awards*

These words were spoken by a transcendent leader looking to bring his nation through systemic change of its educational system in an effort to better meet the needs of its people twenty-one years ago. The hope was to transform and prepare citizens to meet and thrive with the complex needs in an ever changing and drastically shrinking global community, and Mandela's words prove to be as prophetic and potent a vision today as they were then.

While socio-cultural anthropology has been my passion for close to ten years, I have spent a little over the last half a decade working in university admissions, administration, and the business of school to subsidize this endeavor. For any in the academy paying attention to the current dialogue about the health or future of our discipline, it is easy to sift through the noise, read the proverbial tea-leaves, and channel the inner Bob Dylan as he so prophetically proclaimed, "The times, they are a-changin'."

For anyone who has been working in higher ed over the last decade or so it is evident that the academy is in the midst of a paradigmatic change as we enter further into this new virtual age. As the cost of education continues to skyrocket, generations are having fewer children, leading to fewer students filling the halls of

universities at large. This coupled with the incredibly fast advancements in technology and skills required in the workforce has resulted in the academy struggling to keep pace and maintain its current status quo. In the years to come we will see schools begin to shutter their doors, departments shift their priorities and learning objectives, and disciplines look to evolve to meet the needs of this modern age—or otherwise render itself a fossil; the one thing we can say with confidence is that change will be the constant.

Currently there are 44.2 million Americans who have an approximate total of \$1.48 trillion in student loan debt, eclipsing the total credit-card debt in the United States. Let those two numbers sink in for a minute. In 2016 the Federal Reserve estimated that the average monthly student loan payment increased to \$393 from \$227 in 2005. A recent report published by Georgetown University, *Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020*, provides insight into job requirements and economic projections for the future. It is projected that the US economy will grow from 140 to 165 million jobs by the year 2020 with over 65% of them requiring a post-secondary degree. Of that total, a minimum of 11% would require a master's degree (this does count the impact or influence of degree saturation for the remaining openings that would not technically stipulate that a master's level is required). Furthermore, last year the Institute for The Future (ITF) in their article, "Charting New Paths to the Future in California Community Colleges," called for a dramatic reimagining of majors along with their learning objectives as indicators of success. It is at this level of innovation that ITF wants higher ed to operate in order to adequately prepare students for what they will need in the future: plasticity of the mind and the resilience to be able not only to get a job, but also to lose a job, navigate a new path of events to the future, and keep moving forward. Given the financial investment and degree of importance for social and economic mobility that a college degree grants an individual, it is imperative that all university departments and disciplines take these forecasts seriously to serve their members well.

One might ask what does any of this have to do with anthropology? As is the case in many universities, my

own included, if anthropology wants to survive as we continue deeper into this new digital age—and must attract new majors—it must evolve. We in anthropology must wholeheartedly fall out of love with the academy and redefine our long-term goals. With tenure track jobs becoming more and more scarce, it is clear that to not only survive but thrive in this new era (regardless of the degree level), students or practitioners who graduate in our discipline *must* be hireable in a way that business and industry recognize and understand. There is no room for anthropological traditionalists enforcing or perpetuating a misplaced importance on superficial disciplinary boundaries. We must lean heavily into the realm of the whole economy and recast ourselves resoundingly into a new mold, equipping future anthropologists with both the powerful lens the liberal arts has historically provided, along with tangible skill sets that will prepare not just our practitioners but the stakeholders who employ them to navigate a future sea of change that awaits us all. The beautiful saving grace here is that unlike many disciplines around the academy, anthropology not only *is capable* of making this shift, but our beautifully unconventional community should *lead* the way!

So where in business and industry can we see the powerful potential in pairing the anthropological lens with a tangible skill set? In short—everywhere! To be human is to be social and furthermore to be human is to be learned. The self emerges through the chiefly human and complex control system of reflexive intelligence. This complex process takes root through webs of meaning, utilizing the socially constructed semiotics within an already developed yet dynamic organization of social networks. To understand, organize, or even utilize such data, society at large has historically had to look to and crossover into the realm of the academy—often confined to scholarly articles, journals, and classroom discourse—and only decipherable after a language translation of the discipline in use. The anthropologist has historically been trained to study areas such as these. Imagine a future in which an anthropologist trained to observe, identify, and analyze such phenomena with the thickest of descriptions is also equipped with the skills to lead organizations or departments focused on marketing, human resources, research and development, or production! Truly each one of these divisions would greatly benefit from such a lens.

The internet has changed everything. Those powerful networks of connection that literally link the internet together seem to uncannily resemble the webs of meaning and social networking we hold so valuable in our humanity. The world as we know it is moving further and further into a virtual, digital world. We are brought closer and closer together yet further and further from each other's humanity. From online chat-

bots to robo-calls, Instagram feeds to manicured filters, hashtags, and Facebook check-ins, we all have a window into the lives of those we have no business seeing; we are always connected with each other. Yet at the same time we risk becoming further and further removed from connecting with the humanity of the other and in this digital new reality we can find ourselves in danger of feeling cosmic homelessness. This already has and will present real challenges for businesses, politicians, tech giants and even healthcare providers.

In the realms of marketing, SEO strategy (search engine optimization), or public planning where it is harder and harder to cut through the proverbial white-noise or endless stimuli, where one can feel utterly alone in a crowded room, devoid of authentic connection and communication with others in a tangible way, who is better qualified to work to identify, reveal and reconnect with the humanity we all bear than the anthropologist? It is important not only for the survival of our discipline or for potentially profitable for business and industry (giant tech conglomerates, massive corporate firms, big pharmaceutical businesses, government agencies, or insurance organizations), but for the future flourishing of the society for those equipped with the anthropological gaze to be present to call out and remind these organizations of the humanity of those they wish to engage in commerce.

With varying degrees of success we are already seeing anthropologists cross this academy / business and industry chasm today mostly due to degree saturation, lack of tenured positions, financial insecurity of universities, and so on. Examples include individuals such as Dr. Tricia Wang with her use of ethnographic techniques to consult on “thick data” for various Fortune 500 companies through her consulting business, or Dr. Alexandra Mack, formerly on the board of EPIC, an organization created to promote the use of ethnographic principles to create business value. These anthropologists are already leading the way to show how successful this shift can become.

There is a paradigm that is shifting in the academy, and one of Khunian proportions. Things will never go back to the way they were before for the majority of the higher ed community. We will see the rise and fall of many universities, along with as many strategies to avoid such ends. Anthropology, as with many disciplines, is feeling the consequences already of this impending shift. Uniquely qualified to navigate the unknown future, we as anthropologists must look to this change and respond in kind. For change is coming, that much is certain—now let us lean in.



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