

Trends in Anthropology Bachelor's Degrees

A Review of Federal Data

Introduction

Undergraduate anthropology programs are in generally solid shape, at least according to federal data on bachelor's degree completions, but there has been a notable decline in the last few years. The 2008 economic downturn occurred alongside a growing emphasis on college as a place for career preparation, directing students to other fields, but among the social sciences, anthropology is holding its own.

This report offers an analysis of federal data on bachelor's degree completions in anthropology, 1987–2016, as well as degree completions in other social science fields since 2003. The hope is that this information will assist anthropology departments by providing some context for them to interpret the trends they observe in their own student population. By observing trends at the national level, we may also be able to identify common challenges, allowing us to come together to create shared solutions.

Thanks to Gigi Jones at the National Center for Education Statistics for her assistance. Any errors are mine alone.

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Key Findings

- After decades of solid growth across all size departments, anthropology degree completions peaked in 2013 and have decreased sharply since then. 2016 saw the fewest anthropology degrees granted since 2009.
- This pattern seems to be common to social science disciplines without a clear post-graduation career path (history, sociology, political science), but is not observed in fields with better-established connections to the professions (psychology, economics, criminology).
- Since 2003, 70% of anthropology graduates have been women and 27% people of color, with both trending upward. This compares to 57% and 29%, respectively, for all bachelor's degrees.
- One point of intervention that may help to reverse the recent downward trend is to make clearer connections between anthropological training and diverse careers, advancing the idea that anthropology is a job-ready major that provides solid training for a wide range of meaningful careers.

How many bachelor's degrees in anthropology are granted every year?

In 2016, 9,135 bachelor's degrees were granted in anthropology from 421 U.S. higher education institutions. This represents an increase of 238% in degrees granted from 1987, the first year for which data are available, but an 18.9% decrease since the record-setting year of 2013, when 11,270 anthropology bachelor's degrees were granted. The growth from 1987–2013, as well as the decline since then, were shared across all size anthropology departments, as shown in Figure 1, which is segmented by decile: the lowest band represents the largest 10% of departments (i.e., the top 42 departments graduated over one third of all anthropology majors in 2016).

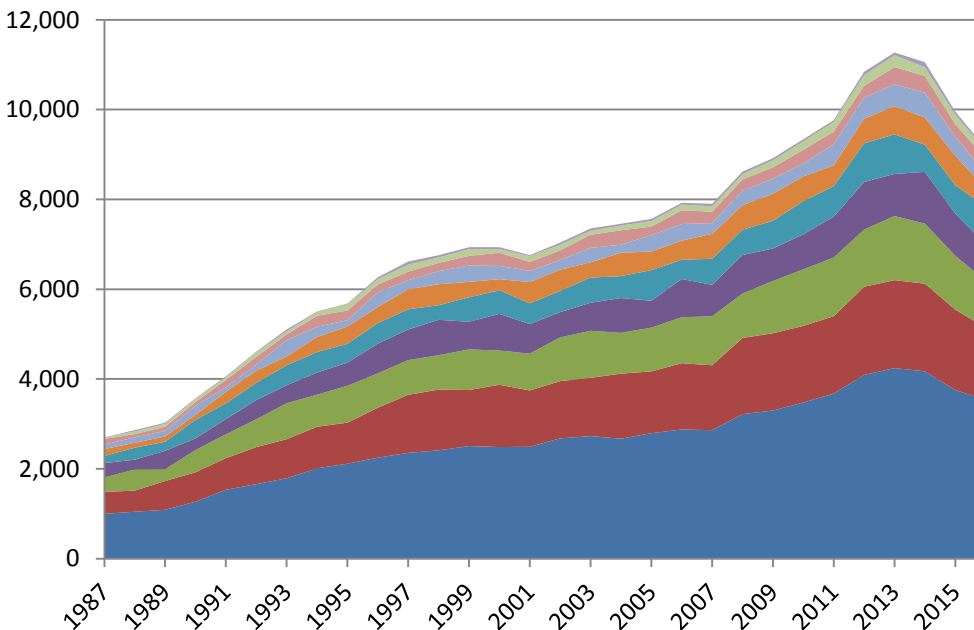


Figure 1: Anthropology degree completions, segmented by decile. Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 1987-2015 (final) and 2016 (provisional).

From 1987–1999, anthropology degree completions increased in absolute terms, and also as a percentage of all undergraduate degrees granted, increasing from 0.28% of bachelor's degrees in 1987 to 0.58% in 1999. After that, they remained roughly stable until 2010, and subsequently increased until 2013, when they totaled 0.63% of undergraduate degrees. Although anthropology degrees have declined since then, the total number of undergraduate degrees has continued to increase, reaching a record of 1.94 million in 2016 (of which only 0.47% were in anthropology, the lowest share since 1993). These trends are illustrated in Figure 2.

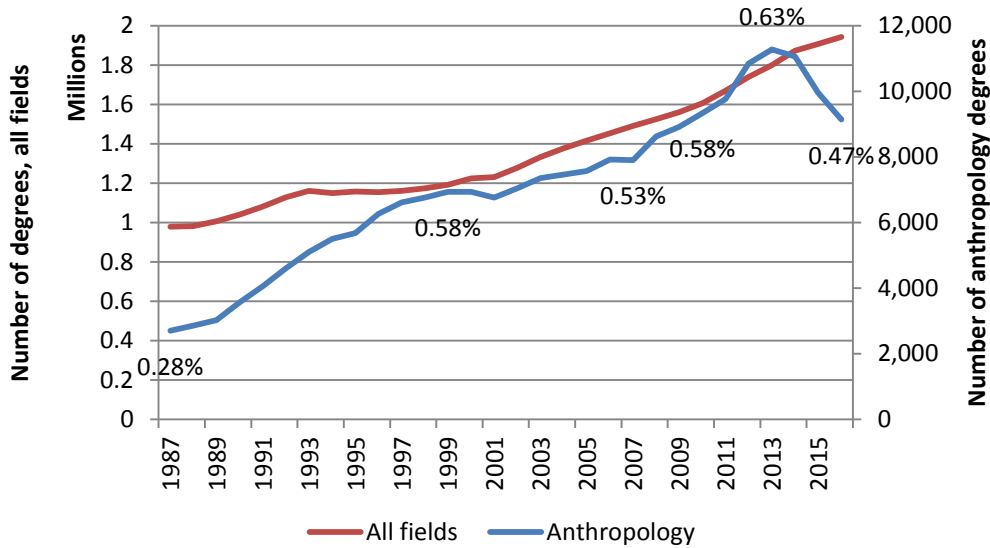


Figure 2: Trends in anthropology compared to all bachelor's degrees (Labels: Anthropology as percent of total). Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 1987-2015 (final) and 2016 (provisional).

Despite sharp increases and declines in degrees granted, the number of colleges and universities granting bachelor's degrees in anthropology has increased slowly but steadily throughout this time period. As Figure 3 shows, changes in the number of degrees offered are due not to new departments opening and old ones shutting down, but to changes in the size of departments. The median department granted six degrees in 1987, 16 in 2013 and 13 in 2016.

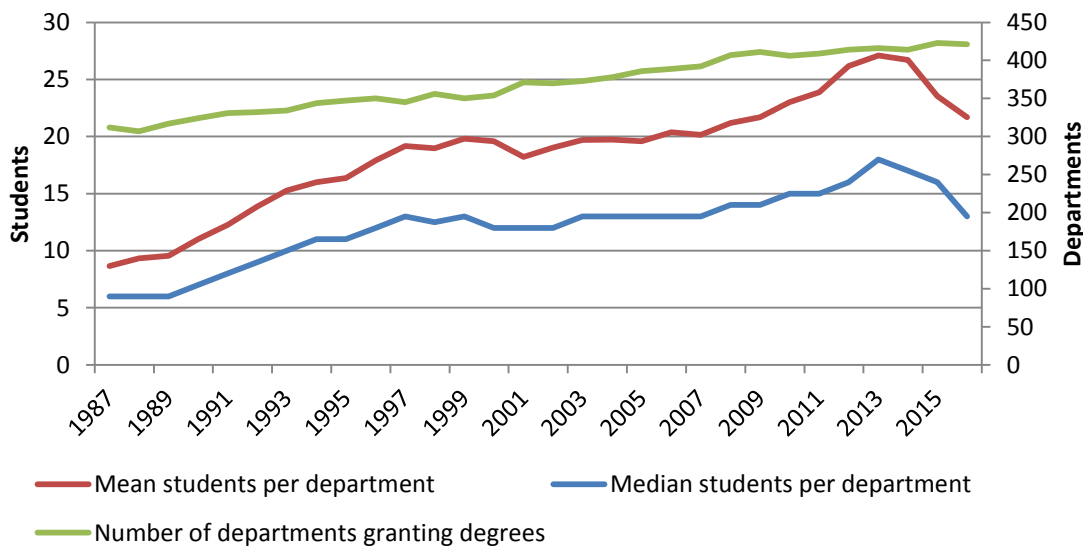


Figure 3: Departments vs. students per department. Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 1987-2015 (final) and 2016 (provisional).

According to the AAA's 2016 survey of departments, undergraduate course enrollments have also declined in recent years, though not as steeply as degree completions. The question, then, is how we

might recruit students to declare a major in anthropology once they are already taking anthropology classes.

Is this pattern typical among the social sciences?

Since 2003, there have been between 6,000–12,000 anthropology graduates a year, which ranks anthropology near international relations and general social sciences. In recent years, criminology has grown into this range as well, as has research and experimental psychology, a new designation added in

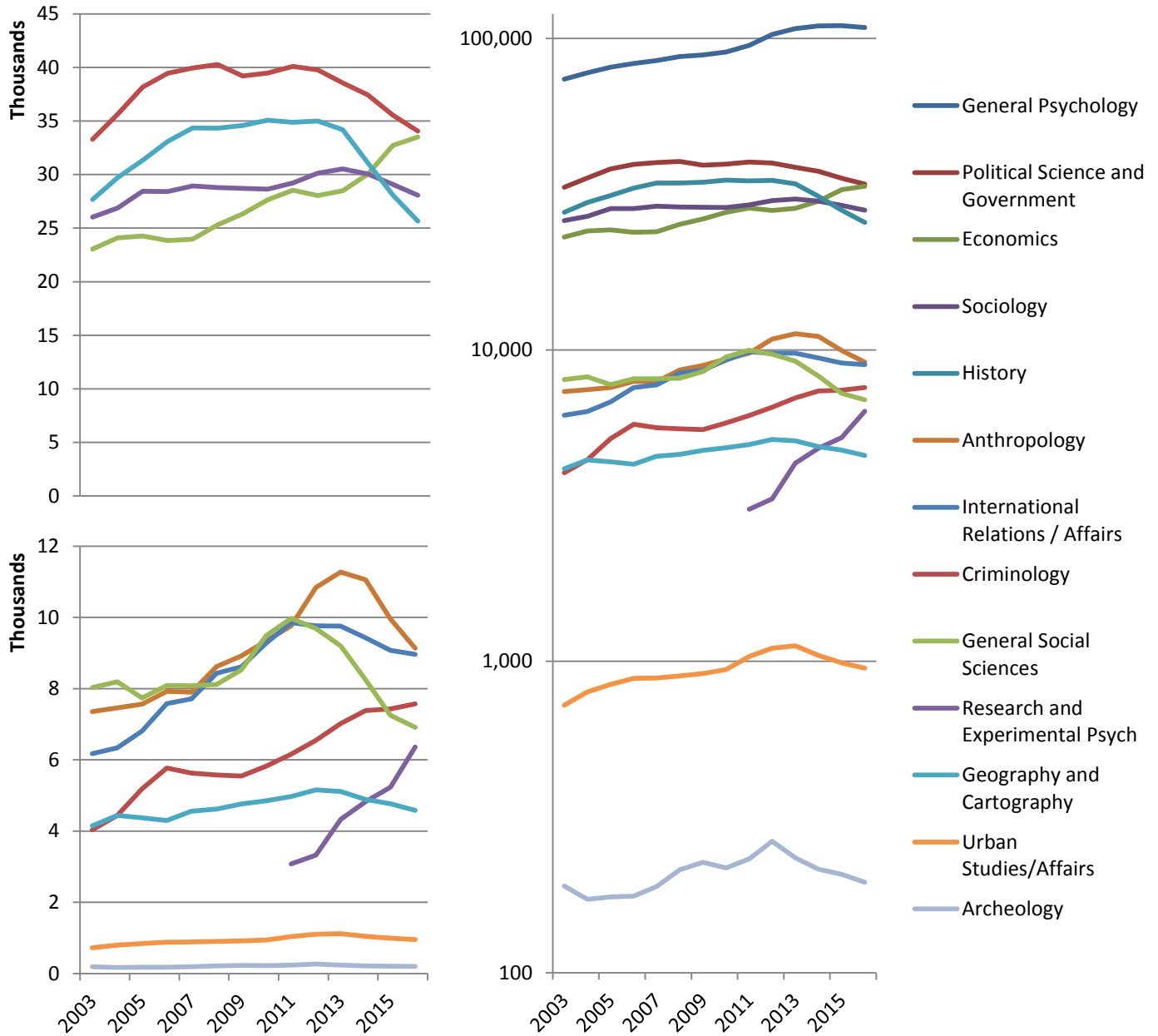


Figure 4: Social science degree completions. (a) Larger disciplines; (b) Small to medium disciplines; (c) Logarithmic scale. Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 2003-2015 (final) and 2016 (provisional).

2010–2011. Geography is somewhat smaller, with 4,000–5,000 graduates a year; urban studies (700–1,100) and archaeology (175–265) are much smaller; political science, economics, sociology and history are larger (20,000–40,000); and general psychology is in a class by itself (passing 90,000 in 2010 and 100,000 just two years later). Year-over-year trends are depicted in Figure 4.

As the figure shows, the declines in anthropology degree completions have come in parallel to similar declines in political science, history and general social science, as well as more modest declines in sociology, international relations and geography. At the same time, general psychology, economics and criminology have continued to increase. While explanations are beyond the scope of this data set, anecdotal evidence from faculty suggests that there may be a connection to the different social science disciplines' perceived relevance to career preparation. If students see economics and criminology as preparation for jobs in business or law enforcement, they may find it easier to justify taking on the expense of an undergraduate education in those fields.

There is reason to believe that “students at less selective schools ... tend to choose majors that are more likely to lead to an immediate, well-paying job” (Cheng 2017; see also Choy and Bradburn 2008). While these analyses consider all social sciences as “academic” rather than “career-oriented” majors, we can investigate whether a similar pattern holds among the social sciences by comparing the proportion of bachelor's degree recipients from more and less selective institutions across social science fields. To complete the analysis, I used definitions provided by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.), which identifies institutions as “selective” if their students fall into the third and fourth quintile, and “more selective” in the top quintile, as measured by SAT / ACT scores.

In 2015, the most recent year for which final release data are available, 65% of anthropology degrees were granted by “more selective” institutions, which places anthropology in the middle of the pack, along with urban studies and political science. In general social science, which has also experienced a recent downturn, only 38% of graduates came from these institutions; at the other end of the scale, 81% of economics degrees were granted by “more selective” institutions, but this field is on an upward trend. This suggests that the connection between enrollment trends and institution selectivity is not simplistic, and a longitudinal analysis bears this out, as shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6. Recent growth in economics and decline in anthropology are both driven by more selective schools; conversely, growth in criminology and decline in general social science are both driven by less selective schools.

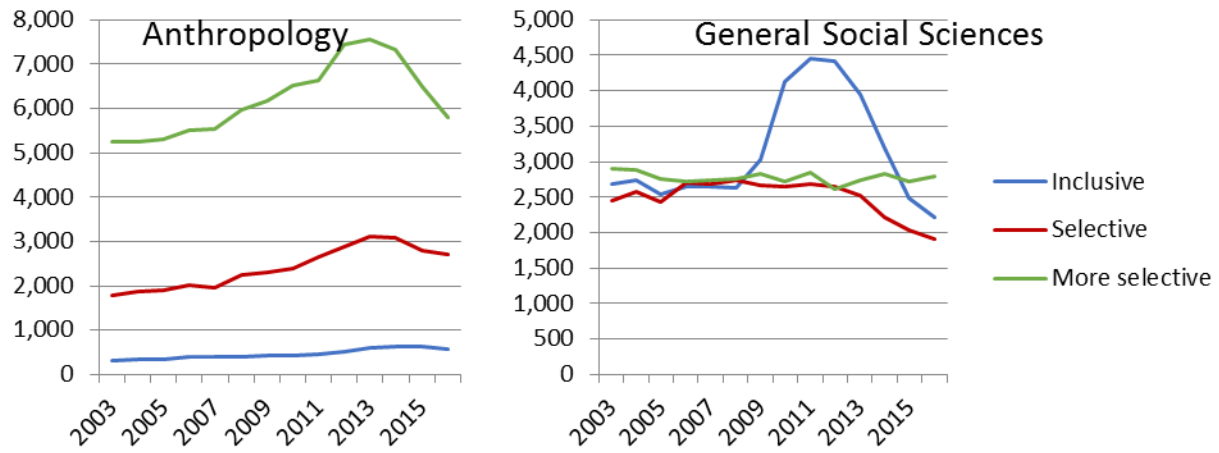


Figure 5: Selectivity in fields with recent decline. Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 2003-2015 (final) and 2016 (provisional).

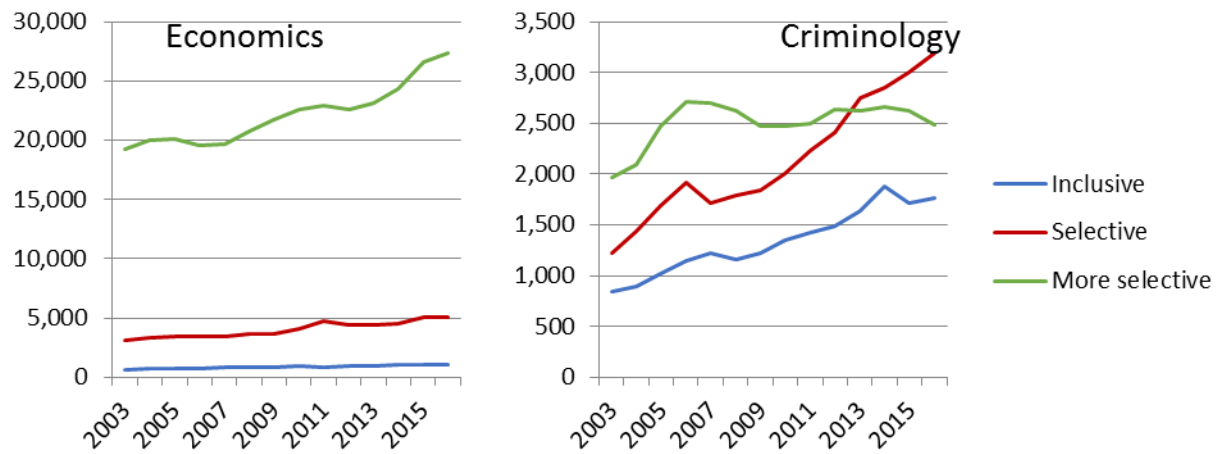


Figure 6: Selectivity in fields with recent increase. Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 2003-2015 (final) and 2016 (provisional).

Another way to address the issue of career readiness is to look within anthropology but focusing on applied programs. Not all departments give equal emphasis and attention to the relevance of anthropology to a variety of professional careers. To identify a subset of programs that pay particular attention to this issue, we may consider the 31 departments that are current members of the Consortium of Practicing and Applied Anthropology (<http://copainfo.org/programs/>). Figure 7 shows the number of graduates of these programs, expressed both in absolute terms and as a percentage of all anthropology degrees.

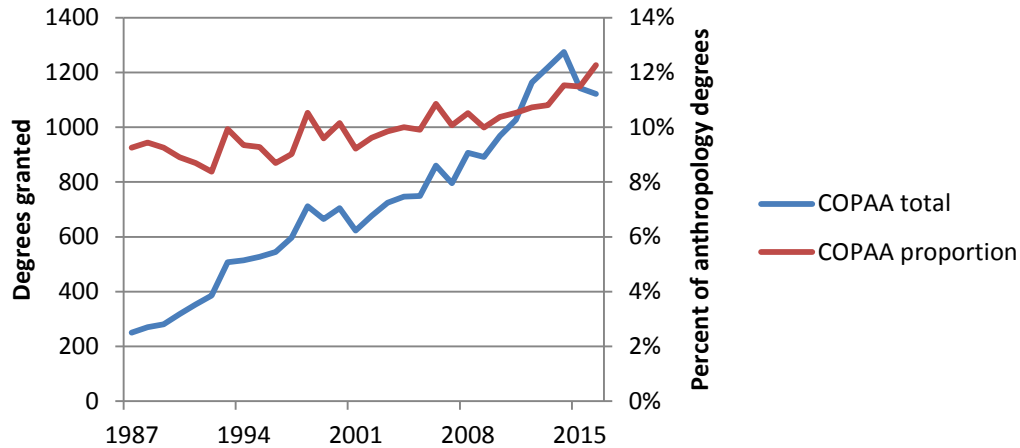


Figure 7: Degrees granted by COPAA member departments. Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 2003-2015 (final) and 2016 (provisional).

While COPAA degree completions, like anthropology degree completions overall, have declined in recent years, we do observe some differences. COPAA hit its peak a year later, in 2014, and has not declined as much since that date. As a result, we see that the proportion of four-year anthropology degrees earned at today's COPAA departments has been on a general upward trend since at least 2000, if not longer, and has consistently increased year over year since 2009. This trend aligns with the anecdotal evidence mentioned earlier in suggesting that a focus on applied careers may help to "recession-proof" an anthropology department.

Gender balance

Historically, about 70% of anthropology graduates have been women. As degree completions have risen and fallen over the last 15 years, the proportion of women has slowly but steadily increased from 69% in 2003 to 73% in 2016. As numbers have fallen since 2013, the number of women has dropped more in absolute terms, but the proportion of men is lower now than it was then. In the same time period, women have consistently earned 57–58% of all bachelor's degrees. These trends are shown in Figure 8.

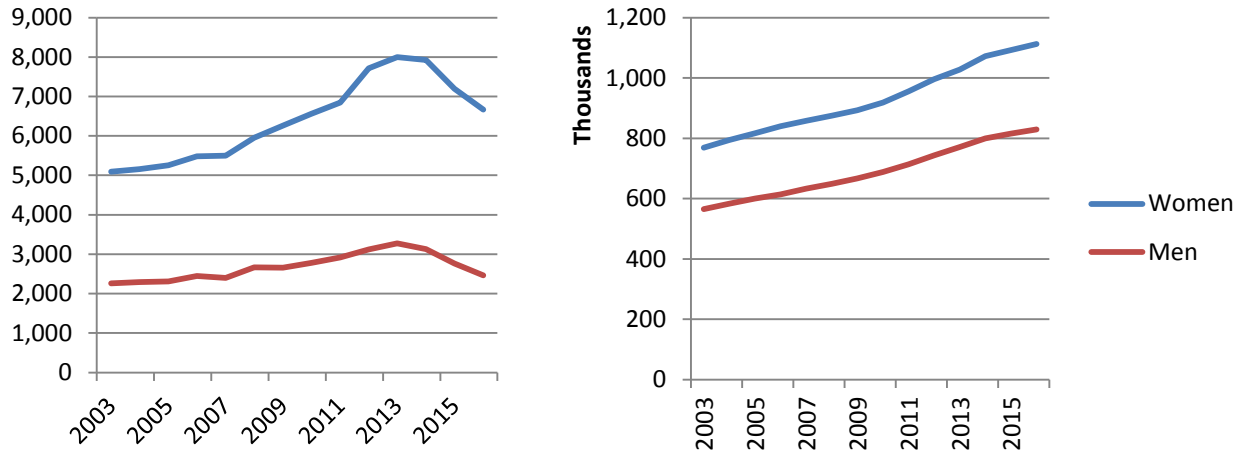


Figure 8: Women and men bachelor's degree recipients (a) in anthropology; (b) all fields. Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 2003-2015 (final) and 2016 (provisional).

Anthropology has a higher proportion of women than most other social science fields. It falls below only general psychology (76–78% women graduates per year) and experimental psychology (75–80%), and ranks near archaeology (64–76%) and sociology (69–71%). At the other end of the scale, criminology is near parity, and men outnumber women in history, economics, geography and political science (see Figure 9).

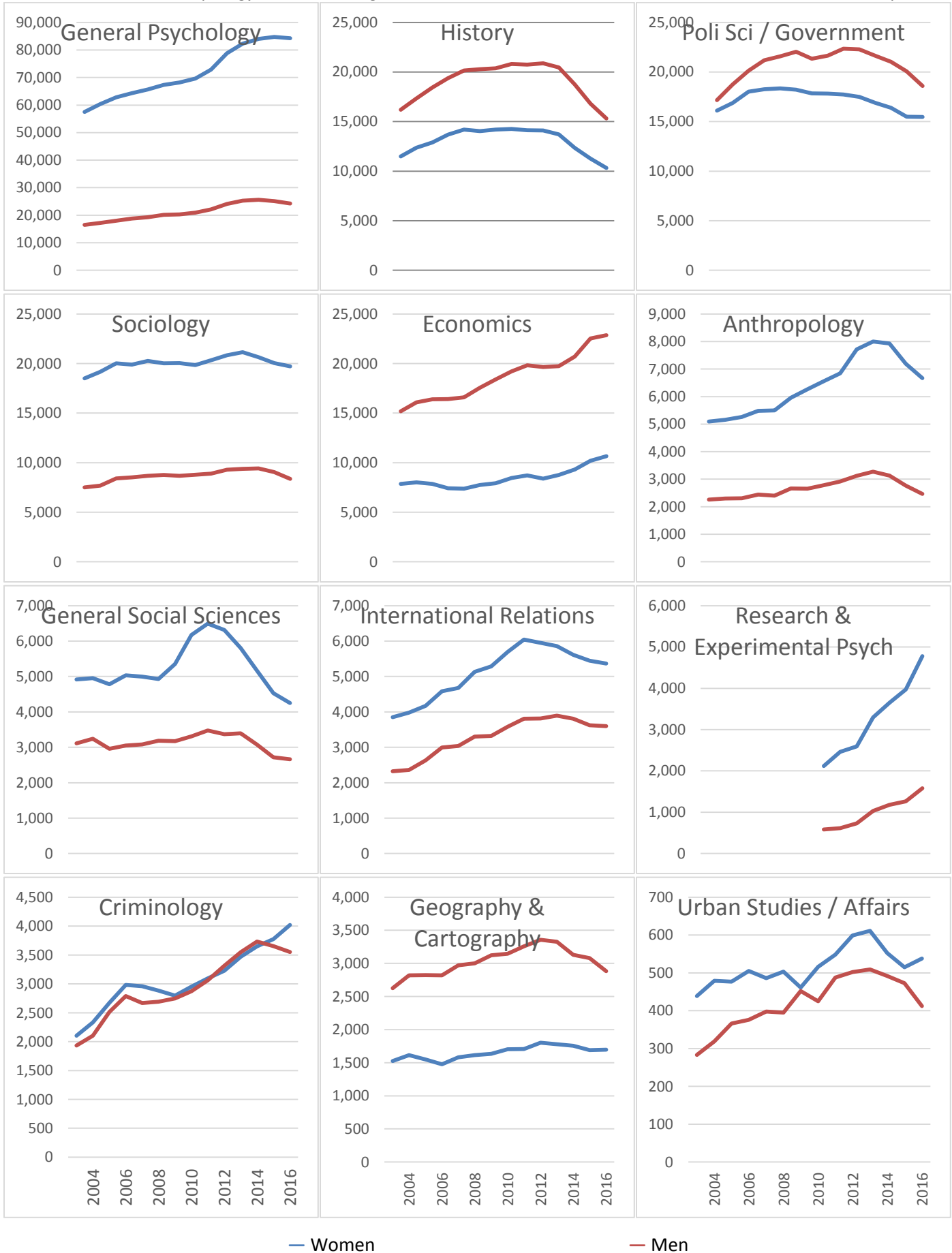


Figure 9: Gender balance, compared across social science fields. Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 2003-2015 (final) and 2016 (provisional).

Racial makeup

While many anthropologists resist using racial categorization as a proxy for ethnic diversity, it is the only opportunity that an administrative data set such as IPEDS provides to help us understand the presence of members of underrepresented ethn racial groups in higher education settings. Since we are looking at historical data, this report uses the old OMB (Census) classification that categorizes Pacific Islanders as Asian and Middle Easterners and North Africans as White, and that did not include *Two or more races* as a reporting value until 2008. Note that institutions do not report a racial classification for students with “non-resident alien” immigration status, so those students are excluded from this analysis, as are those for whom no racial classification was reported.

To provide a baseline, Figure 10 shows the distribution of all US bachelor's degree recipients across racial classifications since 2003. Successive four-year-degree cohorts are becoming more racially diverse: Between 2003 and 2016, the number of bachelor's degrees granted to Native students was essentially flat, while the number of degrees granted to White students grew by 124%, to both Black and Asian students by 163%, and to Latino students by 249%.

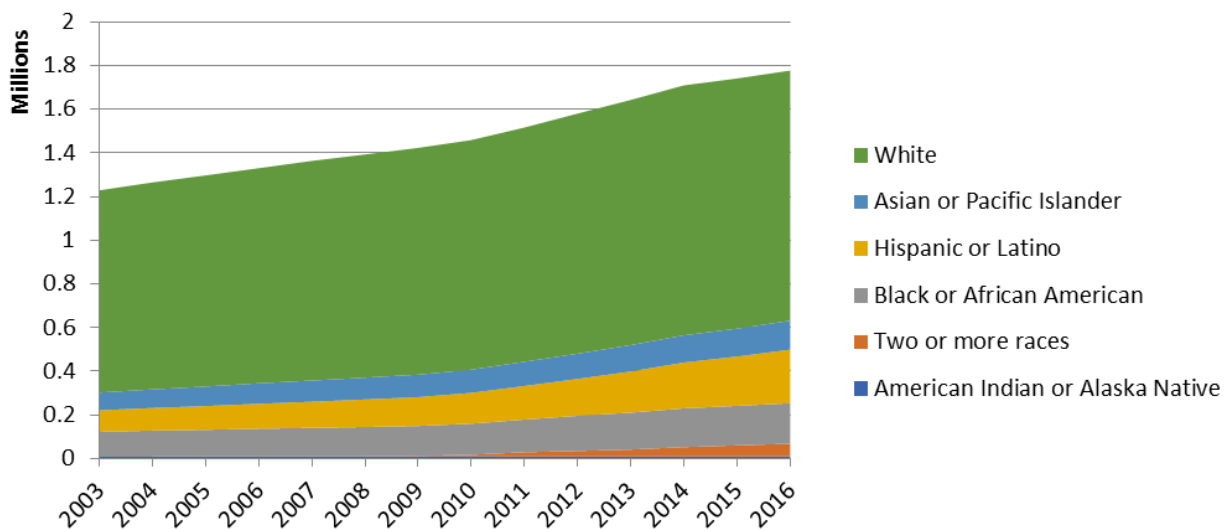


Figure 10: Racial classification, all bachelor's degrees. Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 2003-2015 (final) and 2016 (provisional).

In anthropology, these trends are more extreme: in 2016, Native degree recipients were at 59% of 2003 levels, Whites were equal to 2003, Asians at 154%, African Americans at 194% and Latinos at 305%. In the peak year of 2013, there were 137% as many White anthropology graduates compared to 2003; since that time, they have fallen back to 2003 levels, while students of color have continued to earn anthropology degrees at increasing rates.

Figure 11 below compares the racial classification of bachelor's degree recipients across social science disciplines. Among these fields, geography has a higher proportion of White students, economics a higher proportion of Asians, and sociology a higher proportion of African Americans.

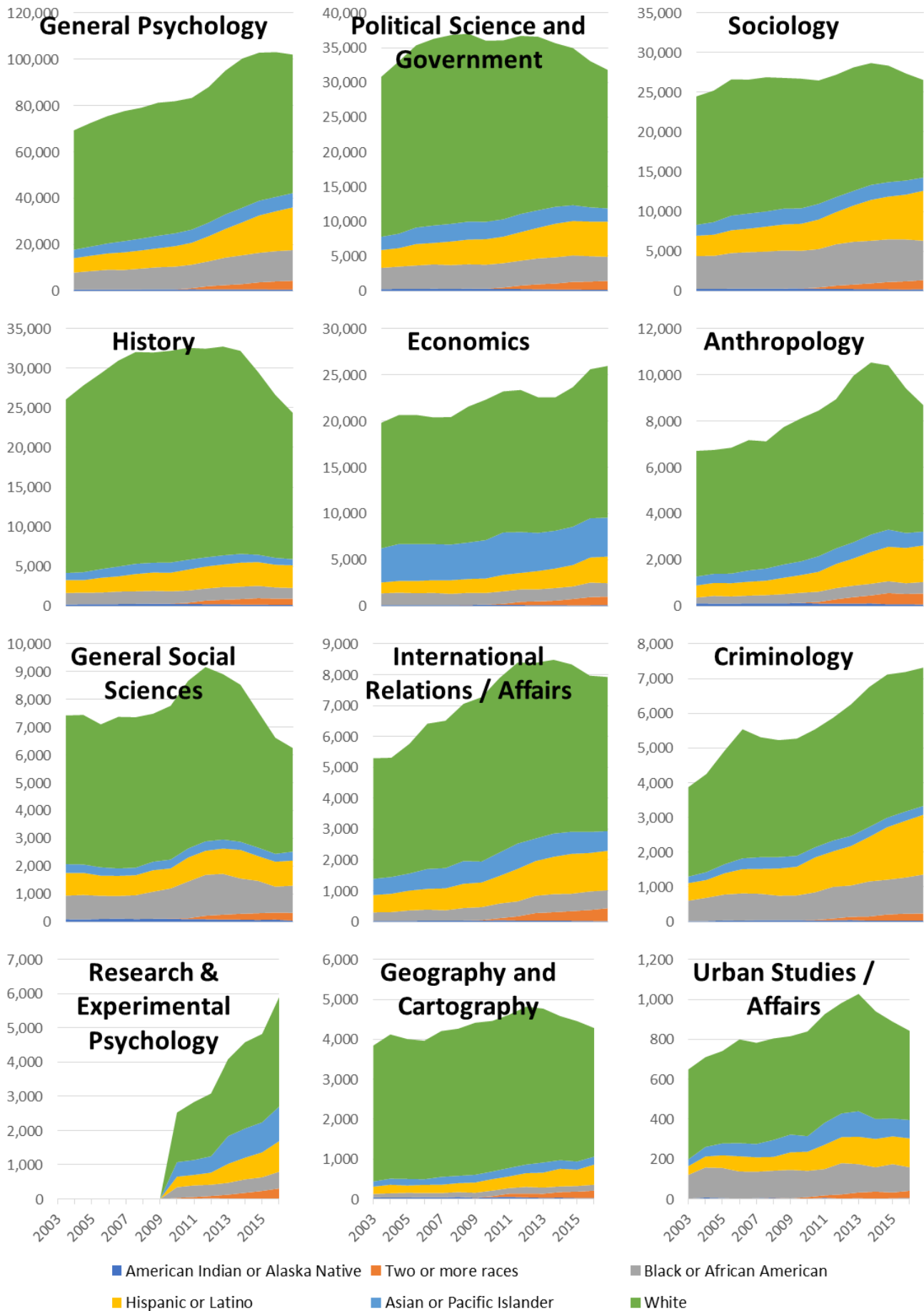


Figure 11: Racial makeup of social science fields. Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 2003-2015 (final) and 2016 (provisional).

Among these fields, only sociology has become “majority-minority,” with White students receiving 49% of degrees in 2015, 46% in 2016, and 58% of the total since 2003. White students are slightly overrepresented in anthropology relative to all bachelor's degrees (73% of anthropology vs. 71% of all degrees since 2003), and exceed 80% of degree recipients in history, geography and archaeology.

Next steps

At the Association level, the clearest point of intervention that this analysis suggests is to advance the idea that anthropology is a job-ready major that provides solid training for a wide range of meaningful careers. In parallel with this report, we are compiling a set of profiles of anthropology graduates who have gone on to apply their education in a variety of settings, providing some specific examples that departments can offer to prospective anthropology majors. We are also completing a review of learning outcomes documents that were provided to us by a sample of departments, in which we identify a few key competencies that reflect a consensus among programs, as well as parameters of variation that capture individual departments' particular strengths. Through these themes, we will begin to articulate the contribution of an undergraduate education in anthropology, not only to the individual graduate's store of transferable skills for the workplace, but to fostering a respect and understanding of cultural difference that are essential for citizenship in a diverse society.

To this end, we invite all our members, including professors as well as non-academic practitioners, to join us in discussing ways to strengthen anthropology departments by promoting the value of anthropology education.

A note on the data

Every year, all U.S. colleges and universities that receive federal financial aid are required to report certain data to the U.S. Department of Education, including counts of degree completions at each level and in each academic field, broken down by gender and race. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) then makes these data available to the public through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), accessible online at <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds>.

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