

A Review of Undergraduate Learning Outcomes in Anthropology

Many anthropology departments have created departmental learning outcomes documents that identify the skills and abilities students are to acquire by the completion of their degree. In this report, we summarize a sample of these documents in order to identify common pedagogical objectives among departments. This may be useful to departments that are in the process of assessing or designing learning outcomes documents, who can now easily compare their outcomes to those developed at similar institutions. By identifying learning outcomes that are often shared across departments, we also hope to prompt discussion about undergraduate anthropology education more generally.

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Introduction

Universities, departments, and degree programs often produce learning outcomes documents that outline what their graduates should know, understand, and be able to do. One use of these documents is internal, as program evaluations may require departments to show how their coursework and other requirements qualify students for the credential they earn. More recently, they have been used to improve comparability of university degrees between institutions, beginning in Europe with the Bologna Process (Kehm 2010). To accomplish this, a process of “tuning” was created in which faculty collaboratively define the core of the discipline, learning outcomes are aligned to student career destinations, and feedback is solicited from a broad range of stakeholders within and outside the university. This process was later adapted to non-European contexts, including the US (Institute for Evidence-Based Change 2012), where it has been used primarily by state higher education authorities, and also by some scholarly societies (American Historical Association 2016; National Communication Association 2016).

In this report, we begin to investigate whether a similar tuning project would be of benefit to the field of anthropology. In recent years, there has been a decline in anthropology bachelor’s degree completions, which may be linked to the difficulty students have in seeing anthropology as a major that will prepare them for professional careers (Ginsberg 2017). We believe that if students, along with their families and potential employers, had a better sense of what anthropology graduates could know and do, then this would help to encourage them to invest their college years and tuition dollars in an anthropology degree. Since no tuning project has taken place in anthropology, this report offers a preliminary view across departments in which we review and compare outcomes documents currently in use. One size

definitely does not fit all, as we observed variation that reflected individual departments' particular areas of focus or interdisciplinary collaboration. Nevertheless, there are distinct commonalities, as most outcomes addressed the areas of theoretical foundations, research engagement, and skill development.

Overview

From November 2 – December 21, 2016, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) invited U.S. college and university departments that grant degrees in anthropology to participate in an online survey with questions about their academic program, student enrollment, and faculty composition. One question asked departments whether they had created a document outlining their learning goals or outcomes for undergraduate anthropology majors, and if so, whether they were able to share that document with the AAA. Out of 123 responses to this question, 27 departments (21.9%) stated that they did not have a learning outcomes document, 66 (53.7%) had documents that they were unable to share, and 30 (24.4%) provided documents through the survey. For more information about responding departments, see *About the Participants* below.

To identify common themes among the learning outcomes documents we reviewed, we treated each document as a list or collection of pedagogical objectives, and treated each objective (e.g., *Students will understand the methods used in the discipline of anthropology*) as a single data point. We found that these objectives could be categorized into three overarching themes: (1) Theoretical Foundations, (2) Research Engagement, and (3) Skill Development. Each of these topical categories is further subdivided into specific areas of emphasis, allowing us to classify learning outcomes at a greater level of granularity. Figure 1 shows the list of topical codes and illustrates the number of responding departments that had at least one learning outcome within each area.

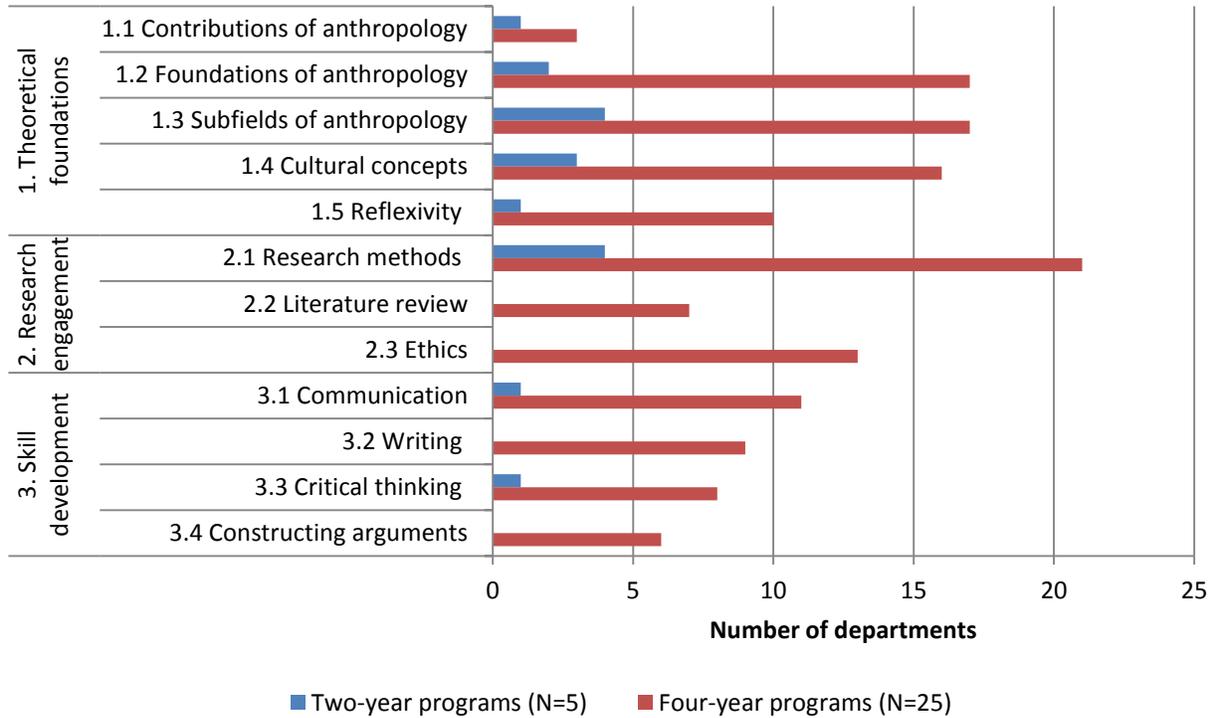


Figure 1: Frequency of topics

We note that these categories bear some resemblance to those provided in sister societies’ learning outcomes guidelines (American Historical Association 2016, American Psychological Association 2013, National Communication Association 2015), even though we did not refer to these guidelines in our analysis, and as discussed above, they were written using quite different processes.

Along with the topical designations, each learning objective that we observed was phrased as an expectation that students would either gain knowledge of anthropological topics and perspectives, or acquire skills of application; these are referred to as the Knowing and Doing functional categories. In addition, we observed whether each learning outcome made specific reference to one or more subfields of anthropology, a dimension of analysis that was particularly salient in topics 1.3 (Subfields of Anthropology), 2.1 (Research Methods), and 2.3 (Ethics). Figure 2 shows the number of departments that mentioned biological anthropology, archaeology, and sociocultural anthropology within each of these topical areas; specific reference to linguistics was for the most part conspicuously absent, although reference to “four fields” was common.

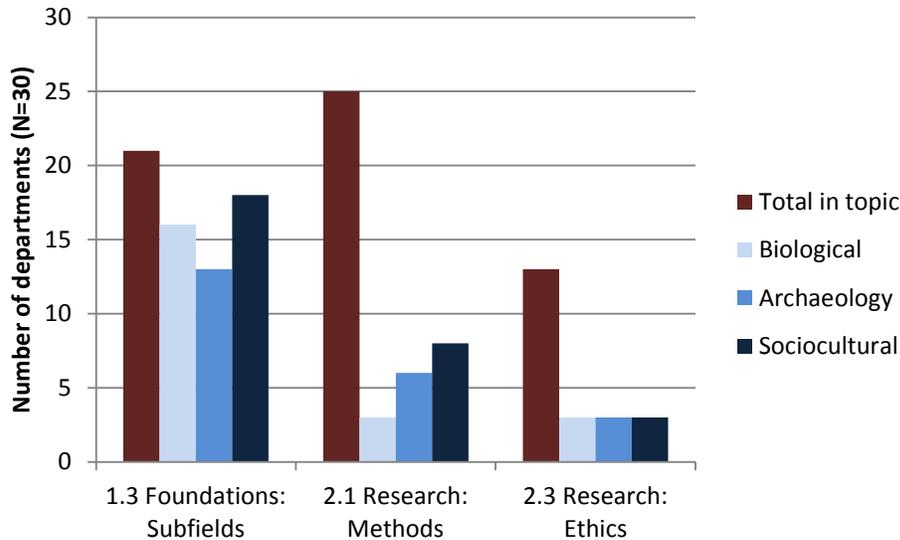


Figure 2: Frequent reference to subfields

Analyzing learning outcomes according to their topical and functional categories reveals the common areas undergraduate students are being trained in, from subfield-specific methods to general academic skills that are transferrable across disciplines and into the professional workplace. These observations reflect correspondences we observed among different departments' learning outcomes documents, which persisted across boundaries of size, geographical location, admissions selectivity, the presence of graduate programs, and even between two- and four-year programs.

At the same time, we recognize areas of variability that reflected differences among departments. A department's relative strength or weakness in particular subfields of anthropology was typically reflected in their learning outcomes; for example, a department whose faculty are all ethnographers would not expect students to learn ethical ways of working with non-human research participants. Additionally, while participating departments were primarily standalone anthropology departments, some were joint social science departments, with associated disciplines such as sociology, geography, criminal justice, forensic studies, and environmental sciences. Accordingly, these departments' learning outcomes reflect the mingling of disciplines and contain objectives that reflect their particular resources and faculty capabilities. Learning outcomes may also reflect student demographics, institutional missions, interpretations of foundational anthropological knowledge, and possible local or state requirements.

In the next sections of this report, we provide the definitions that we used to assign each learning outcome to a topical (foundations / research / skills) and functional (knowing / doing) category. Following these definitions, we provide example outcome statements from the documents we reviewed, and we conclude with evidence that suggests our observations may be broadly representative throughout the discipline.

Topical Categories

This section provides definitions of the three main topical categories that were used to categorize learning outcomes, as well as the subcategories that fall within each area.

Theoretical Foundations in Anthropology

Describes the foundational knowledge students need to obtain within their specific subfield and general anthropology. Topics included are the study of the origins of anthropology, key theories and theorists, and the contributions of anthropology. In addition, the learning goals encompass cultural awareness and reflexivity in terms of providing students with an anthropologically-diverse lens.

- 1.1. **Contributions of anthropology:** Emphasizes the significance of having an anthropological mindset because of its unique approach to understanding issues culturally, socially, and politically.
- 1.2. **Foundations of anthropology:** Views anthropology holistically as one discipline and encourages a broad understanding of it. Concerns major theoretical approaches, common terminology found throughout the discipline, core issues and debates within the field, and the development of an anthropologically-informed frame of academic inquiry.
- 1.3. **Subfields of anthropology:** Approaches anthropology as a collection of distinct subfields. Centers on the theoretical approaches, terminology, concepts, and central ideas found within the subfields.
- 1.4. **Cultural concepts:** Requires students to use anthropological perspectives to understand cultural diversity, cultural bias, and the formation of social patterns.
- 1.5. **Reflexivity:** Explores the dilemmas in social inequality and social justice. Prescribes the ability to think reflexively and analyze one's own familiar cultural environment through a critical lens.

Research Engagement

This section details the main features of research, including methodology, literature reviews, and ethical considerations. Learning outcomes in each theme require not only foundational knowledge of the subject, but also practical application in a general research project, a subfield-specific project, or the everyday life of the student.

- 2.1. **Research Methods:** Concerns general research methodologies as well as subfield-specific methodologies such as ethnographic or archaeological field work. Requires students to evaluate and employ the research methodologies that are appropriate to contemporary events.
- 2.2. **Literature Review:** Involves the analysis and critique of scholarly literature across the fields of anthropology. This includes evaluating strengths and weaknesses of informational resources, broadening or narrowing searches, creating links between various sources of information, and synthesizing sources into reports.
- 2.3. **Ethics:** Details students' abilities to recognize and identify ethical behavior as anthropological researchers. Ethical considerations include respect for human diversity, obligations to informants, obtaining proper permission from review boards, abiding by subfield-specific ethical principles, and exhibiting ethical behavior in everyday life.

Skill Development

This section emphasizes students' abilities to apply general skills obtained in their undergraduate career to professional or personal settings.

- 3.1. **Communication:** Features the ability to communicate with multiple audiences across diverse media platforms, beyond education and outreach. This includes interpersonal skills, etiquette, articulating arguments orally, and being able to explain anthropological concepts clearly to the general public.
- 3.2. **Writing:** Stresses students' ability to write well in formats other than ethnographies or anthropological research. It encompasses various forms of writing including critical essays, field notes, and well-structured arguments.
- 3.3. **Critical Thinking:** Highlights analytical thinking about issues or questions within the discipline. It also includes the use of anthropological theories to evaluate scientific concepts, research, and social phenomena.
- 3.4. **Constructing Arguments and Debates:** Advocates for the skill of identifying common fallacies, central debates, and types of argumentation. It also focuses on the practicing these skills in the form of constructing debates and arguments both inside and outside of the classroom.

Functional Categories

To fully comprehend the subtle difference between learning outcome statements, they were divided into the dual functional categories of Knowing and Doing. These functions are defined as follows:

Knowing: Focus on students' acquisition of intellectual tools. Statements within this category emphasize recall, understanding, appreciation, awareness, and the attainment of concepts and ideas widely distributed throughout the anthropological field.

Doing: Emphasize engagement with course material through the application of concepts and ideas. Statements within this category accentuate creation, critique, evaluation, participation, and application.

Not every topical category contains learning outcomes that correspond with both knowing and doing functions. In the following section, we present sample learning outcomes from the documents we reviewed, categorized by both topical and functional categories, and where applicable, showing specific relevance to particular subfields as well.

Sample Learning Outcomes

1. Theoretical foundations

1.1 Contributions of Anthropology	
	<i>Knowing:</i> Understand the unique contribution that anthropology makes to the study of culture and society and the ways in which it addresses the urgent issues of our times, especially with reference to the effects of globalization, the challenges in social and ethnic diversity, and the pursuit of social justice in the domains of health, the environment and human rights
1.2 Foundations	
	<i>Knowing:</i> Acquire intellectual tools to appreciate and analyze different worldview, subsistence patterns, modes of exchange, kinship and family organization, political institutions, strategies of socialization and education, religious beliefs, and technological expertise of societies in different areas of the world
1.3 Subfield Foundations	
<i>Unspecified Subfields</i>	<i>Knowing:</i> Compare and contrast theoretical and methodological foundations for at least two of the four sub-disciplines
<i>Biological</i>	<i>Knowing:</i> Demonstrate knowledge and understand of variation in primate, hominin, and human biology and behavior over time and across space <i>Doing:</i> Use physical anthropological knowledge and techniques to solve problems demonstrating competency in basic genetics, osteology, and primate anatomy
<i>Archaeology</i>	<i>Knowing:</i> Students will identify and describe major theoretical approaches to the study of archaeology
<i>Sociocultural</i>	<i>Knowing:</i> Explore in depth historical schools of anthropology, including culture history, functionalism and structuralism, as well as more current approaches to the discipline, including interpretive approaches, historical materialism, practice theory, and feminist theory
<i>Multiple Subfields</i>	<i>Knowing:</i> Utilize the scientific method in observations of human attributes (biology, behavior, language, artifacts)
1.4 Cultural Concepts	
	<i>Knowing:</i> Understand concepts within their cultural and historical contexts <i>Doing:</i> Deploy a holistic and comparative approach to provide a fresh perspective on issues such as sustainability, human rights, migration/immigration/forced resettlement, educational inequity, gender/sexuality, urban environment/design, health/illness/medical care
1.5 Reflexivity	
	<i>Knowing:</i> Demonstrate knowledge of and respect for the similarities and differences that characterize humans and human societies in the world <i>Doing:</i> Awareness of one’s own cultural filters, ability to think comparatively across sociocultural contexts and to apply a cultural relative perspective regarding cultural diversity

2. Research Engagement

2.1 Research Methods	
<i>General Methodology</i>	<p><i>Knowing:</i> Students will be able to explain how anthropological methods are employed to answer significant research questions</p> <p><i>Doing:</i> Identify, describe, and evaluate appropriate methods of data collection and data analysis</p>
<i>Biological</i>	<p><i>Knowing:</i> Students will demonstrate working knowledge of the methods of biological anthropology</p>
<i>Archaeology</i>	<p><i>Doing:</i> Students will select and evaluate the archaeological skills required to develop and conduct archaeological research related to artifact collection and the development of cultural models.</p>
<i>Sociocultural</i>	<p><i>Knowing:</i> Identify what constitutes ethnographic data and how it is generated and collected</p> <p><i>Doing:</i> First-hand experience of data collection methods central to anthropology including ethnographic field research, interviewing, and archival research</p>
2.2 Literature Review	
	<p><i>Knowing:</i> Familiarity with anthropological literature and qualitative/quantitative data in at least one of the sub disciplines of anthropology</p> <p><i>Doing:</i> Gather and interpret information from diverse sources (literature review, databases, and own archive)</p>
2.3 Ethics	
<i>General Ethics</i>	<p><i>Knowing:</i> Understand the social, political, and ethical implications of anthropological research</p> <p><i>Doing:</i> Practice ethical and civically engaged anthropology and sociology</p>
<i>Biological</i>	<p><i>Knowing:</i> Have a scientific understanding of human biological diversity, including an appreciation of ethical concerns arising from that diversity</p>
<i>Archaeology</i>	<p><i>Knowing:</i> Students will demonstrate knowledge of the ethical and legal issues surrounding preservation of archaeological sites, the acquisition, curation, and exhibition of human remains, sacred objects and other sensitive materials</p>
<i>Sociocultural</i>	<p><i>Knowing:</i> Understand ethical responsibilities of anthropologists, the politics of writing, and audience, and the dynamic nature of ethnographic encounter</p>

3. Skill Development

3.1 Communication	
	<p><i>Knowing:</i> Understand the diverse media and forums through which anthropological knowledge is communicated to the public</p> <p><i>Doing:</i> Possess skills to communicate anthropological knowledge effectively through writing, oral presentation, and data presentation in various formats for diverse audiences</p>
3.2 Writing	
	<p><i>Doing:</i> Develop and apply analytical and writing skills in coursework, students-faculty research collaborations, internships, civic engagement activities, entrepreneurial projects, and independent research</p>
3.3 Critical Thinking	
	<p><i>Doing:</i> Demonstrates ability to analyze and synthesize in relation to anthropological issues or theories</p>
3.4 Constructing Arguments and Debates	
	<p><i>Knowing:</i> students will recognize and value the central contemporary anthropological debates and perspectives</p> <p><i>Doing:</i> a capacity to construct and evaluate arguments in light of anthropological evidence</p>

About the Participants

To this point, the report has relied on learning outcomes documents that were provided by a self-selected group of anthropology departments. To determine how representative this group is of all anthropology degree-granting departments, we generated¹ a list of 497 colleges and universities that granted anthropology degrees in 2015, the most recent year for which confirmed totals were available, and compared our respondents to this reference population along several dimensions recorded by the Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.). We found that the departments that provided learning outcomes were representative of this larger population, with no statistically significant differences in Carnegie type (Figure 3), geographic region (Figure 4) or admissions selectivity (Figure 5). For example, all five of our associate's degree outcomes documents came from colleges in the Far West, and 81% of all two-year anthropology programs are located in this region.

¹ Source: National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 2015 (final).

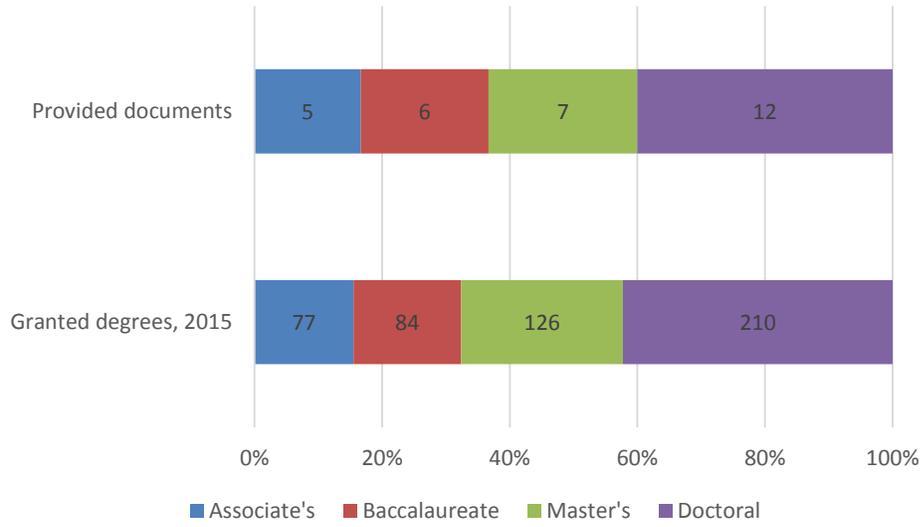


Figure 3: Carnegie type

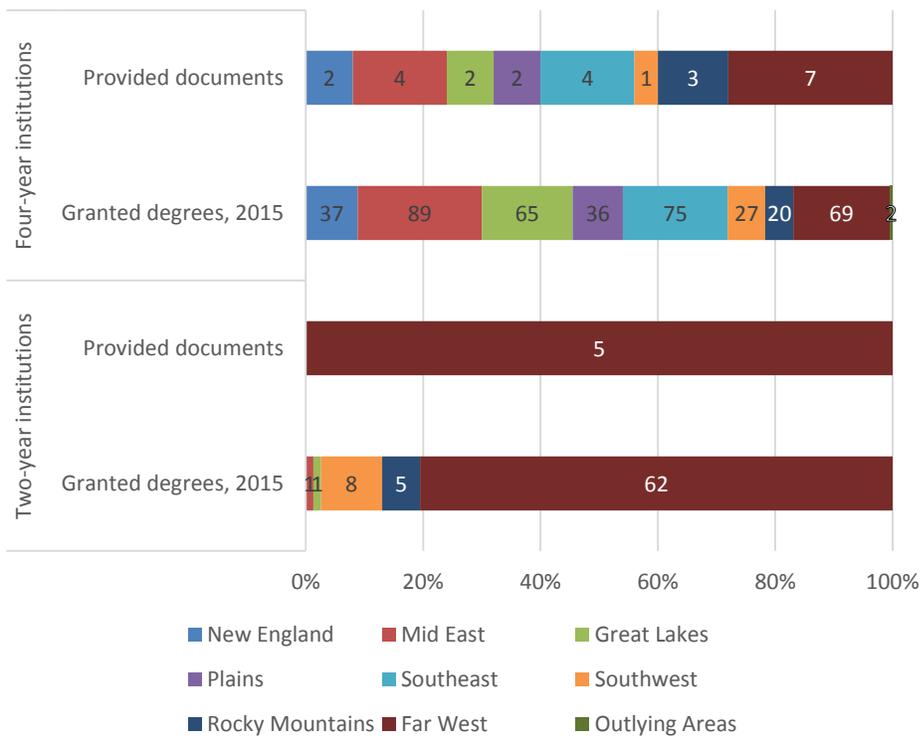


Figure 4: Geographic region

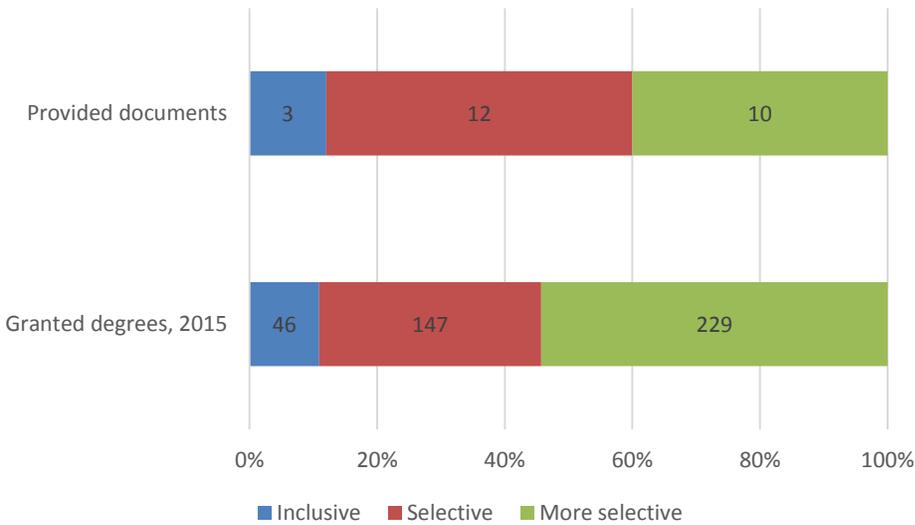


Figure 5: Selectivity

In addition to institutional characteristics, we also assessed how common it is for departments to have published learning outcomes documents. By reviewing the departmental websites of all four-year institutions in our reference population, we identified 192 (45%) that had published learning outcomes online. This figure underestimates the actual number of anthropology departments with learning outcomes documents; for example, eight of the departments that provided documents through the AAA survey did not publish learning outcomes on their website, and we have no way of knowing how many other departments have created such documents for internal use only. While we did not conduct a rigorous analysis of all 192 documents obtained through the web search, a cursory review suggests that the topical categories we identified will represent most undergraduate learning outcomes throughout the discipline.

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