When I started this job in February, a big part of the learning curve was coming to understand what “association research” is, and how we carry out research on anthropology not only as a scholarly discipline, but also as a profession.
Most of the research I've done so far is published through a section of the AAA website called Anthropology Information Central.

http://www.americananthro.org/LearnAndTeach/Landing.aspx?ItemNumber=13179&navItemNumber=577

This page is meant to provide answers to frequently asked questions addressing topics such as anthropology education, the academic and non-academic job market, AAA membership, scholarly publication and anthropology in the media. There’s a clearinghouse of existing working group and task force reports, as well as an ongoing series of reports that I’ve written based on last spring’AAA members
And based on this information, I’m able to answer a lot of questions that come in from members of the AAA and of the discipline more broadly. I end up talking to a lot of people who want to know more about anthropology, which often consists of ...

(Image credit: https://www.pexels.com/photo/cold-snow-winter-communication-68105/)
I have to give a presentation tomorrow.

How long do you have to go to school to be an anthropologist?

How much money do they make?

... students, who may ask questions such as these ...
... but the second biggest constituency is department chairs, who may ask questions such as these.

Now, for anthropologists, the answer to these questions may seem obvious, but I was able to provide quantitative data to reassure this person that, yes, these are core areas of anthropological research, and he won’t have any trouble.

But for this audience, I’ll look at three other areas that may be of interest: advocating for administration to support anthropology departments; contingent faculty hiring; and career advising for undergraduates.
First, advocacy. This is a question that I got from an understandably anxious chair. I could respond to it in two ways: first, using federal data, and second, using AAA’s own records from the AnthroGuide.
For federal data, I used IPEDS, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. In case it’s not familiar, all colleges and universities that participate in federal financial aid are required to report a fair amount of information to the government every year, and a lot of that information is made publicly available through the IPEDS web interface. One thing you can do is search degree completions by program, so every anthropology degree granted since the 1990s, listed by school, broken out by degree level, race and gender.

So I did a search for schools that had granted at least one anthropology degree per year over the last twelve years, but none over the last two years.
Out of five to six hundred anthropology degree granting colleges and universities, these eleven schools fit that profile. That’s a small percentage, but a big enough group to be concerning ... but drilling down further, we can provide additional nuance.
For example, this school is so small that going two years without granting a degree might just be part of the natural ebb and flow ...
And this school is a joint department of anthropology and sociology, where maybe when they did their data entry in 2008 and ‘09, they listed it as “anthropology,” but then in 2010 were back to listing “anthropology and sociology,” which is a separate category.

So just because these eleven schools have no anthro degrees on record in the last two years, it doesn’t mean they’ve closed down entirely.
To get another perspective on this, I asked my colleague Lauryl Zenobi, who coordinates AnthroGuide listings. And here’s what she said.

So in response to this question, I was able to provide not just reassurance, but data that he could take back to the dean and advocate for his department.
More and more jobs don’t offer tenure.

More and more, non-tenure track faculty don’t transition into tenure-line jobs.

What can we do about it?

Here’s another question that I received, this time from the Executive Board of AAA, which has recently established a working group on non-tenure track employment in anthropology. “What can we do about it” is a big, systemic question, but before we get there, I wanted to examine some of the presuppositions here. Is it really true that tenure-line jobs are decreasing? As a percent of faculty, it’s definitely true, and the American Association of University Professors has very clear data on that. But what about the transition from non-tenure track to tenure track? What about the idea that I can get my PhD and adjunct for a year or two until I get a full-time job—does that happen?
To investigate this, I looked at the member survey, where we asked respondents how many years they had spent working in different sectors: non-tenure track, pre-tenure, tenured, nonprofit, government, industry, etc., etc. And I looked at current faculty across different types of tenure status, to see what was the average length of time they had spent in each of these kinds of job.

To begin with, if we compare tenure track to tenured, then the second group really looks like the future of the first group. They’ve each spent a year and a half or so in non-tenure track jobs, but the tenured professors are a few years older, have spent a few more years pre-tenure (until they earned tenure), and then an average of about 11 years in tenured positions. There’s a clear path from number one, to number two.

And if non-tenure track jobs are a gateway into academic employment, we’d expect the third category to look like the first category, at an earlier stage of their career.
But in fact, that’s not what we see at all. Non-tenure track faculty are on average older than pre-tenure faculty, have spent less time in tenure-line jobs, and three to four times as much in non-tenure track jobs. This isn’t the gateway to tenure—it looks like a different career track entirely.

So I’m comfortable saying that our framing was correct: non-tenure track faculty don’t transition into tenure-line jobs.
The next question was, what can we do about it? To begin thinking about it, we asked non-tenure track faculty what their career goals were: did they plan to stay in their current position, move to a tenure-track position, move to a more stable NTT position, leave academia, or (no one selected this option) leave the workforce entirely?

Within this group, the #1 predictor of their response—more than prestige of school, full-time vs. part-time employment, even salary—was length of appointment. Professors with one- to three-year appointments look like they’re planning to stay in their current position until they can find a tenure-track job, while professors with four-year or longer appointments (this includes permanent faculty at non-tenure granting institutions) are planning to stay where they are.

But what surprised me is that overall, only 30% are even considering looking for non-academic jobs. That is, 70% of contingent faculty are not even thinking about leaving higher education. I wonder why that is—this is an observation that bears further study.
At any rate, to get another perspective on this question, we’re also asking about non-tenure line faculty in the AAA survey of anthropology degree-granting departments, which is currently running until December 9. This will give us another angle to understand contingent faculty hiring in higher ed, particularly as pertains to anthropology.

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Finally, we can talk about career advising for undergraduates. I’ve heard this from a lot of you this morning as well: students will come to you and say, “I love anthropology, but if I can’t tell my parents what kind of job I can get with an anthropology degree, I’m going to have to major in business.” And you want to say something like “Well, an anthropology degree prepares you to do whatever you want!” Which is true, but at the same time, not all that helpful.
On the member survey, we asked students what kind of careers they’re considering. (We had very few undergraduate respondents, so this analysis is going to include grad students as well, but I think the findings turn out to be applicable.) The details of this graph aren’t so important—mainly it’s just to get a sense of the categories they chose, such as higher education, social justice advocacy, museums, community development.

Now, the interesting thing is that we also asked the same question of survey respondents who are employed doing something other than college and university faculty. Not “what are you considering,” but “what are you doing.” And then we can compare the results, to get a sense of how well students’ goals map onto the actual job market. The method that I used to do that is to see the difference in rank. For example, the number one response of non-faculty was also higher education, so that’s a wash—the difference in rank is zero. And then you go on down the line.
Here are the results. The categories more toward the top are the ones that were ranked much higher by students, and the ones toward the bottom were ranked much higher by professional anthropologists. And in these two groups, you see certain trends. First, the practitioners are much more likely to name careers such as administration, assessment, management, finance—things that are very institutional. But on the other side, students are more likely to name development, tourism, social impact, community development—things that involve working directly with communities. They’re much more idealistic sounding.
Perhaps the clearest illustration of it is this: students ranked “social and economic impact assessment” four places higher than practitioners. But practitioners ranked “evaluation / assessment” nine places higher than students. And that’s basically another term for the same thing, but one of them appeals much more to students’ idealism.

Now, that’s not to say that people who work in administration aren’t somehow contributing to social justice in their work. It’s just not in their job title — there are literally zero jobs that are advertising for a Social Justice Anthropologist. The implication of this analysis, then, is that students need to know how to talk about their interests and qualifications in ways that employers will recognize — but that if they do, they’ll find ways of getting what they want.
There are a lot of ways this research could go forward, so one thing I’m doing is looking at sister disciplines to see how they’re talking about it. For example, the American Sociological Association conducted a study with the Class of 2005, and replicated it with the Class of 2012, to follow BA graduates longitudinally and see where they end up. And if we had the resources, I’d love to do something similar with anthropology, or maybe find a way to do it ethnographically, using more anthropology to do research on anthropology.

(Source:
So, to review, we’ve talked about how AAA association research brings together federal data, original research and other sources within higher education, to provide tools that help departments advocate for themselves and understand their place in the field. And if there’s anything you need, you can give me a call.

(Image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Superhero.svg)
Thank you!

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