Towards an Infrastructure for Anthropological Practice

2012 CoPAPIA Section Summit

November 17, 2012

The purpose of this document is to summarize issues that came up in the Section Summit (SS) discussion and to develop actionable goals for CoPAPIA to address in the coming year.

The principal issue addressed in this year’s Section Summit was the role of AAA relative to practitioners. Practitioners become a greater percent of all anthropologists every year. Anthropologists tend to leave AAA when they become practitioners, even if they had been student members. We don’t know how many leave. But without them, we have fewer practitioners to guide programmatic development within the AAA. An unknown number of these leave anthropology and are no longer available to build support for practicing anthropologists within AAA. The Section Summit discussion focused on ways in which AAA can move to make membership in the association more attractive to practicing anthropologists.

Four core questions were defined around this topic and were used to structure the discussion:

- Is it a problem for the profession that practitioners leave AAA?
- Why do practitioners leave AAA and can you think of things AAA might offer to retain them?
- What can practicing and non-practicing anthropologists do to strengthen collaborations with each other in their communities, and in AAA?
- What can anthropologists do to address these problems?

Twenty-two AAA members representing 14 sections were present at the SS, including three members who were representatives of CoPAPIA. There was also an AAA staff person. The group of twenty-three anthropologists consisted of 13 professionals and 10 students. Among the 13 professionals, 8 were affiliated with a university department in some way and 5 were full-time practitioners. A list of attendees is attached to this report. The discussion was facilitated by Mary Odell Butler.¹

Is The Loss Of Practitioners To AAA A Problem For The Profession?
This group agreed that loss of practitioners to AAA is a problem. The need of students to be able to connect with practitioners was the most important consideration in this discussion. The following statements capture the sense of the discussion.²
• Students need connections and opportunities to network with practitioners. Professors don’t always know about practicing careers and opportunities and students don’t have the access to practitioners to network with for information and access to career opportunities.
• Students are interested in interacting with practitioners, but don’t know how to go about it and can’t find help to do this in their departments.
• Student exposure to applied anthropology [in academic institutions] is limited especially at the undergraduate level. We need more awareness about the realm of applied anthropology. Every anthropologist begins as a student. Mentor opportunities exist at AAA, but are students aware of what they are and how to find them?
• For NASA, the job situation is a key concern, but so is the development of a skill set that allows students to enter into jobs outside of academia. NASA has discussed organizing with NAPA around this.
• [The loss of practitioners to AAA] is a huge problem. Students need a variety of role models to build careers.

What Does AAA Have to Offer Practitioners
There was some difference of opinion over the support of AAA for practitioners.

• AAA as an organization is relatively open to practitioners. The problem is with rank and file members. People frequently say things like, “Oh, I never had a methods course” and there is a lack of enthusiasm for providing students with skills. Student oriented sessions are done at AAA, but by different organizations and not organized together. We’ve only been talking about the new generation, but we haven’t talked about the disenfranchisement of members who have already left AAA.
• AAA is set up to favor academics. There is a proliferation of sessions because academics need to present to get money from their schools to attend meetings. Practitioners usually pay to come to the meetings. We are not setting up a program to facilitate the attendance of practitioners and we need to reexamine the structure of the meetings. But to do this, we would need to change the corporate culture of AAA
• AAA is not a friendly space for [connecting students with role models in practice.] I prefer to bring students to SfAA. Should we try to make AAA friendlier to practitioners or should we devote our energy to supporting SfAA?
• I felt frustrated looking at the [AAA] meeting program. The AAA workshop on how to find an academic job overlaps with the session on how to brand yourself as a practitioner. I wondered if this is a message from AAA, choose one or the other?
• I used to organize a session that was “Current Issues in five-field Anthropology” which included applied anthropology. Without marketing, it was attended by 10 people and with marketing about 125. No one initially wanted to accept applied anthropology, but they always thanked us afterward for offering this overview. AAA could organize sessions around an issue and then get five points of view.
• It’s true that AAA is not friendly, but are we concerned with fixing organizations (AAA) or connecting students with jobs? AQA tells young folks that no one gets a job in Queer
Anthropology, but they need to take what they know about theory and use it. We need to teach how to apply what you know and talk across disciplines to help students.

This discussion then turned to the relationship of scholarship and practice. Some of the professional anthropologists felt that a scholarly career was not necessarily a part of the professional scope of practice.

- Being in practice makes being a scholar very difficult. How can I (as a practitioner) manage my responsibilities and still have time to think, reflect and publish? To be a scholar means time for reflections.
- We need to teach students to use theory, because that is what practice is. Every grad program teaches theory, but who teaches “practice”? For anthropologists to retain their identity, they need solid research experiences. A student who goes into practice without solid research experience will find it difficult to retain their identity as an anthropologist. At [my agency], many anthropologists support research, but very few engage in research. I suggest not starting a career at [my agency] if you want to build a research career.
- With government employment your scholarly life is not always in your control. Not every anthropologist can massage their CV to fit every job. [Working for the government], I did not have a lot of time to write, but I did use writing skills in things like contracts and government documents.
- I work for a for-profit university as a professor of public policy. I see anthropologists as intellectual shape shifters – doing different things in different situations. AAA does not have a lock on what our scholarly product is or can be.
- The theory that is being taught in departments is not useful in practice. When I worked at [a government agency] we needed things like old-fashioned diagrams and kinship charts.
- I feel a sense of professional schizophrenia needing the skills to move between various fields and figure out how to fit skills into organizations.
- Why do we make that divide (between scholarship and practice)? Practitioners produce knowledge as well as academics.
- The differences between practicing and academic anthropology have to do with the end product. Academic products are big picture knowledge and practicing anthropology focuses on specific practical problems. To do applied anthropology well, it is important to remain grounded in theory. We can do both, but we wear different hats when doing them.

Finally, the idea that AAA needed to more broadly case professional development opportunities was briefly discussed.

- We need anthropologically based professional development for skills across different fields. In AAA, professional development always seems geared toward cultural anthropologists. Biological Anthropologists tend not to go to AAA meetings.
- In the discipline of archaeology, there is ten-fold the amount of work and money for Cultural Resource Management (CRM). These are different priorities, but not scholarly. Can scholars collaborate with practicing archaeologists? How do we learn from each other?
Building Community
This discussion considered if and how anthropologists are developing linkages between practice and academic institutions in their communities. These efforts appear to be episodic rather than ongoing except in communities with a strong LPO (local professional organizations) that brings anthropologists together.

- I am an adjunct at the University of Maryland and wish this could be a stronger tie. The Washington Association of Practicing Anthropologists (WAPA) meets for a happy hour once a month and this is great.
- We have a professor who brings practice into discussion. Our department networks with the CDC, so students are given opportunities.
- I bring in practitioners to talk to students, but this could also be done via Skype and facilitated by NAPA.
- At [my agency] we created a lot of internships. Many students came and I visited their universities also.
- We used to have AnthroLink, which was a regional organization. This became informative because people were really interested in each other’s work.
- Many universities are located in rural communities and don’t have access to many practitioners. You might have to expand your definition of community.

What Can Anthropologists Do?
The final discussion in the SS dealt with what anthropologists inside and outside of AAA can do to improve the collaboration among anthropologists who practice and those who do not, both within AAA and in their broader communities.

- We need to begin by talking about practice. Have we ever queried the categories of practice? There are many practicing anthropologists across sections. We need to focus on exact skillsets. A taxonomy of practicing anthropologists could be a valuable document.
- Develop something on Internship requirements. Do workshops on internships and how to start internships
- One thing we thought about was having short interviews with practitioners online. This could be 2-3 minutes on YouTube.
- We need to go back to the future. We have profiled practitioners in the past and we need to make sure this isn’t lost and stop reinventing the wheel
- The CoPAPIA tenure and promotion statement was very helpful. I try to do professional development activities and am co-sponsoring a panel with NAPA. This is a blended approach moving across both practice and academia. We need to bring scholarship to practice and vice-versa.
- We need to emphasize technology (in our consideration of practice opportunities). I asked around at the Career Expo about what words would be in the job calls for practitioners and I
heard “user experience research” “computer human interaction” and “usability professional.” These all related to how people use technology and rapid integration of new technology.

- We all face technology, maybe we can organize around that
- How about Cyber seminars? Maybe NAPA could facilitate these.
- We need to engage the public more. If you get the public more interested, then you get more jobs.

Conclusions
This section discusses some of the perspectives that emerged from the Section Summit and presents some preliminary ideas of how CoPAPIA might move forward to improve linkages between academics and practitioners.

There was agreement that we need practitioners in AAA; that it wouldn’t be a good thing to just let them go. This is to be expected given the topic of this session. The most interesting information to come out of it is why they felt that way. The most important role for practitioners is as co-educators of students in building substantive skill sets, investigating careers in practice and finding job opportunities. These are not available in academic departments. The narrowness of conceptions of what practice is came up. Practicing and applied anthropology comes in about as many varieties as any other branch of anthropology. Yet in policy discussions, we assume a universal field of “practice.” There is a need to brainstorm and discuss how to present to students and colleagues the number of options available in practice.

Links among academic anthropologists and practitioners at the community level are not well developed. There are of course individual relationships that are strong and productive, but these are not the rule. CoPAPIA and AAA might want to consider ways to facilitate the development of links between academic institutions and practitioners in communities? Collaboration can build on LPOs in communities that have them and through identified “champions” in communities that don’t. Community colleges might be one partner that can reach the underserved constituency of undergraduates. Such collaborations across communities could meet many student needs on a more ongoing basis than annual meetings.

One strong possibility for collaboration in communities with academic departments is around building internship experiences for graduate and undergraduate students. Internships are a good collaborative opportunity because both academic and practicing anthropologists need interns. Internships are a required part of some anthropology curricula, and those who provide internships are often very pleased with interns who provide trained labor at a low cost. But there is usually no forum for them to jointly define what kinds of internship experiences are needed, how they are to be evaluated and what the responsibilities of both professor and employer in creating an internship experience will be.

There was some discussion of the friendliness of AAA to practitioners and to providing training opportunities in practice for students. Some participants noted that AAA is not friendly to practice or practitioners. Others disagreed, citing the things that AAA and some of its sections have done to promote these kinds of exchanges between students and practitioners. Experience has demonstrated
that it isn’t possible to improve the “friendliness” of AAA to practitioners or anyone else by direct action, possibly because – as one participant pointed out – the problem is with the membership rather than the administration of AAA. It is unlikely that CoPAPIA should spend resources trying to change ideology.

Emerging from the discussion was a real conflict between scholarly research and practice. Some felt that very often it is exceptionally difficult to do research in practice settings. The specific examples given came from government employment. But the fact remains that research can be quite different in academic and practice organizations. This suggests some further discussion on what the model for practice should be. The model for the contribution of practitioners as anthropologists cannot be patterned on the academic model of teaching, publication, and research – the default definition for what anthropologists do. We need to look at professional participation with new eyes. Those who think the only possible model for anthropology is an academic one are unlikely to change their minds. But for the rest of us, some brainstorming on professional expectations for practice might help AAA more successfully meet practitioner needs.

The meeting proceedings were compiled by a CoPAPIA note taker and summarized into topical categories for the purpose of this report. Contextual information that would identify individuals has been removed.

The statements in this document were taken from notes and are not verbatim.