

“subfield.” Curious, I assembled my own data from the past two years for comparison.

Overall, the results do not surprise. Cultural anthropologists are diverse in their geographic and theoretical interests. But the tables do raise a few questions: note the discrepancy between the submission rate for proposals for research in North America (about one in four) and the success rate (one in six in fiscal years 1980–86 and under one in 10 in 2006–07). Why should this be?

**GATEWAY TO NSF**

Plattner suggested that researchers proposing North American projects may do an inadequate job of justifying research site, possibly motivated more by convenience than science. Without further analysis, I hesitate to endorse this interpretation. But I do not think reviewers, often North America researchers themselves, are biased against such projects. Rather, it is my impression that many are policy oriented rather than theory driven. In keeping with the NSF mandate to fund basic science, reviewers prefer the latter.

Table 1 also reveals a large increase in “multiregion” proposals: 8% in the earlier period to over 20% more recently. This, too, makes sense.

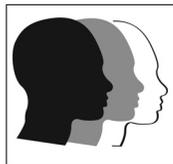
**Table 2: Submissions and Awards by Subfield**

	Political	Social	Applied	Symbolic	Economic	Cognitive	Human Biology/HBE	Tourism	Other
% of submissions 1980–86	26.2	21.3	14.5	12.8	12.4	8.8	—	—	3.9
% of submissions 2006–07	12.9	16.1	12.9	4.8	16.1	12.1	9.7	8.9	6.5
% of awards 1980–86	27.8	20.6	8.1	15.3	15.3	9.6	—	—	3.3
% of awards 2006–07	11.9	11.9	14.3	4.8	16.7	9.5	11.9	7.1	11.9

Anthropologists have turned their attention widely to issues of migration and globalization, and theory-building comparisons. Given this disciplinary interest, it is reassuring that reviewers view multilocation proposals favorably. Their recent success rate of over 28% is far higher than for any single region alone.

Turning to Table 2, I note, as did Plattner, that classifying proposals for subfield is challenging.

These numbers are not precise. However, even with this caveat, we can hazard trends: declines in proposals in political and symbolic anthropology, the emergence of new interests in human biology and behavioral ecology, and the anthropology of tourism. Overall, however, funding rates mirror submission rates, with no clear reviewer preferences. NSF reviewers continue to support anthropology’s historic diversity. ■



**PROFILES IN PRACTICE**

*On the recommendation of the Practicing Anthropology Work Group, in March 2007 AN launched a series of Practitioner Profiles to illustrate the work that practicing anthropologists currently do.*

# The Power to Change

## Insight and Oversight at the Government Accountability Office

SHIRLEY FISKE  
PROFILES IN PRACTICE CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

I sometimes hear anthropologists wonder why “no anthropologists have top management positions.” In the federal sector, there are only about half a dozen anthropologists in the Civil Service Senior Executive Service (SES), the nation’s top federal managers; and Phil Herr will be one of them. He is a cultural anthropologist and candidate for SES at the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in Washington DC.

**How did you get from grad school to a top position at GAO, the Congressional watchdog agency for federal programs?**

Phil is very positive about his graduate studies in applied anthropology at Teachers College, Columbia University. “In the first two years of the doctoral degree they had us write a proposal, seek funding, do some fieldwork, and come back and defend it. ... It forces you to confront data, analysis, what you did—you might get some of the mistakes out of the way before you go out to do your dissertation fieldwork.” His dissertation looked at a rural development project in Honduras, foreshadowing his career in evaluation.

Phil knew he wanted to work outside of academia, perhaps an unusual attitude for a cultural anthropologist. His first job was with the (now) NYC Department of Education. “They have an evaluation office that reviews state and federally funded programs in the schools, and I worked there for about three years while completing my dissertation. Then I also worked for a small consulting firm that did evaluations, primarily for public sector clients. I did that for about a year before I moved to Washington.”

He had never heard of the GAO, but a graduate friend suggested that he apply for a position as a social science analyst. Phil has worked for GAO for 18 years, starting as a GS-12 social science analyst, followed by several promotions, prior to entering the SES.

**Are there other anthropologists at GAO?**

Currently there are fewer than four or five anthropologists at GAO, including two with MA degrees. Anthropologists have often been hired in an in-house team that supports statistical, survey, qualitative and quantitative analysis. GAO typically advertises generic social science vacancies at its website—social science

analyst, program analyst, evaluation specialist; the most frequent hire has an MA in public administration.

**What do you do at GAO?**

Phil describes the position at GAO as an “applied research job.” GAO is the largest of three research agencies that are part of the legislative branch. Congress requests GAO studies to get insight into federal activities, their effectiveness and ways they can be improved. Congress uses the information to make decisions about appropriations, authorizations and drafting laws that affect every agency funded by federal dollars. “Congress needs numbers, context and objective information to answer the question, ‘is it accomplishing its goals? and how can it be improved?’ ” Phil explained.

A research team tries to get a fairly quick picture, interviewing key people, analyzing data sets, collecting data via interviews and focus groups; as opposed to traditional ethnography. “There are opportunities to do ethnography, but it has to be problem-focused.” He speaks Spanish, which has helped him in many ways at GAO. His work has taken him to the US-Mexico border, Latin America and the Caribbean. While in Latin America, he developed a class for a sister organization on “performance auditing.”

*See Profiles in Practice on page 36*

**Profiles in Practice**

*Continued from page 35*

**How will your job change when you become an SES manager?**

Phil will be *managing* people and—not surprisingly—a lot of them. “At GAO you have issue areas, and within an issue area you have multiple directors, who have teams under them; so that at any one time, you have 8–10 projects, each with a total of about 25–30 staff.” His job will be to ensure the reports come together, that the data and report is accurate, complete and well argued.

**Will an anthropology background be an advantage in your new role?**

Phil was thoughtful about the value of anthropology in his new role as super-manager. He’ll be putting together the right people from different parts of the organization, and bringing them

I asked for an example: Phil described a series of case studies of US regions with large numbers of dislocated employees, as the economy transitioned from manufacturing to more knowledge-based jobs. The resulting studies “had recommendations for improving the program [in question]. It was useful to Congress in reauthorization deliberations and also reforming it. After completing the work, the chairman of Senate Finance Committee said, ‘One of my priorities as chairman is to reform this program and we want to use GAO’s work as the basis for that.’” The GAO mandate is to assemble information that is not politically motivated, to provide policy makers with fact-based assessments about what is working and what is not.

**What is one of your largest challenges?**

One challenge is having limited time to do accurate, informative field research. As a GAO investigator, you cannot assume that you can come back later and ask a follow-up question that you forgot—you have to plan carefully and approach the topic systematically. Phil

[Phillip Herr will] be putting together the right people from different parts of the organization, and bringing them together to complete a finished product that has to be accurate and objective.

together to complete a finished product that has to be accurate and objective. He concluded genially, “you don’t have to be an anthropologist to be good at that; you have to be a person who understands dynamics about how individuals work together or not. Being an anthropologist helps, but many people do it well who aren’t anthropologists.”

**Making a difference: Who else can answer the question, “Is This a Good Investment for Our \$100 Million?”**

Phil is satisfied with the contribution the agency makes toward government oversight and reform. He is worked on more than 50 different reports and testimonies, traveling to 26 countries. “You get to make a difference. You are *objective* and you are respected for it. You are not in anybody’s back pocket. You are not beholden to anyone. As taxpayers, we all deserve a good value for our money. Government oversight is an important role—it’s checks and balances. You are answering the question: Is this a good investment for our \$100M?”

finds that “you have to be fairly focused and targeted.”

**Are these “rapid assessments” ethnographically valid?**

Clearly such reports are not generated in isolation. “We have to look to other sources—secondary sources, other analyses of a particular project. GAO also uses NAS [National Academy of Sciences] for expert panels, to provide insight into a field.” However, the goal at GAO is to use case studies as a mechanism “to elucidate a broader picture of what is happening.” Take for instance, an agency supporting microenterprise in 50 countries. “We can’t send people to 50 countries. Is what’s in Egypt representative of what’s in Bulgaria? Or Peru? All you can try to do is get some in-depth snapshots and give people a flavor of what’s happening out there.” Although Phil would describe this approach as “a tradeoff,” he did not feel the analyses are compromised. “I don’t think it’s compromised in the sense that people value the work that GAO does.”

**Phillip Herr**

**US Government Accountability Office**

**Title:** Phil is in a liminal state in GAO while he finishes his SES candidacy. During this *rite of passage*, candidates rotate through a number of different experiences to broaden their management capabilities. Phil left behind his former position with the GAO International Affairs and Trade team to start his training. He has since been acting director in the agency’s Financial Markets and Community Investments team, staff for the Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight of the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Capitol Hill; he will be in residence at Harvard’s J F Kennedy School for a month; and there is a likely placement outside of GAO with a private consulting firm or a multilateral. At the end of the SES training, in the Spring of 2008, he will return to the GAO.

**Salary:** \$112,000–\$168,000 for SES-grade employees.



Phillip Herr outside the GAO building. Photo courtesy GAO photographer

**What can AAA do to increase the communication between AAA members and practitioners or encourage more practitioners to participate in AAA?**

As a practitioner, Phil has stayed active with anthropology associations. He participated as a National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) mentor and in the series of evaluation workshops organized by NAPA. He recently gave a talk to the Washington Association of Professional Anthropologists as part of a panel of federal anthropologists. He believes the AAA should be more attentive to the needs of applied anthropologists because, in his experience, practicing and applied anthropologists are drifting off to other organizations such as the American Evaluation Association, where they may have colleagues who better understand their day-to-day challenges. ☐

**Environmental problems are human problems!**

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