

# Anthropology from different angles: a tale of the neoliberal arts

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A discipline's value depends on the institutional position of its valuers. In US liberal arts undergraduate education, trustees, marketers, and parents routinely link disciplinary value to "return on investment." This market logic is evident in rhetoric equating a discipline's worth with the cost of department maintenance and the lucriveness of careers pursued by majors. Yet students are also expected to buy the liberal arts experience as a whole package, a logic that makes all majors interchangeable. These contradictory dynamics provide undergraduate anthropology students with a profoundly teachable illustration of US neoliberalism.

KEYWORDS: undergraduate education, anthropology, neoliberalism.

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IN THE US, THE DISCIPLINE OF ANTHROPOLOGY HAS A DISTINCT history in liberal arts education. In this paper, I explore how anthropology is perceived and valued in a small, private liberal arts college within a larger picture of higher education in regimes of neoliberal value, and how anthropological knowledge can help students grasp that picture and its effect on themselves.

The history of four-year liberal arts colleges is specific to the US, starting with the establishment of liberal arts education in US colonial colleges (most now universities), grounded in the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, and oriented toward notions of service both civic and clerical. More were established in the decades following the revolution, including “the College” discussed in this chapter. Such colleges stressed classics as an educational foundation valued for its capacity to develop the powers of the mind and stock it with appropriate ideas, as opposed to training for a particular vocation. Liberal arts subsequently became institutionalized in four-year undergraduate colleges and in undergraduate university programs.

However much liberal arts *curricula* have changed since, their informing philosophy has not, and anthropology certainly fits that philosophy. It was established at the College shortly after World War II (when it also entered the *curricula* of many similar schools) by a PhD student of Kroeber’s, was never combined with sociology and was taught by that one Kroeber student until the 1960’s. Meanwhile, anthropology departments were becoming established in the rapidly-expanding university systems, turning out a great many PhD. In liberal arts colleges, unlike universities, there is no direct reproduction of the discipline through the work of PhD students who will go forth and teach elsewhere, including other PhD programs. Some majors may go on to a PhD but it will more closely reflect their graduate than their undergraduate education. This brings us to the difference in how neoliberal regimes – the assumption that all institutions should operate in terms of market values and market logic – play out *vis-à-vis* liberal arts in universities and liberal arts colleges. In both universities and colleges that plays out through the imposition of marketing regimes, placing institutions in constant competition with each other, within ranked peer groups, for prestige and resources, under continual pressure to impress stakeholders and attract donors, with students cast as both products and consumers. But the departmental operations of large, especially public, universities are subject to much greater audit scrutiny (Shore and Wright 2000) than are liberal arts colleges. With its constant pressure to show return on investment to institutional stakeholders, audit logic favors departments that bring in substantial resources, *e.g.* through grants or patents (Tuchman 2009) and places faculty under continuous pressure to document their accountability. While comparable audit practices have been creeping into liberal arts institutions, through assessment policies accompanied by increasing standardization,

segmentation and documentation of departmental teaching and administrative practices (the better to allow top-down manufactured comparisons across departments), it is still less pervasive and onerous than the policies found in public universities especially (Urciuoli 2005).

The neoliberal market logic governing private liberal arts colleges is most evident in the recasting of elite liberal arts education as a skill set, an approach developed not simply as marketing tactics but, at least at the College, as strategies developed over several years by its board of trustees, president and office of institutional advancement in a concentrated campaign to raise and define the College's national profile. From this perspective, each discipline has equal marketing potential. What really matters is casting students as a special kind of human capital: as bundles of skills (which any good education can provide) bathed in implicit symbolic capital (which only the College and its peers can provide). So, as I elaborate below, students become embodiments of "liberal arts skills".

Yet, to students not all disciplines are equal. Once students become majors (concentrators), particularly in smaller departments, many come to identify very strongly with the department, its faculty, and each other. This is certainly true of anthropology students – majors, minors, or just students who take a lot of anthropology – who find in the discipline a way to study their own lives, the College, and higher education itself.

#### HOW DISCIPLINES LOOK FROM THE TOP DOWN

The College is rural, with not quite 2000 students, not quite 200 full-time faculty, and a carefully maintained campus. It is pricey, though about half the student body receives some form of financial aid. It is about three-quarters white. It is well-connected through trustees and *alumni* to the corporate and financial worlds, with a substantial number of students from elite social backgrounds, often related to trustees or *alumni*.

From the perspective of the president, departments are largely interchangeable constituent elements which it is not the president's job to deal with directly. Nor is it really the job of college presidents to know the day-to-day operation of their institutions. If a president comes from outside the college, it is very difficult to know the institution from the inside in any depth.

Overseeing academic departments is a job that falls to the dean of faculty, and in a small school like the College, that oversight is relatively unmediated though there are associate deans. Much of the dean's perspective is governed by how much trouble departments present, or so I found as department chair under different deans. My experience was that deans were less interested in actual department operation than in whether department personnel behaved in ways that made the deans' jobs easy or difficult. I think this perspective

is built into the job structure, and to be fair, if I had to deal with 22 departments, I would feel much the same. Deans' perspectives cannot be altogether divorced from their perception of certain disciplines, a perspective at least partially framed by the deans' own disciplines, though most try to keep a balanced perspective.

In terms of neoliberal strategizing, representation of a college by its office of institutional advancement (OIA) probably carries the most weight in portraying individual departments to outsiders. The functions of offices of institutional advancement include fostering *alumni* relations, fundraising, and generating name recognition and positive images of their institutions. In institutions with particularly strong trustee investment, as is true of the College, the relationship between trustees and the institution's OIA is especially strong, with the president occupying a critical position in that relationship. Since the early 1990's, the College's trustees have expended considerable effort, especially financial, to grow recognition of the College's name and reputation from regional to national. The OIA has worked hard to project an image of the school reminiscent of old New England colleges (a powerful stereotype), showcasing literature, philosophy, and history as the iconic liberal arts disciplines, economics and government as the disciplines that resonate with the college's connections to the worlds of finance and public life, and the sciences with its state-of-the-art Science Center. The less iconic and less connected disciplines, including anthropology, are less foregrounded. So, although all disciplines are structurally equal, they are not marketed equally. At the same time, all student majors and department faculty are pieces of a marketing mosaic.

This mosaic effect is not only a matter of marketing rhetoric. It is embedded in administrative policies and offices that have come to reshape student life, probably starting in the late 1980's, and certainly gaining ground in the 1990's, organizing student life into a series of (in theory, anyway) productively structured "experiences" (Urciuoli 2018) that cumulatively displace the centrality of disciplines. Handler (2008), drawing from his own administrative experience as associate dean, describes the development of paracurricular programs outside of and parallel to the academic *curriculum*:

"Top administrators believe they must create innovative programs to garner financial support from alumni, donors, tuition-paying parents, charitable foundations and grant agencies." (Handler 2008: 7)

These programs are designed to appeal to students and parents worried about future employability and seeking participation in an idealized "community" through, as Handler puts it, "special undergraduate 'experiences'" (seminars, abroad programs, internships, undergraduate research) and new

degree programs designed to top off a liberal arts degree with a professional master's degree (features that also appeal to donor organizations and trustees). Handler also describes their "innovation" as phantom in that actual innovative liberal arts research and teaching are overlooked and devalued by administrators who substitute programs that reproduce hegemonic institutional interests.

For example, Handler (2018) outlines programs for students to "do" research not as part of a course project but as an activity distinct from specific academic programs, and in ways that shift the focus from the academic topic to the student's experience of "doing" research, effectively undercutting the role of faculty. Such research experiences may be minimally overseen by disciplinary specialists, or in some cases not academically overseen at all. Even when they are overseen by faculty, the research content may wind up disregarded as Baldrige (2018) makes clear in her account of a group research project, sponsored by a college paracurricular program, the value of which lay largely in the imaging it provided for the program and the college.

The effect of all this can be seen in the projection of "the good student" as the product of liberal arts education (Urciuoli 2014). College and university websites are illustrated by images of students engaged in productive activities, such as academics, athletics, arts, or volunteer activities, or socializing in ways that look pleasant and earnest. We do not see students having unproductive fun (LaDousa 2011) drinking or partying or overtly flirting, nor do we see them looking bored, unhappy, hungover, or in any way behaving badly. Such imagery may be accompanied by captions or stories reinforcing the message of productivity (*e.g.* giving the time and location of the activity, perhaps even the student's name and class year) or the imagery may function as wallpaper. Either way, the message is that these students represent what the college or university can produce, especially as future workers. This productivity may be loosely tied to a major: the College's "outcomes" webpage links to a series of (OIA edited) student narratives, tracing an arc from undergraduate experience to career path. Most of these narratives mention the student's major though a few do not. The major is generally talked about as one of several experiences, along with volunteer activities, internships, study abroad, independent research, and so on, that have led that student to the desired outcome. Talk of the major is likely to include talk of a key mentoring relationship (not always faculty); it may or may not include talk of specific coursework and is likely to include independent research activities which may or may not be embedded in coursework.

This approach to undergraduate education, stressing the arc from college entrance to "career outcomes", fits a long-standing human capital model (see *e.g.* Becker 1993 [1964]) in which the value of individual workers is a compendium

of attributes and capacities that brings return in whatever paid employment that individual performs. It is concomitant with the general shift since around 1990 toward a generic “skills” model of education, coherent with the neoliberalized vision of the ideal worker as a bundle of possessable and transferable hard (specific knowledge) and soft (social) skills (Urciuoli 2008) by which one can exercise neoliberal agency by running oneself as a business (Gershon 2017). Any individual neoliberal agent can in theory possess any skill and structural inequalities play no part in who gets what skills. By contrast, Bourdieu (1986) posits cultural capital as knowledge and capacities that specifically provide social hierarchic advantages. Elite education is an important source of cultural capital as well as an important source of social capital (advantageous connections) and symbolic capital (prestige). Furthermore, it is not always clear which of these plays the strongest role in post-elite-college career success. Yet these are routinely conflated with human capital, as shown by this selection from a 2014 opinion piece posted to *Forbes* by the CEO of a major company who is also a liberal arts college trustee:

“It is foolish to underappreciate the value of liberal arts skills. It is bad for our country, bad for business and bad for those just starting in their careers... For some students, a specialized college education leading to a specific set of skills may be the right choice, but I believe most will be better served in their professions by a liberal arts education... During my 38 years in the corporate sector, I have found that as employees progress in a career, it is these broad liberal arts skills – the ability to think critically and communicate clearly – that differentiate their performance.

This is not to say that specialized skills are a detriment to one’s career. They sometimes lead to a quicker start in certain functions within an organization. But liberally educated workers differentiate themselves early and tend to outperform their more narrowly trained peers over time. It’s been my experience that they look at issues from various perspectives and find new ways of doing things. In other words, they think critically. And once they have a new idea, they communicate their thinking clearly and persuasively. They understand intuitively that the idea is important, but so is the ability to explain it, whether in writing or in front of a group. While these characteristics can be developed at a large university, they are the hallmarks of liberal arts institutions, where small classes foster interaction and meaningful discourse that require students to develop and defend their views. The ability to think, to conceptualize, to come up with creative ideas separates the top performers.

These are also characteristics desired by employers. According to a 2013 study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, 93 percent of the survey respondents said, ‘a demonstrated capacity to think critically,

communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a candidate's] undergraduate major'.<sup>1</sup>

The author opposes “liberal arts education” to “a specialized college education,” and “broad liberal arts skills” (including “the ability to think critically”) to “a specific set of skills” or “specialized skills” (*i. e.* job training). While conceding that “liberal arts skills” can be learned at a large university, he implies that special qualities of liberal arts education lead to capacities that distinguish the “top performers” who can also “solve complex problems.” All this he sees as properties of a broad liberal arts education as opposed to “majors”. This is interesting because, of course, in liberal arts education students do declare majors. But if what matters is the acquisition of broad skills that can be learned in any major, then all majors are interchangeable. These talking points can be found on the website of the College and of comparable colleges. If the author’s perspective were not widely accepted among comparably placed corporate executives, the article would not have appeared in *Forbes*.

This CEO contrasts specialized skills, more generally known as “hard” skills to broad skills, more generally known as “soft” skills. Skills thus imagined become attributes of human capital, possessed by individuals. In theory any school can turn out them. But since they are valued as the product of elite education, they are, in Bourdieu’s sense, cultural capital (elite forms of action) framed by symbolic capital (institutional prestige). Thus, this CEO collapses two opposing perspectives. On the one hand, imagining students as potential human capital made up of skills bundles excludes imagining those bundles carrying signs of structural inequality. On the other hand, privileging liberal arts soft skills as obtainable only in small schools with small classes slips symbolic capital into the picture in that those schools are not cheap. Non-elite human capital models routinely relate communication skills to time management, team, and leadership skills, all of which suggest a compliant workforce that knows how to accept direction while operating independently. By relating communication skills to critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation, the author plays down that sense of human capital embodied in generic workers and instead suggests qualities of initiative and independence that one would find among entrepreneurs and executives

The perspective in this article is widely shared among high-status stakeholders – trustees and donors – and certainly informs the website’s “outcomes” pages (described above), although some trustees hold onto the notion that there is a connection between one’s major and one’s likelihood of career success. Cutting across these perspectives is another piece of market logic: the

1 Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2014/09/05/employees-who-stand-out/#4298800269b0>.

routine equation of the worth of disciplines with the cost of department maintenance. This point was brought home to me at a dinner I attended some years ago of parallel faculty and trustee committees for tenure and promotion, plus the dean of faculty. After asking the dean and faculty members about hiring and tenure practices and about the balance of teaching and research, the trustees addressed the importance of outcomes planning for the college's future ten years down the line. They discussed the cost of department maintenance balanced with department contributions to said outcomes, and how decisions might have to be made about cutting or combining departments. They also asked us what we thought students should be like when they graduate, what a liberal arts education should teach, and what message was sent by an "open *curriculum*". They asked if students were taking a broad enough range of courses, whether the advising was good enough, and whether departments needed to exist.

I found it striking that they saw these as questions about discrete quantifiable things to which faculty and the dean could and should give definite answers, taking for granted college policies and practices as "things" that operate in measurably cause and effect terms. Not only is it difficult to penetrate such assumptions and the discourse that recreates them, but faculty who want to work with trustees need to adapt to their assumptions and discourse. New policies are disseminated top-down. As it happened, a few years after this dinner meeting, a senior administrator told me in an interview that "massive amounts of funds are going to go into career development very soon. They (OIA) already have a master plan for this, they've done a task force and it's been headed up by a former trustee. They have all the reports, they're putting all these things in place", including links with corporate sponsors. The master plan was to clarify the steps along which students engaged in a "life course" from matriculation through graduation to career, a plan for which they themselves provided generous support, and for which more support would be sought from external donors. They also hoped faculty would buy into this plan, and the dinner discussion described above was doubtless meant to encourage us to do so.

This is the background to the college "outcomes" webpages discussed earlier, which appeared a year or two after the interview cited above. Links are provided to each graduating class, each with a graph showing what percentage of that class has found a job, is looking for a job, or is in transition, in graduate school, or on fellowship. Further links specify the field of employment, area of graduate studies, and specific fellowship. Another page links each graduate's current position and employer to their major. Another link takes the reader to the student "how I got here" narratives described earlier. All this information is juxtaposed in a format that suggests cause and effect, a suggestion often elaborated in the student narrations. One can infer a direct link from major to

career or that despite having an “impractical” major, one can still get a good job. Economics, government and science majors tend to fall into the former category. Anthropology majors generally fall into the latter category.

This setup works for the institution in multiple ways. It gives tangible shape to trustees’ beliefs about how education should operate since, being successful corporate people, they see the corporate world as the model for all institutions. At the same time, it allows them to hold onto the high-status model of liberal arts education that defines the College’s place in its peer group. After all, they were not themselves all economics or government majors; one board chair was an art history major. These disparate positions on the market logic governing notions of accountability in liberal arts education are not so much contradictory as they are evidence of different kinds of corporate-mindedness found among board members. This setup also helps the OIA define the College within its peer group and it helps clarify the school’s image to potential donors. And of course, it helps encourage students to major in whatever they like while reassuring their parents that their kids can get jobs. For the record, anthropology majors from the College’s class of 2018 found positions in both corporate and non-profit work, with one archaeology major finding work in contract archaeology.

#### HOW THE DISCIPLINE LOOKS TO STUDENTS

What students taking anthropology courses think about the field depends on (at the very least) how they regard coursework, why they’re taking the courses, whether or not they’re majors, whether they expect coursework to have a vocational aspect, whether they’ve had other comparable courses, who’s teaching the course and how, and the course content itself.

Handler (2013) gives an informative account of what happens when students have vocational expectations of their major, in his examination of the interdisciplinary global development studies major (GDS) that he helped develop at the University of Virginia. Many students (at UVA and elsewhere, including the College) see interdisciplinarity as a useful alternative to what they often perceive as the “narrowness” of specific majors, a line of thinking that slides neatly into college marketing discourse. Interdisciplinarity makes administrators happy because it provides an extra major without extra faculty cost. Handler describes the origins of GDS in response to students’ desires to do good in the world based on what they think development should accomplish and their desire to develop expertise in addressing real-world problems. In addition to core courses, students take disciplinary options which they often select on the basis of the skills they believe that a given discipline will supply, an understanding that reflects both how they see development work and how they understand those disciplines, often without having taken any courses in

it. This skills-oriented perspective means students look for practical knowledge that can help them manage programs, though they tend to shy away from hard-core economics. They tend to see anthropology in terms of its capacity to provide cross-communication and ethnographic research skills, area expertise, and an understanding of cultural relativism – all understood as “detachable” from a more specific understanding of the field itself.

Handler sees student desires for particular skills that serve their desire to do good in the world as an aspect of their (very American) belief in themselves as individual autonomous agents with the right to make a choice and the right to do good. Although the author of the elite skills op-ed cited earlier does not frame his message in terms of choice or desire, he presupposes pretty much the same notion of students as autonomous, choice-making agents able to extract the appropriate skills from particular courses without becoming mired in “narrow” knowledge. In this model, liberal arts students at elite colleges are assumed to have a knowledge of the world and of disciplines appropriate and sufficient for making such decisions. The notion of “passion”, signifying a choice of coursework, extracurricular activity, or social pursuit of a career that engages one more than any other comparable choice, is also based on this model of personhood.<sup>2</sup> To see what I mean, go to any .edu website and search for “passion” as I did on the College website, where I found news stories about student passion for a subject matter, for social good, or for an activity such as writing or antique collecting. In the contexts of course and career choice, “passion” only points to courses of action with positive outcomes. Choice, desire, and passion, as constitutive elements of good students, all presuppose the idea of productivity.

There are students in any college or university who see any liberal arts discipline through this kind of lens. Yet many students let go of (or never have) the idea that they should use their major to “do” something practical. There is much to be said for the “narrowness” of a discipline, and for the appreciation that can emerge from the kind of intense engagement that a major has to offer. Handler points out that many GDS students come to understand what anthropology has to offer them beyond detachable skills. Many of his undergraduates, both GDS and straight anthropology majors, have demonstrated this in their own work (Cororaton and Handler 2013; Childs, Nguyen and Handler 2008).

This brings me back to the College. In my 30 years there, I taught a range of anthropology courses, most with a semiotic and/or linguistic underpinning. I frequently included subject matter that students would find ethnographically and/or experientially familiar so we could recast the familiar in a comparative

2 Handler, personal communication, 2019/09/24.

frame and defamiliarize it as an object of analysis. The courses in which this worked best were US Discourses: Race/Ethnicity, and Class; US Discourses: Gender and Technology; and The Semiotics of Liberal Arts Education. The two US discourses courses were designed to get students to think about how the ideal American is imagined in terms of either race/ethnicity and class or gender and technology, and how that imagining is embedded in US history. Semiotics of Liberal Arts Education aimed to get students to consider where the idea of liberal arts education comes from historically and how it now operates as a US cultural construction – including of course, what it means to be a liberal arts college student. Many senior projects grew out of those courses.

These courses were based on understanding race, gender, and class markedness and unmarkedness as they defined being American. These courses were developed so that students could work out how constructions of unmarked (white, male, well-off) and marked (not white or male, not well-off) identities are sustained as social facts. The point was for students to see that there is no such thing as “just a social fact”, that social facticity is precisely what makes everything that matters in the world real and enduring, that that is how culture emerges, and that it is an ongoing process. The analytic apparatus included basic readings on indexicality, much of which I wrote myself, as short essays streamlining ideas developed by Roman Jakobson, Michael Silverstein, and others, with reference to upcoming course readings. I stressed the idea of performativity in relation to cultural emergence and sedimentation, reinforcing the message by having students read a lot of popular media through which social facticity was performatively reinforced. For example, in the race/ethnicity and class course, we read a lot of 19<sup>th</sup> century “scientific racialism” and other writing naturalizing the superiority of white Anglo-Saxons. Another important source of discursive construction of social facticity was the *Congressional Record* for the 1964 hearings on the bills that became the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act (lifting the national-origin based immigration quotas established in 1924 and revised in 1952). We read testimony from senators, representatives and citizens representing civic organizations talking about “good” and “bad” immigrants. The point was to see how the oppositions endured even when the content varied over time, as students quickly noticed. The gender and technology course spent a lot of time on the expansion of the US middle class that came with post World War II manufacturing and corporate expansion and the opportunities presented by the GI bill. Ethnographic illustration of social facticity and personhood produced in discourse was provided by popular magazine stories taking moral stances on gender roles, mostly from *Life* magazine accounts of US families in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Those stories reflected the US society of my students’ parents or grandparents’ youth. One course text was Tom Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff*, which provided backstory for *Life* accounts of perfect astronaut family lives (part of NASA’s publicity package). The idea

behind these readings, as with the race/ethnicity and gender course, was to let students see how elements of marked and unmarked categories of person emerged and became familiar, shifted and persisted over time, and made into social fact through routine social actions.

I have been talking about intellectual engagement as if it operated on an individual basis. Intellectual engagement is also social engagement which means that the people taking the course, why they are taking it, who they are taking it with, who else they know who has taken it, and what other courses they've taken, can all affect how they engage with anthropological ways of understanding. An interesting example, quite different from the anthropology major, is provided by an interdisciplinary communication studies major that a colleague and I developed and oversaw for ten years. My colleague's academic training was in communication, and she had extensive professional experience in practical applications, especially corporate consulting. When we decided to develop the major, we combined coursework providing the basic principles of communication studies, linguistic anthropology, and practical training. This meant that the major pulled core and elective courses from the departments of communication and anthropology. It also turned out that most of the students attracted to this major strongly hoped that this coursework would train them for work in media and/or management. So, our major faced some of the same issues that Handler describes for the GSD major. It was formed in part in response to requests from students who expected to develop skills that could be disconnected from the disciplinary matrix in which they were encountered. Many, when they started the major, could not see why they had to deal with what seemed like arcane theory to get those skills. To make matters more interesting, when my colleague and I proposed the major, there was considerable pushback from faculty who typified it as probably vocational and certainly not true liberal arts.

Some of this elitist attitude was projected onto the majors, many of whom were football, basketball, and hockey players, mostly not from elite backgrounds. In a Division III liberal arts school, students play these sports because they like to play these sports and are unlikely to do so after college. Whatever issues there are with college sports culture, and I won't pretend they don't exist, need to be understood as structural issues; they are not the "fault" of students nor are student-athletes walking embodiments of those issues. Football players especially often reported being looked down on by more socially elite classmates, and by faculty unable to realize that they were confusing their own gender and class stereotypes with actual human beings. A few faculty went so far as to tell these students directly that they could not meet "rigorous" academic expectations. The fact that some faculty believed this was confirmed to me by faculty themselves; the fact that they said it to students was confirmed by several student-athletes and by a colleague who advised some of them.

These attitudes were reinforced by perceptions of the fraternity many football and basketball players belonged to, a fraternity which was also the least class elite and most racially and ethnically diverse fraternity at the College.

Many majors were not fans of the required Language and Culture introductory course, which they found awfully technical. Nor did they see at first how anthropology fit into a communication studies major. I never quite managed to win a lot of formal linguistics fans in this major but what changed minds about the point to anthropology was the second linguistic anthropology requirement, *Ethnography of Communication*. This started off with John Thompson's editor's introduction to Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power*. It took a few weeks and the first course essay for many class members to digest it. But for students from race, ethnic, and class marked backgrounds at an elite college, too often stigmatized as "meatheads" for the sports they played, whose fraternity was routinely stereotyped as an "animal house", and whose major was routinely looked down on as a "gut", Bourdieu provided a pretty good way to understand their own situation at the College. Once the notions of cultural, social, and symbolic capital entered the picture, it became much easier for students to see how class was indexed by formal elements, especially phonetic, and where that indexing came from when it was personally experienced as multiple dimensions of markedness. *Ethnography of Communication* required three essays, the first of which involved local ethnography, plus a final research paper, and during the ten years that my colleague and I oversaw the major, a lot of those final papers fed into senior projects.

The internal dynamics among students were occasionally a problem, though rarely a lasting one. In one Language and Culture course, six guys who were teammates (on various teams) and fraternity brothers (in various frats) would show up to class late, trade loud wisecracks, and do sloppy work. Then they all declared the major. So I sent them letters at the end of the semester saying in effect "Welcome to the major, I'll be your new advisor, you're getting this letter because you did a lousy job in the gateway course, and here is what I don't expect to see you do again", copying my concerns to their advisors and coaches (who backed me up). I figured my *Ethnography of Communication* class, which they would all take the following semester, would be a disaster. It wasn't. The same group dynamic that I saw in Language and Culture worked to their academic benefit in subsequent courses. They responded strongly to my colleague's practical applications of communication principles and she and I encouraged them to see the college in ethnographic terms and to integrate their observational and practical understanding with theoretical principles. The guys responded to all of it, producing insightful, critical work of which they were proud.

The cohort factor is an important aspect of student engagement or disengagement. I found it mostly worked toward engagement. For example, my

gender and technology classes drew little networks of communication studies majors who also found their way into an anthropology colleague's course on Culture and Consumption, and some of them ended up working with both of us. These interest-based student-faculty networks developed frequently over a series of courses and is one of the advantages of teaching anthropology in a small school. The interdisciplinary communication studies major eventually ended and I focused on developing new courses and redeveloping older ones. At about this point a new member of the department also started developing semiotically-oriented, discourse-focused courses which drew students interested in language phenomena. Over time this led to new social dynamics and new lines of student research. For example, a few years ago I noticed for some years running a group of guys who took one of my linguistic anthropology introductions and would then turn up in Phonetics and Phonology, History of Linguistic Theory, and Semiotics. Their performance varied but what really struck me was their enthusiasm for linguistic phenomena – they really seemed to enjoy it and a couple declared self-designed linguistics majors. It turned out they were all members of the same fraternity. None of them were anthropology majors. Another excellent example of a productive and enthusiastic student-faculty intellectual network is the archaeology major, now about 20 years old, which also grew from student interest. A striking proportion of its majors have gone on to MA and PhD work.

The course in which all these elements came together most vividly was The Semiotics of Liberal Arts Education. Like the two US Discourse courses, this was analytically grounded in the construction of social facticity through familiar discourse. Of anything I ever taught, it was most specifically oriented toward the project of semiotic defamiliarization, since everyone taking it was a liberal arts student. It included ethnographic accounts of college experience juxtaposed with analyses of the marketization of the college experience under the neoliberal regimes of contemporary capitalism, a combination of approaches which, not surprisingly, struck a deep chord with a lot of students and inspired an interesting set of final projects (organized as panel presentations and put together as a “proceedings” volume PDF). Students developed a keen eye for discrepancies between the imagery projected in college marketing as part of the college brand and the contradictions and indeterminacies lived by students in terms of housing, athletics, social events, racial difference, class difference, and student organizations, including private societies. They critiqued the institutional misrecognition of the increasingly competitive regimes of productivity within which students were under constant pressure to perform and which made their life balance more and more precarious. An especially cogent (and moving) argument was made about the growing issue of student “mental health”: the institution saw its responsibility in terms of service provision so that students could “seek help”, but what about institutional

complicity in an unsustainable model of “good studenthood” generated by ever-widening neoliberal-driven institutional competition?

## CONCLUSION

The main point to all this is the way in which the combination of intellectual engagement, social semiotic analytic principles, ethnographic familiarity and defamiliarization, and encouraging social dynamics in undergraduate anthropology worked. Anthropology-specific principles helped many students see the dynamics shaping their experience and their own continual interpellation as neoliberal subjects. I hope that knowledge made it easier for them to create a little distance as well.

Although the dynamics described here are not unique to undergraduate anthropology programs, they (optimally) enhance the capacity for undergraduates to understand the marketing and branding practices that undervalue the very notion of an undergraduate liberal arts major, and to see more clearly the neoliberal conditions in which students are continually interpellated to value themselves as bundles of skills disassociated from any particular disciplinary understanding, and to prove their value to the school by becoming those skills bundles. Such understanding especially matters for students from non-elite backgrounds, for whom schools like the College can be a real trial.

In their longitudinal, empirically-based study *How College Works* which tracks student experience of intellectual and social life in a liberal arts college, sociologists Dan Chambliss and Chris Takacs (2014) set out the dynamics that make college good for students (as opposed to students being good for the college’s image). Their argument is that it is not necessary for higher education institutions to engineer student lives with programs that may be part of the latest administrative fad but have no proven results; there are a few basic principles that work. If colleges and universities can stick to those principles, students will benefit. Chief among these principles are the provision of spaces for relaxed and productive social interaction among students and between students and faculty. Intellectual engagement depends on those relationships. As I hope I’ve shown, undergraduate anthropology built on those principles can provide powerful and lasting insights, not least into the very neoliberal dynamic that turns the discipline itself into just another piece in the mosaic.

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