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# Ambiguous Assessment: Critiquing the Anthropology Graduate Admissions Process

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a survey of admissions processes employed by 43 American anthropology departments. Motivated by a desire to begin a dialogue about how candidates can be better prepared to submit an application, and to assess how individual departments make admissions decisions, I conducted a survey of faculty within these departments using both email and a web-based survey tool. Additionally, I spoke to prospective doctoral student users of a particular online forum– thegradcafe.com– to assess their understanding of the process and their confidence about admissions. Herein, I further attempt to explain why a transparent admissions process is in the interest of anthropology graduate programs, and suggest how we can emulate efforts made by our colleagues in the humanities to improve the experience for both applicants and faculty.

## INTRODUCTION

The process of applying to one of the hundreds of American graduate programs in anthropology appears to be made more stressful by the ambiguities of the process, and the particular strategies that it demands of its participants. Despite often-precise expectations governing a successful application, there is no field-specific body of information addressing strategies that might help (or hurt!) the candidate– and yet within anthropology as in other disciplines, an assumption exists that those who successfully navigate the admissions process are the most deserving. However, it is in the interest of our field that we make graduate applications as transparent as possible for several reasons.

First, the survey I have conducted of faculty reveal that many have common pet-peeves regarding applicant behaviors, such as the submission of substanceless, *pro forma* emails and basic questions pertaining to topics covered on departmental websites or best directed to the graduate coordinator. However, such miscalculations are the result of a vague sense by applicants that they should be making contact with potential advisors, without understanding the form this should take. This ritual has become a parody of the old system of cronyism, whereby the endorsement of one faculty member was almost certainly enough to guarantee admission, and at present many of these outreach efforts garner no response.

Second, the process as it presently exists, wastes a large number of resources. Attrition rates within the discipline are estimated at 50%, comparable to figures quoted within the well-documented humanities (Golde 2005:669). Attrition is most commonly correlated with two factors: a lack of knowledge among Ph.D. hopefuls about how graduate study differs from undergraduate, and a mismatch between students and departments.[1] Indeed some departments appear to accept large numbers of students on the assumption that a sizeable percentage will drop out. Or, as more than one faculty member indicated in response to my survey, because of a fear that cutting admissions would result in a permanent hit to their departmental budget.

Although the extent to which departments do or do not help socialize students to the norms of a department, or fail to reach out to students who show signs of alienation or disproportionate stress is beyond the scope of this paper, attrition rates and their attendant waste of student and faculty time continue to be a significant issue. Therefore, the question of how admissions processes can help mitigate this problem is one worth addressing. In one humanities-based study, this meant finding ways to assess applicant maturity and creativity during admissions (Arlt 1969:37). Surely, although we attempt to glean these through statements of purpose and recommendation letters, the admissions process implicitly values professionalism over ingenuity, quantity over quality. If we acknowledge that many of the skills most necessary for success in graduate school cannot be taught (Enright and Gitomer 1989:4), we must accept the limitations of measuring them in this way.

Finally, because anthropology fails to collaboratively track job placements (although we do track graduation), we do not presently know whether we accept too many graduate students, and therefore if high attrition rates are actually saving us from ourselves. As I will discuss further in this paper, market-driven pressure on rising anthropologists to professionalize early can be distracting and detrimental to one's graduate education. This combined with a Bourdieuian inclination towards social reproduction, i.e. faculty steering students into academia rather than providing them with information about jobs for anthropologists outside of the academy, increases tension among graduate students who are aware that they are competing against one another for a relatively small number of university positions. Accordingly, we as a field need to

[1] For one particularly moving account of the attrition process, see (Allo 2010).

begin to examine all aspects of anthropology admissions, ranging from how we can make the process more transparent, to how we choose students, to how many students we can ethically choose.

## SURVEY METHODS AND RESPONSE

I selected schools to receive my survey based on the frequency of their appearance among the posted decisions on thegradcafe.com (Total= 43 schools), as this method resulted in a diversity of department sizes, wealth, geography, and university type.[2] I sent my survey by email, with questions enclosed in the body of the message, attached as a Word file, and later contained within an anonymous online survey, in order to allow my respondents to choose their method of reply (See Appendix A). During the initial round of inquiry, I sent my email to two faculty members from each department. Where listed publically on the department's website, I chose the department chair and the graduate program coordinator as my targets. Where one or both were not specified, I selected one faculty member who received his or her Ph.D. before 1980, and one post-1980 doctoral recipient, or chose in relation to the graduation date of the department chair if no graduate coordinator was listed.

I sent out my initial surveys to those schools with more than fifteen posted admissions results on thegradcafe.com (Total = 15 schools; 30 faculty). After gauging response levels– possible at this stage because I had not yet set up the online survey and thus all replies came through email– I sent my survey to those with more than ten mentions on this website (14 more schools; 28 more faculty). During the third round, I included schools with greater than five mentions (14 more schools; 28 more faculty). Moreover, during this round I sent out additional emails to targets in the first two categories, in cases where someone had replied to me to let me know that they did not feel qualified to complete my survey, or would prefer to defer to a colleague. The initial rounds occurred over two months, and after again assessing my response numbers, I sent out an additional two survey requests to individuals chosen on the previously mentioned basis of graduation date, but limiting this additional solicitation to the fifteen schools most frequently applied to (30 more faculty). The total number of emails sent was ultimately 116, with 39 total responses (34%).

During my third round of faculty surveying, I also sought to interview current applicants, and in order to maintain consistency I solicited these from among the same forum's anthropology discussion section.[3] Of the participants on this subsection of the forum I found nineteen individuals willing to correspond with me or take a survey I constructed; on the basis of assured anonymity (See Appendix B). (I also maintained my own anonymity at this stage, although I offered to provide credentials, as well as a copy of this paper to any who were curious.) I added this additional survey sample in order to give applicants a voice in this project, and because I had begun to develop hypotheses about the affects of admissions on applicants and wished to corroborate these impressions. As I was dealing with members of an online community, I did not attempt to control for demographic diversity; thus, applicant data should not necessarily be taken as representative.

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[2] http://thegradcafe.com/survey/index.php; Only a fraction of applicants to any one program visit the website, however it's possible to glean the relative popularity of departments from the number of admissions results posted. I found that the curve of posted admissions results was a steep one, with the most popular schools getting mentioned about five times more often than less popular ones.

[3] http://forum.thegradcafe.com/

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### *Applying*

Although budget cutbacks have affected admissions in a minority of departments (8.1% reported decreased budgets during the current economic crisis), admissions have generally either remained steady (43.2%) or decreased for reasons unrelated to current university budgets (29.7%). As of late 2009, anthropology has not conducted studies assessing whether there are a surplus of anthropologists graduating with masters or doctoral degrees and seeking tenure track academic jobs, although this is colloquially believed to be true. Only education graduate programs award more degrees than the social sciences (analyzed as a single unit) (Nerad 2004:184). However, the humanities do track this data, and the prospects for graduates in this area of study have continued to be dismal. Many books on how to get into graduate school even cite these figures as a means of dissuading potential candidates who perceive a Ph.D. as a means to a lucrative and secure job (Kaplan 2008:240; Mumby 2004; Peters 1997; Wilkening 2008; Asher 2000:2). In the language and literature fields, the best current data suggests that the likelihood of acquiring full-time academic employment (putting aside the subject of tenure) is 50/50, and within 5 years of graduation only 66.7% (MLA Ad Hoc Commitee on the Professionalization of PhDs 2002:187). More than twenty years ago, the University of California system-wide data on History PhDs revealed that it was necessary to admit six students in order to place one in a tenure-track post– a figure that was affected by attrition rates of 45% (1984) and 41% (1985).[4] Unfortunately, no relevant information of this type exists in anthropology.

Across academia in general, but absent from discussions of anthropology there is substantial reference to the point that while academic jobs in general are still increasing, the percentage of overall tenure-track positions has not. Moreover, more students in the humanities and social sciences want to teach (50%) than in the sciences, a number that may be artificially low based on the inclusion of fields like psychiatry, where doctoral recipients often go into private practice or clinical work (Nerad 2004:190).

Within the U.S., growth in awarded doctorates since the Vietnam War era boom is largely due to a surge of enrollment in the life and physical sciences, engineering, and the humanities, as well as an influx of international students–half of whom remain in the U.S. following degree completion (Nerad 2004:184). False indications of a shortage of doctoral candidates during the 1980s furthered this increase in graduate students, and by 2007, the top social science degree granting institutions were Berkeley (138 that year), Harvard (129), Maryland (114), and UCLA (113)[5]. Among anthropology departments in my survey, the most common number of accepted students (defined separately from matriculation rates) was tied between 9, 10, and 12 (13.4%) with 55% of all respondents reporting that their department accepted ten or more students and 10% reporting acceptances of 25 of more.

Although these numbers are relatively modest, I would argue that the field needs to begin collecting data on the ratio of graduates to tenure-track, or at least full-time teaching positions, and following the MLA's recommendation by encouraging departments to educate their students about alternatives to academic employment. Within the humanities, Scholes has interrogated the morality of accepting more students than can ultimately find jobs, claiming that departments

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[4] (Scholes 1998:10). Scholes also assesses that if their graduates get tenured at the same rate as graduates of Brown University's English department, the University of California campuses would need to admit 12 students to place one.

[5] Followed closely by the Grad School and University Center, CUNY 112; Michigan 112, and UT Austin 103. Berkeley awards the most doctorates overall, with 896 in 2007, the last year data was collected. (2007).

have shown deliberate indifference to the plight of their graduates because of a pervasive interest in retaining cheap graduate student labor– an arrangement that ceases to function as an apprenticeship for the student if the job for which she is training does not exist.[6] In such cases, the process of admitting large numbers of students serves only the interests of the institution, enhancing or maintaining a department's prestige, justifying its budget, etc., and where extensive T.A. labor is used, actually preventing universities from having to hire those who have completed their degree (Scholes 1998:13). Another relevant humanities-based essay calls for departments to have to publically defend their size in terms of the composition and mission of their department, and– perhaps extravagantly– to prove that every Ph.D. granted represents a valid use of resources and a worthwhile investment of faculty and university time (MLA Committee on Professional Employment 1998:46). Indeed, it is also hard to guess how attrition rates in anthropology as well as our field's long time-to-degree might mask the glut of graduate students, if one exists.

Moreover, the percentage of women enrolling in graduate programs has also increased dramatically, and while the number of doctorates received by men peaked in 1972, women's doctorates have continued to steadily increase until 2000, when the number of doctorates received was divided evenly between the genders. In anthropology (and social science in the aggregate), women have surpassed men as recipients of doctoral degrees since 2000, and, with the exception of 2006, have maintained a consistent gender-based ratio of awarded degrees. Of 683 awarded anthropology Ph.D.s in 2007, women obtained 409 of these while men received only 274, and as of the same year, only 3,393 men, compared to 6,339 women were enrolled in anthropology graduate programs.[7] With an even more dramatic division between the genders in received anthropology bachelor's degrees (7072 vs. 3195 in 2007), I hypothesized, based in part on existing studies in other fields, that graduate admissions committees wishing to create a diverse cohort would bias against female applicants either consciously or unconsciously (Gregory Attiyeh and Richard Attiyeh 1997:525). According to one respondent at a large public university:

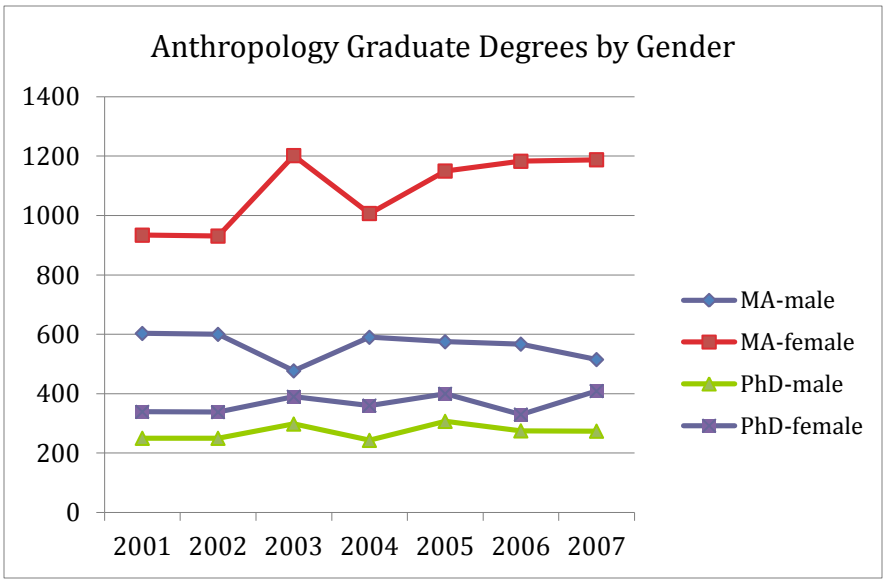


**Table 1**: Data from AnthroGuide (American Anthropological Association 2001-2008)

[6] He also cites a study in which 125 Teaching Assistants were employed to teach English at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champagne, but in 1995-96 only six doctoral recipients were hired (1998:11).

[7] According to AnthroGuide.(American Anthropological Association 2001-2008).

> "The overwhelming majority of our applicants are female, and there is concern among the faculty to ensure gender balance by having a cohort that includes both males and females."

Other respondents added:

> "People get pretty excited if there is a guy who is smart."
> "[We consider men among] racial, sexual, and those in other 'underrepresented' categories."

Nonetheless, only 8.3% of respondents (with an identical 8.3% uncertain) admitted that their department employed any overt strategies to balance the cohort, although some responses hinted at such a process:

> "I would guesstimate in recent years that our applicant pool has more women than men, and certainly our entering classes each year are pretty consistently balanced by gender."

Or saw the utility in the notion, considering the current ratio of women to men in their department:

> "We probably should try to achieve more gender balanced cohorts by admitting/funding more men and fewer women."

Apart from select quotations however, most programs merely reported receiving far more applications from women, and being concerned about this discrepancy but unwilling to lower admissions standards in order to artificially balance the cohort. A few programs reported 2009 entering classes that were entirely, or nearly entirely female.

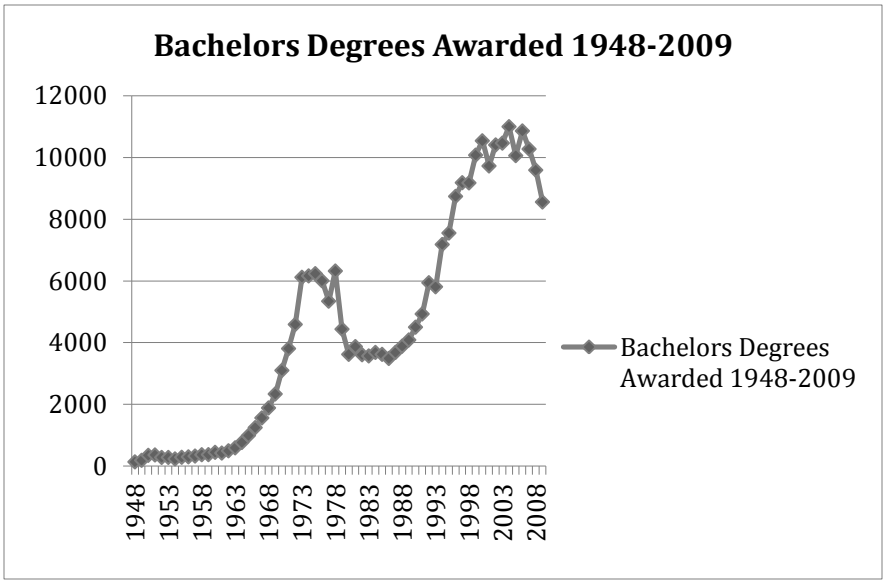


**Table 2:** Data from AnthroGuide (American Anthropological Association 2001-2008).

Accompanying a substantial increase in students graduating with anthropology bachelor's degrees (although only 57.9% of the applicants I spoke to were undergraduate anthropology majors), the process of applying to graduate school in anthropology continues to grow more competitive as the number of slots remains steady or declines. Although most anthropology

departments do not publish the number of applications they receive, we do know that demands for admission are high.[8] Thus, I conjectured that undergraduates might feel a sense of urgency to professionalize (attend conferences, publish etc.), parallel to an increasing burden on graduate students. Lack of knowledge about the nature of the competition leads applicants to speculate about their credentials and to take steps to try to insure that their profile will be, at minimum, comparable to those of their fellow applicants. Indeed, when I asked applicants to rate their confidence levels on a scale of 1-10 (where 1 was 'no confidence') 22.2% chose "3", although 4, 5, and 7 were tied with a close 16.7%). Two representative comments were:

> "I just have no idea how [my application] will stack up with the others that the programs receive"
>
> "My GRE score is [high] and my GPA is 4.0, but I'm wondering if that'll even get me a foot in the door. I know that my personal statement is the most important part, but don't know how it will be evaluated."

***Making Contact***

In terms of strategies, these applicants almost universally responded that they attempted to gain concrete research experience related to their interests, presumably to prove that they could carry out the kind of project they proposed to do in a doctoral program. Others cited personal contacts as crucial to their projected success, and indeed attempting to make contact with faculty members was a strategy acknowledged by faculty members as being on the rise. One noted:

> "There is an increasing obligation, it seems, to write to faculty ahead of the admission season to establish some kind of a relationship. I find these letters pointless and irritating in most cases. They very seldom incorporate a genuine question that can't be answered by the website."

And this sentiment was affirmed by another faculty member:

> "With the rise of internet, the number of inquiries from prospective students is increasingly from year to year, but the content of those inquiries is not improving at an equal pace."
>
> "Many make contact with professors here first, to try to establish a personal connection. No evidence to me that it works to better one's chances."
>
> Conversely:
>
> "Many students now recognize the importance of establishing contact with our faculty prior to submitting their applications. This increases the quality of their essays."

[8] In one article the number of applicants to Brown's English PhD program was 400 in 1998, with 20 accepted and an expected yield of 10. But of course, this was English and eleven years ago. ((Scholes 1998:9).

Among faculty responses to this question, a point of thematic consistency emerged. Most admissions related contact with graduate faculty is essentially little more than a *pro-forma* attempt to insure that one's name will be recognized amidst a massive stack of applications. Indeed, most how-to books on graduate admissions, field non-specific as they are, encourage contact with faculty members, but regularly fail to offer guidance on the substance of these messages. Some of this proposed contact falls along the lines of questions that might be better directed to the graduate advisor/coordinator (not the department chair); therefore departments who wish to explicitly direct such questions should make clear on their websites who holds this position.

One admissions guide instructed applicants to begin a dialogue with graduate faculty in order to get a feel for what graduate school in their field entails, and to solicit a qualitative sense of how graduate-level research differs from undergraduate (Mumby 2004:37). Further, the author emphasizes that the applicant's ultimate goal in contacting faculty ought to be to convince a prospective supervisor that she would not only thrive in graduate school, but that the advisor would benefit from having her as a student– a conversation that is perhaps of much greater importance if one is applying to study in the lab sciences. Contextually, it is perhaps more understandable that the author mentions several colleagues who claim that they'd never accept a student who had not made prior contact before applying, and conceivable that some applicants would feel compelled to make contact even when they have nothing to say. Although this particular guide acknowledges that some faculty find these contact emails a nuisance, the author encourages applicants to err on the side of sending them, noting that even if the faculty member is bothered by the message or does not reply, the attempt most likely will not jeopardize the candidate's chances. Herein, the student becomes like a product that, within a crowded market of similar products, must be sold to potential advisors and departments.

Even guides that strongly encourage contact express the caveat that the applicant should never ask questions that can be answered by departmental websites or other admissions materials. Some specifically note that contact emails should demonstrate knowledge of the professor's research, and extrapolate on how it connects to one's own intellectual focus. However, one guide also encourages using these emails to explain grades, test scores, and research experience, and to attach a c.v.– always remaining mindful of the ultimate goal of garnering an in-person meeting (Wilkening 2008:107). The notion presented herein is not to target an individual faculty member based on inferred compatibility, but to find anyone willing to argue for one's acceptance during the admissions process (Wilkening 2008:46). Even further, some accounts argue for persistent contact, e.g. sending more than one email, offering to call, and 'cold calling' if one has not received a reply (Mumby 2004:152).

The campus visit was also assessed in my survey, and mentioned by my applicant sample as significant to their overall strategy. Notes one professor:

> "Unless an applicant makes a really strikingly good impression during a campus visit, it is likely that the faculty member may have forgotten all about the candidate until the application turns up." (S/he emphasized that most candidates make either a lukewarm impression during this process.)

and another:

> "The preliminary email is a bit of a bogus ritual. Effectively it allows the student to say that they've contacted the faculty member, but there is really nothing that the faculty member can say or do at that stage of the game. Much more useful are face-to-face visits."

Persistent contact is part of an overall strategy, advocated in books devoted to graduate school *writ large*, that assumes a small number of targeted programs, and a necessity to come in with an advisor– a tactic that seems to have influenced the way graduate students perceive their relationships with faculty during the application process, and upon their arrival. Only one guide makes a point that seems applicable to anthropology Ph.D. hopefuls, by encouraging them to attend a national conference in order to familiarize themselves with current faculty research, and to make contacts without having to tour multiple campuses (Walters n.d.).

Regardless of whether in-person interviews hurt or help the applicant, according to my survey, a slim majority of departments do not request these, even of their short-list candidates. A higher number than I anticipated– 47% of respondents– indicated that their department does conduct some form of interview with select candidates, or did so before recent budget cuts. Another 1% indicated that their department recommends either a visit or an interview, coordinated by the student.

### *Stating One's Purpose*

Although the statement of purpose is universally considered the most significant portion of the application, confusion abounds regarding its ideal content, and whether departments expect a specific project proposal, general reference to areas of interest, or biographical data (and if so, how much). Faculty commented:

> "I advise prospective applicants to give us a statement of purpose rather than an autobiography. Most students nevertheless provide the latter."

And

> "'Personal' essays that reveal too much (often a strategy to differentiate oneself) are an embarrassment and generally don't work."

In response to this confusion, some programs have begun requiring a separate personal and research statement, explicitly outlining the necessary focus of the statement, or offering examples of successful applicants' essays. Regrettably, commercial admissions guides often do nothing to decipher the expectations of departments in various disciplines, even failing to explain that there is a difference between a "personal statement" and a "statement of purpose", and encouraging applicants to focus on content that belongs in the former type although most anthropology departments require the latter.[9] Rather than emphasizing that the statement is essentially a research proposal, these argue that the applicant should refer to her strengths and notable qualities, taking care to avoid egoism, as faculty will be attempting to read evidence of her personality between the lines.

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[9] "Do not be afraid to include information that is of a very personal nature. After all, it is a *personal* statement." (Mumby 2004:127).

Those that do differentiate offer some useful advice, defining the statement of purpose as an explication of one's reasons for applying to graduate school, interest in a particular department, and long-term goals (Kaplan 2008:77) Nonetheless, the reality that anthropology programs often use these statements to assess a candidate's ability to conceive of a substantial research project is not mentioned anywhere. In many cases, simply outlining one's fit with a department would be woefully inadequate. And the message delivered by these guides and substantiated by interviews with faculty and admissions officers, is that one must appear unique– thus implicitly encouraging applicants to incorporate background information and anecdotes into their statement in cases where only a single essay is required (Kaplan 2008:89; Wilkening 2008:53). Even in guides containing examples of ideal social science applications, inclusion of personal trivia is counseled.

Only in a minority of cases do authors council naming specific faculty members with whom the applicant wishes to work, an element of the essay that most of my survey respondents stated helps their departments to match these applications with the relevant faculty for review.[10] Generally absent as well is the importance of tailoring essays to a particular department, although reference is made to understanding each department's focus (and whether one's project intersects with it!) before applying. Finally, only one among the guides I consulted referred to the significance of (credibly) citing work relevant to one's own, doing some exploration of the politics of a particular department in advance, and investigating whether a targeted faculty member is either about to retire or leave.[11]

### *Applicant Profiles*

Driven by an ever more competitive admissions process and per one popular guide, I expected applicant profiles to have changed. One guide indicated that ever-more undergraduates (in English) were publishing– resulting in 32% of applicants to Indiana University's English Ph.D. program having either published in an academic journal or presented at a scholarly conference (Peters 1997:15). Symptomatic of the previously mentioned impulse to professionalize earlier in a competitive academic marketplace, the pressure to publish transfers much of the work previously undertaken as a new faculty member to a stage of one's career that was formerly about deepening one's knowledge of a chosen discipline. As one of the admissions hopefuls explained:

> "I think it's pretty clear that they're looking for people who are smart (GPA/GRE) and have proven themselves as researchers (publications/presentations/lots of independent research experience)."

In response to my inquiry, 34.2% of faculty stated that they perceived applicants to have progressively more publication and fieldwork experience–often in the context of substantial prior ethnographic research projects. However, the majority either indicated that either they had not noticed changes, or were uncertain as to whether any existed. Similarly, 44.7% denied that more students with master's degrees are applying, and 66.7% claimed that a master's degree would not elevate a candidate's chance of admissions. This is consistent with the reports of my applicant

[10] Wilkening, 174 Does mention this. However, he also recommends telling personal antecdotes in the essay and referring to hardships that make the candidate special, using as an example an essay about how an applicant learned the value of hard work from her grandmother.

[11] (Asher 2000:76). He also argues that the first sentence of your statement should never begin with "I" (101).

informants, 63.2% of whom have only a bachelor's degree, but diverges from another recent study wherein 50% of those interviewed had an M.A. degree before applying to Ph.D. programs (Garth 2010:6). Moreover, applicants are aware of the present job market, and some have crafted contingency plans as a result; one of my informants revealed: "[I pursued] a professional Master's degree as a fallback plan, in light of a hypercompetitive academic job market."

Accompanying an increase in publications and substantial research experience, a 47.4% majority of faculty surveyed denied any increase in age among applicants. Again, the applicants I surveyed confirmed faculty impressions; the majority (33.3%) reported a gap of only two years since receiving their bachelor's degree, and 88.9% had completed their undergraduate program less than four years ago. Of those who were not applying while presently undergraduates, the majority (61.1%) had postponed applying for strategic reasons (e.g. to gain more research experience, study a language, or travel abroad), and indeed the utility of this strategy was reinforced by the comment of one professor, who noted:

> "We tend not to take applicants straight from college, so their post-grad experiences and ability to represent them as providing a rationale for admission are critical."

Informed by a seeming consistency in applicant demographics over time, I was curious who applies to graduate programs, and if it is possible to generalize about those likely to submit an application for doctoral study. I am able to extrapolate somewhat from my surveys that such individuals are presently motivated enough not only to achieve relatively high grades (application guides emphasize that grades matter little anyway, as long as you earn at least B's), but to go above and beyond in soliciting research and life experiences, and building positive relationships with faculty for their own sake– or for the purpose of securing glowing letters of recommendation.

Against earlier studies denying a causative relationship between tendencies to seek higher education and socioeconomic class, Mullen et al. describe a connection between parental education and graduate school aspirations. Her research indicated that 76% of students whose parents had only a high school education or less did not enter graduate school, compared to 62% of students whose parents had some post-graduate education. Moreover, though a marginal gap exists between the socioeconomic profiles of those who seek master's degrees (variable by type of master's degree), among doctoral students the gap is much wider– 1.4% versus 5.1% (Mullen, Goyette, and Soares 2003:149-150). Indeed, class impacts graduate school application in a variety of indirect ways, including quality of academic portfolio, and a tendency among the more affluent to major in subjects generally considered less conducive to post-bachelor's degree job acquisition. Family demographics also largely dictate the types of undergraduate institutions attended, of relevance to my project due to the predictably greater likelihood of matriculating between elite institutions and graduate school.

The discrepancy between recent data and previous research may be indicated by a rise in the overall number of college degrees sought within the U.S., and implies that as bachelor's degrees have become more commonplace in the U.S., the socially privileged have accordingly increased their investment in education in order to maintain a dominant position. Mullen et al. refer to a Bourdieuian model of education as a means to social reproduction and reinforcement of habitus, wherein parental education dictates parental and student expectations, and motivates student performance. And one survey suggested that applicants are often motivated to apply to graduate school by a particular academic victory or moment of scholastic achievement (Garth

2010:6).

Moreover, it is important to consider whether qualities that the anthropology admissions process frequently values are themselves homogenizing factors, when the means to engage in extensive post-graduate research, travel abroad, and visit distant departments are often unavailable to many college graduates. The process of applying to anthropology programs thus requires a different kind of academic (even diplomatic) intelligence that is in and of itself elite and potentially counterintuitive to many undergraduates- per the guides I have cited, this involves cultivating strong ties with faculty so as to secure good letters of recommendation early, preparing well in advance for the GRE, and generally treating the undergraduate years as part of a strategic process of preparing oneself for applications. And although some of these holes in the applicant's experience may be filled in by post-graduate activities and effort, faculty mentorship–arguably one of the most crucial advantages to an applicant– is often hard to retroactively obtain. Half of the current applicants I surveyed reported feeling either as though they were not receiving enough support, or felt uncertain about whether their guidance from faculty and other mentors was adequate– mostly because these influential bodies were either unavailable or too busy. Ironically, this support may be most lacking at some of the most prestigious universities in the country, where it can be notoriously difficult to attract faculty attention as an undergraduate.

***Review and Response***

The application review process is in some ways a mystery to applicants. An even 50% of applicants surveyed claimed to understand how their files would be assessed, however most seemed to feel that their understanding was limited to abstract notions about the primacy of the statement, and were unsure about evaluation criteria. The vagueness of the process prompts students to fret over word choice and the dangers of affiliating with an unpopular school of thought.[12]

The process has evolved substantially over the years, from a time when one could be admitted based solely on personal correspondence or an interview. (Arlt 1969:38) The idea of incorporating seemingly impersonal criteria such as standardized testing initially met with resistance, and might not have finally won approval had Educational Testing Service not collaborated extensively with schools to construct and improve the tests. One of the most persuasive notions behind tests such as the GRE was (and continues to be) its supposed ability to predict graduate student performance and combat attrition rates (Enright and Gitomer 1989:8).

Regarding the nature of the process, most faculty among those I surveyed confirmed that application emphasis has changed from outlining one's preparation to outlining a project, and a majority cited an increased expectation that students will already be trained in their field site's language upon arrival, or will have compensated by demonstrating an ability to do fieldwork in general. There appears to be a problematic mixed message inherent to the anthropology admissions process- the implicit confirmation that training is part of one's graduate education, and a contrary expectation that students will arrive with advanced levels of competency. To this end, several professors commented that they would have never been admitted under present standards (not having a chosen field site upon arriving, not having begun language training, transferring from another field, etc.), but a few others, perhaps reflecting my deliberate selection of individuals with diverse graduation dates, inferred that standards had essentially remained the

[12] (Garth 2010:7). (Also, I can affirm this practice, having been warned a few times during my application process not to mention particular theorists or theoretical perspectives.).

same during their time in academia. In total, 60% of my respondents suggested that the process continues to grow more difficult.

One of the most substantial concerns expressed about anthropology admissions pertains to a specific concern of the faculty. An apparently high level of discomfort revolves around the increasing gulf between the budgets of the wealthiest institutions and the majority, with students unwittingly wading into a quagmire of resentment when attempting to leverage the offer of one school against another. Most public universities, unable to match the offers made by their private counterparts, are losing students in the process. Two commented:

> "More 'bidding wars' are going on between competing institutions trying to recruit the same students. This creates enormous pressures on funding, especially for public universities."

> "…There has been a hugely widening gap between the resources that privileged private universities devote to subsidizing graduate education and those that public universities and non-wealthy private universities can devote.

Almost unanimously, professors reported greater numbers of applicants, but reduced acceptances because of the need to fully fund them. This development reverses a previous system in which more admissions offers were made, but funding was not universal. Now, many students uneasily suspect that their financial offer reflects their perceived potential (Garth 2010:10).

The decision making process itself, against one that was "less formal and more biased" in the past, according to one faculty respondent, appears generally homogenous across universities. 78.4% reported that their department does not use an initial weed-out process (such as cutting all applicants with GREs or GPAs below a minimum level; however, incomplete applications are generally set aside).[13] Instead, most use a variant on the following system: 1. The admissions committee reads all of the applications and creates a short list. 2. This short list is distributed to all within a department or subfield, or is distributed selectively according to overlap between applicant and faculty interests. 3. This feedback is used to generate a list of offers and, in some cases, a waitlist. Additionally, an increasing number of faculty read each application as the pile grows thinner- on the aggregate, three read at the first stage, six or more after the first cut, and the majority of the faculty in the final round. (Some sources reported that this was how it was *supposed* to work, but that colleagues cooperated to varying degrees, and in several departments, feedback is only sought outside of the committee as it pertains to pairing applicants with professors.)

Whether the advocacy of a single faculty member can 'get you in' was not among my questions, but it is certainly asserted by admissions guides (again, more likely in some disciplines than others) (Mumby 2004:41). Presumably, based on the aforementioned process a single professor's input could influence the process, but is more likely if he is on the admissions committee, or if the applicant makes the initial cut(s) and reaches the stage where his input is sought. One guide suggests that because applications are screened in the order that they're received, a Ph.D. hopeful is best served by submitting as soon as possible; however I found no evidence to corroborate this as normative practice (Asher 2000:36).

[13] (Asher, 59-61) indicates that graduate admissions officers and department administrators frequently weed out applications before departments receive them, but none of the faculty I surveyed alluded to this practice.

The previously outlined lack of transparency in the process leads candidates to speculate on the outcome of their efforts, whilst they wait and after they have received a reply from their schools. Although rejection is the norm (reading thegradcafe's results postings makes this clear[14]), students feel shame about the outcome of the process, and with a sense that the transaction has been arbitrary, attempt to speculate about which element of their files landed them in the 'no' pile. Many never think to write programs and ask about the decision made on their file although they have the right to do so, and in Garth's survey, they attempted to introduce certain logic into the process by interpreting where they end up as where they were 'meant to be' (2010:11).

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

A thorough audit of the admissions process in humanities has resulted in a list of proposed modifications, from which I believe anthropology can draw some inspiration. It called for prospective applicants to be supplied with departmental attrition rates, job placement figures, time-to-degree averages, teaching expectations/opportunities, and anticipated financial packages (Cardozo 2006:146; MLA Committee on Professional Employment 1998:47). Further, I will add that departments ought to make profiles of admitted and matriculated students, and potentially even those who are seriously considered, available to applicants in order to mitigate some of the bewildered self-assessment that accompanies the admissions process. Anthropology departments have taken some small steps to engage these reforms by frequently incorporating pages about job placement into their web sites, and some sites include basic references to median GRE scores (although reference to minimum acceptable scores is common, and I think less helpful in determining one's competitiveness). And certainly, not all departments embrace such transparency.

Moreover, despite the size and inherent limitations of my surveys, I believe some important points of concern emerged. The first is, as I have outlined, the specialized expectations involved in submitting an anthropology application, which seem to self-select from a privileged group of applicants with reliable mentoring, and even application management.[15] Thus, although the application can be a highly useful exercise in self-presentation, success is also impacted by considerable insider information as well as a certain strategic expertise that is not synonymous with academic talent, drive, or creativity.

Despite the variety in what departments look for in a statement of purpose (and whether, like good Bourdieuians we are seeking ourselves-in-others), a certain standardized expectation exists that I believe could be more effectively transmitted to admissions hopefuls. Among my applicant informants, one of the most common, semi-rhetorical forum posts was: "What do you think department x is looking for?" with a perhaps misguided concern that writing and asking was somehow inappropriate. The latter appears to be a result of a vague sense among applicants that their messages *bother* faculty– a hunch that turned out not to be incorrect, but was specifically indicative of the sloppy mien of some messages. Indeed, one commercial admissions

[14] These are conveyed via a reporting mechanism that allows the applicant to enter the school, the field, the result, and a comment if necessary. Most comments, if included are brief exclamations of joy or despair. See http://thegradcafe.com/survey/index.php.

[15] I can attest to this most strongly as an alumnus of the University of Chicago MAPSS (Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences)., which attracts predominantly unsuccessful PhD candidates by promising to help them to move on to a PhD after successful completion of the M.A. This promise is largely fulfilled by highly skilled management of the graduate's application file during her next admissions attempt, and indeed MAPSS' record is impressive.

guide suggests that many otherwise qualified applicants fail to get into graduate school based on "fatal mistakes", the result of ignorance about what is expected from them during the process and sometimes, how graduate and undergraduate admissions differ (Mumby 2004:9). One truism of the application process is that many of its best practices seem obvious only in hindsight, or when one is able to see and experience large numbers of applications, and applicants, at once.

Although evidence of professional competency is certainly useful, there is certainly something lost when we encourage undergraduates to professionalize in response to a competitive application process. One's undergraduate years might be better used in exploration of many different ideas and fields, as the energy required to groom oneself as a graduate school candidate takes away from the energy one could be expending making sure that a anthropology is the right match for one's emerging intellectual perspective. Admissions committees looking for predictors of potential success, and seeking to help reset the clock on professionalism, might therefore consider weighing experiences sought out after one's bachelor's degree more heavily. Accordingly, it would be of great utility to carry out a study on the respective success rates of students entering doctoral programs at different ages, although individuals should still be assessed on their own merit regardless of these findings.

Although terminal master's degree programs have been touted by some as a potential solution to undergraduate professionalization and graduate school under preparedness, most terminal master's programs offer little financial aid– a significant impediment when one considers that the average bachelor's degree presently leaves American students with $24,000 in loans. The additional expense of a $42,000 University of Chicago or $32,000 plus NYU master's degree may not actually help them get into a doctoral program, or even to find a job.[16] Although of intrinsic utility, the master's program is an expensive means by which to refine one's focus and conceivably strengthen one's Ph.D. program application.

In researching this project, I have come across numerous proposals for admissions reforms, which range from holding candidate group discussions and exercises, to requiring highly creative and unusual essays, tests, and exercises as part of the admissions process. In one such study, social science departments (broadly categorized) experimented with creative admissions strategies, such as eliminating standardized testing requirements or minimum GPAs from consideration. Intriguingly, the departments experimenting with alternative admissions processes reported a decline in attrition and an overall better fit between students and the department (Hagedorn and Nora 1996:41-2). Some of these required applicants to perform a task comparable to those frequently performed by their program's students, such as critiquing an article pre-selected by the faculty. Another asked their finalists to make a presentation to faculty from among a provided list of topics in order to demonstrate their communication skills and organization. Interviews also seem to be an increasingly common part of the process, as departments seek a more accurate means of assessing preparedness and compatibility. However, these are customarily impossible for poorer departments to cover. Although the same study acknowledged the fiscal and time resources demanded by some of these practices, its author measured these against the loss incurred when a student drops out (Hagedorn and Nora 1996:44). Along those lines, my survey also revealed that there is growing frustration about the budget discrepancies between anthropology departments, and I would therefore suggest that students

[16] This is simply the quoted minimum tuition as listed on the university bursars' web sites: http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/graduate_admissions/tuition and http://bursar.uchicago.edu/tuition.html. This number does not include cost-of-living and supplies.

keep this in mind when attempting to solicit matching stipends from the institutions that they are invited to join.

Finally, and less directly relevant to admissions, a 'what can you expect if you matriculate' primer for prospective graduate students (perhaps sub-field specific) might be of great use in acculturating students to their new departments, or potentially empowering them to make an informed assessment of their suitability for graduate study before applying. Although we still emphasize the utility of the GRE despite its inability to predict student success, we fail to assess how applicant expectations may differ from the reality of graduate school (Hagedorn and Nora 1996:32). That departments have a vested interest in accepting mature students who are unlikely to drop out seems obvious, however the process of admissions reform is complicated by the influence of institutional pride about high application numbers, and in some cases, indifference to attrition rates.

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## APPENDIX A

**Admissions Practice:**
Is your department accepting progressively more, less, or a consistent number of new doctoral students annually?

How many doctoral students did your department accept to start in Fall of 2009?
How do you feel graduate admissions in anthropology have changed since you applied to graduate school?

Does your department use any sort of initial culling of the applicant pool before the admissions committee (if one exists) sees the applications?

How many people read an application before a decision is made on it?

What is the process after an application is received in your department? (I.E. do individual faculty read it independently or are they read solely in group meetings?)

Does your department request interviews with prospective candidates?

Considering the much greater numbers in which women are applying to anthropology graduate programs now, does your department take any steps to try to create a gender balanced cohort?

**Applicant profiles:**
Have you seen any change in the number of applicants who come to the graduate admissions process with publications or substantial fieldwork experience?

Have you seen any change in the number of applicants with previous master's degrees applying to your department? Does an existing MA generally increase candidates' chances of admission?

Have you seen any change in the average age of applicants?

Are you noticing an increase in any specific kinds of strategies used by applicants to differentiate themselves?

## APPENDIX B

1. Do you currently hold a master's degree?

2. If yes to the previous question- Did you seek a master's degree after failing to gain admissions to a Ph.D. program?

3. Have you ever been admitted to a Ph.D. program?

4. Were you an anthropology major as an undergraduate?

5. What kinds of strategies are you attempting to use to make yourself stand out or to try to increase your chances of admission? (If any).

6. How confident do you feel in this process? (1-10; 1 is no confidence, 10 is completely confident)

7. Approximately how many years ago did you complete your undergraduate education?

8. Did you choose to wait before applying to a Ph.D. program for strategic reasons? (i.e. thinking that work experience or activities pursued in the meantime might make you a more attractive candidate?)

9. Do you feel as though you are getting enough support from faculty or other mentors during this process?

10. Do you feel as though you understand how your application will be assessed?