

## INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL COLLECTION

### Diverse Student Experiences in Higher Education: Implications for the Anthropology Classroom

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#### Abstract

*The articles in this special collection were presented at the Society for Applied Anthropology meeting in 2018 on a panel affiliated with the organization's Issues in Higher Education Topical Interest Group. This topical interest group focuses on examining how ongoing shifts in student demographics, financial challenges, and national policy impact decision-making and practice at all levels of the institution in complex ways. The articles in this collection explore educational experiences and needs of college students from their perspectives within the broader context of a rapidly changing higher education landscape and with a focus on applying this knowledge to teaching practices in the anthropology classroom. The authors present ethnographic research on students' experiences, discuss implications of findings for the anthropology classroom, and provide concrete strategies that instructors can implement to address students' needs. In doing so, they bring together two fields of study that often appear in the literature as separate areas of focus – the anthropology of higher education and the teaching of anthropology.*

**Keywords:** *higher education; anthropology instruction; college students; applied anthropology; pedagogy*

The articles in this special collection emerged from a panel focusing on student perspectives and experiences in higher education at the 2018 Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) conference. The panel was one of a cluster of sessions affiliated with the recently-formed SfAA Issues in Higher Education Topical Interest Group (TIG). This interdisciplinary group of more than 500 members is committed to bringing an ethnographic perspective to institutions of higher education to inform policy and practice. As founding board members, we are charged with helping establish policies and procedures, recruiting presenters for conference sessions on issues in higher education, and finding ways to disseminate research on this topic. Our participation in

the SfAA session and in the interest group as well as our passion for foregrounding the voices and perspectives of students converged to bring us together as co-editors for this special collection on "Diverse Student Experiences in Higher Education."

The landscape of higher education continues to change at a rapid pace. Shifts in student demographics, financial challenges, and national policy are only a few "drivers" affecting an increasingly complex and volatile system (Foster 2017). These drivers impact institutions at levels of policy and practice, but they also affect individuals, particularly students, in unanticipated ways. College students across the US are increasingly diverse in terms of life stage, ethnicity, gender identity, and socio-economic status (Aguilar 2017; Smith 2019). As such, the educational and social-emotional needs of students on any given campus are equally diverse. Recent work examining higher education in terms of policy, administrative culture and practice, and research and instruction highlights the complex, multi-layered nature of these institutional settings (Anderson 2015, 2017; Foster, Graham, and Donaldson 2018; Gusterson 2017). Much of this work attends to policy and practice at the institutional level and beyond, with a systemic focus on how to better serve the needs of students. Anthropology, with its focus on the interplay between individuals and structural forces, provides a lens through which instructors can guide students to critically evaluate how institutions of higher education are influencing their experiences.

The articles in this special collection complement existing scholarship on student life (Arnett 2016; Blum 2017; Henry 2017; Nathan 2006; Nichter 2015; Vander Ven 2011; Wade 2018) by exploring the educational experiences and needs of college students from their perspectives with a focus on implications for the anthropology classroom. Each article is based on ethnographic research that foregrounds the voices of college students to provide close, first-person accounts of how they are navigating some of the challenges they face in the context of today's higher education landscape. All of the articles are intended to inform the teaching and learning of anthropology by attending to these guiding questions: How might understanding the experiences of students affect the way anthropology instructors design and manage their classes? Within the context of each study's findings and unique student demographic, what pedagogical approaches would help improve learning for students in anthropology courses?

While all of the contributions to this special collection address these guiding questions, each article reflects a different research focus and student demographic, providing a diverse exploration of student experiences and perspectives. Wightman's article on service-learning at a southern US liberal arts college explores how students who are diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender identity navigate fraught interactions with the surrounding white, conservative community. She describes how college life extends beyond the campus as students engage in the local community for service-learning and research projects. Wightman shares student experiences with the

local community and discusses strategies to address their concerns both in the classroom and campus-wide.

Ultimately, Wightman suggests a reimagining of certain service-learning practices – including the definition of service, values of reciprocity and collaboration, and how faculty prepare students for service – to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population of students. For example, she suggests diverse students may benefit from working collaboratively in professional, managerial, or research-based service projects. She envisions this type of service work as a kind of “border-crossing” that provides sustained exposure to a middle-class, professional community many students hope to enter after college. Wightman advises faculty that in preparing students for service learning, instead of focusing solely on how to serve the community’s needs, it is also important to consider the potential impact of the service opportunity on students. She presents strategies that her university, in collaboration with the Spencer Center for Civic and Global Engagement, have implemented to facilitate a more inclusive and reciprocal model of service-learning that encourages dialogue, collaboration, and mutual respect between students and community members.

Tamir and Taylor’s article explores a different student demographic: nontraditional students in an ethnically diverse, small public university located in the southwestern United States. Tamir and Taylor highlight the strong presence of nontraditional students nationally, noting that almost half of undergraduate students enrolled in US colleges and universities are older than 25. The authors explore the college experiences of nontraditional students, many of whom have complex lives that require them to juggle multiple competing demands and stressors, including parenthood, work, marriage, and financial responsibility. Tamir and Taylor share the narratives of five nontraditional students to illustrate the range of experiences that emerged across the research sample. In doing so, the authors highlight challenges faced by nontraditional students as well as the unique strengths they bring to the classroom environment, such as life and job experience and emotional maturity.

Tamir and Taylor explore themes that emerged from the students’ narratives, including a fierce commitment to school despite a multitude of barriers and an equally fierce commitment to serve the university community by sharing their life and job experiences in classes and informally mentoring their younger classmates. Additionally, the students highly valued office hours and face-to-face conversations with their professors. They often also needed flexibility with office hours, deadlines, class offerings, and class attendance policies. The authors advocate that, when possible, professors make time to understand the broader context of their nontraditional students’ lives in order to personalize course materials, advising, and mentoring for this growing sub-set of the student population. However, Tamir and Taylor also acknowledge that, for many faculty who teach large sections of classes and carry heavy course loads, this kind of one-on-one relationship building may not be possible. In that vein, the authors offer

strategies for addressing the values and experiences of nontraditional students regardless of class size, including ways to connect curricula to practical skills that students can use in the workplace and strategies for incorporating discussion and interaction into any class.

Morey and Taylor's article focuses on the day-to-day challenges faced by traditional students (those who enter college directly after high school) at a large, ethnically diverse state university located in the southern US. The authors build on research showing the widespread and negative effect that chronic stress punctuated by periods of intense stress has on student learning and classroom culture. Their research ethnographically explores experiences of stress among these emerging adults, many of whom are living on their own and facing some degree of financial responsibility for the first time as they work in one or more jobs to pay for college. Additional stressors for this demographic include making decisions about how to manage time, money, relationships, and schoolwork, all while feeling pressured to live up to their social expectations of "college life."

Morey and Taylor highlight strategies students used to manage their stress, such as engaging in physical activity as a way to distract or exhaust themselves, hanging out with friends or talking with someone close to them, and escaping the source of their stress to spend time alone. In narrative accounts of stress, students tended to present themselves as vulnerable protagonists who were dealing with situations completely out of their control. Such feelings resulted in a desire to get away and physically remove themselves from their environment by taking a drive or going home to an empty apartment, for example. Because the campus represented a central site of stress for students, some avoided seeking counseling and other services provided by the university; their desire to escape the source of their stress was stronger than their desire to seek professional help. Others avoided counseling because of the stigma associated with therapy and a desire to handle stress on their own. The authors point out that studying anthropology can contribute to self-reflection as well as the critical analysis of individual-institutional interactions. They share strategies for incorporating classroom activities and assignments that address both anthropological lenses to help students better understand and manage their stress while developing a greater awareness of structural forces that influence their college experiences.

Several themes emerge across the articles that are worth brief discussion here. First is a shared focus on the intersection between the anthropology of higher education and the teaching of anthropology. These have tended to be two separate areas of focus, and the articles in this collection bring them together, integrating ethnographic research on the experiences and needs of college students, discussion of the implications of findings for the anthropology classroom, and concrete strategies anthropology instructors can implement to address students' needs. The authors encourage anthropology instructors to apply research-based knowledge about students' experiences in higher education

settings to classroom curricula and instructional styles; moreover, the authors provide concrete lesson ideas and classroom practices that instructors can try out.

Additionally, all three articles emphasize a need for faculty to understand students in the context of their life experiences. Students across the three studies expressed a range of life challenges related to both school and their personal lives, including time management, classwork, family and other interpersonal relationships, as well as concerns about finances, health and safety, and discrimination. As anthropology instructors, we know that students do not leave their life experiences outside the classroom. The authors in this special collection advocate responding to students' concerns by finding ways to incorporate these concerns into the curriculum. Wightman describes campus initiatives designed to help students *and* community members confront intolerance and prepare for future interactions. Tamir and Taylor encourage strategies for supporting the values and experiences of nontraditional students, such as connecting the curriculum to practical work skills; being flexibility in terms of deadlines, office hours, and attendance; and taking the time to get to know students as people. Morey and Taylor provide concrete activities and strategies for helping students self-reflect and critically examine institutional forces that influence their college experience as a way to process their stress within the context of class learning objectives. All of the authors share a practice of valuing students' experiences and finding ways to incorporate their life challenges and stressors into the classroom with an eye toward improving the learning experience of anthropology students.

While the authors of articles in this special collection offer curriculum-based mechanisms that address their students' concerns and stressors, broader campus-wide strategies may help all student populations – traditional-aged students, students of color, sexual or religious minorities, and adult learners – address their concerns. As discussed in Morey and Taylor's article, students may not be aware of the campus resources available to help them navigate challenges. Instructors can play an important role in advocating for and connecting students with campus services designed to support them. Whatever the source of the challenges students face – financial, emotional, familial, or medical – they could benefit from campus services designed to address the diverse needs of diverse student populations. The more contented students feel both in classrooms and on college campuses, the more likely they are to enjoy their college experience, remain enrolled and engaged, and succeed.

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