

## STUDENT SHOWCASE

### Park, Partnerships, and Place: Interdisciplinary Student Perspectives on Applied Anthropology Research in the City

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#### Abstract

*As a graduate student team from an applied anthropology course series, we conducted a yearlong community research project focused on an urban park for a local city government partner. This paper reflects on how learning and working as an applied, interdisciplinary team impacted our research process, our project design, and our experiences as students. Through the project, we experienced the benefits and challenges of collaborative work, like working through different disciplinary expectations and training styles, communication challenges, and equitable work distribution. Our unique positionalities and backgrounds shaped how we engaged with the park, the community, and the research. We all experienced the city for ourselves—through hands-on engagement—and learned about many different park experiences through a novel combination of techniques, including observations, interviews, a survey (with an embedded map feature), and a community design charrette. We engaged with a variety of people and population dynamics, which helped us provide our government partner with insight into how various community voices matter in the future of the park as a public space, while we also had the opportunity to grow as researchers.*

**Keywords:** *Applied Anthropology; Interdisciplinary team; Place; Local government partnership; Mixed methods research*

#### Introduction

An applied course series offered by Purdue University's Anthropology Department allowed our interdisciplinary team to apply anthropological skills within our city.

Through first-hand engagement, we were able to better conceptualize and experience what it can mean to be a part of a *city*. This course series is a long-term partnership between the anthropology department and a city government partner, currently the Community Forestry and Greenspace Planner for the Parks and Recreation Department. While developing a new parks masterplan for the city, our city partner tasked the students in the 2021-22 cohort to understand people's experiences at and expectations of Happy Hollow Park. Built along a tree-lined ravine, it is one of the most sought-after city parks, offering amenities like playgrounds, shelters, and a dog park. Greenspaces like this are vital city amenities for providing physical, social, and mental benefits through recreation and interaction with nature, in addition to helping maintain biodiversity, clean air, and an environmentally friendly society (Larson, Jennings, and Cloutier 2016; Margaritis and Kang 2017; Pitas et al. 2017; Sandifer, Sutton-Grier, and Ward 2015; Wood et al. 2018). This paper aims to present student experiences in this multifaceted project through discussing the project context, the research components and process, the interdisciplinary graduate team dynamics, and how this experience shaped our view of the city.

## Course Description

Set within an applied anthropology framework, this was the second of two sequenced graduate courses aimed at engaging students with social science research outside of the academy. Each course runs for a full semester, both taught by the same professor, and are offered to graduate and advanced undergraduate students across several disciplines. Often, the majority of students in the courses do not have an anthropology background. The first course of the sequence (offered in the fall) serves as an introduction to applied anthropological theory and to the project partner, premise, and goals. The anthropological theory is presented through many readings, including applied anthropology ethnographies, which are partnered with class discussions and professionalization exercises meant to reflect on anthropology as a framework to apply to future career endeavors. In this first course, the class works together to plan and propose a research project to meet the needs of the external partner. Because it is an introduction to the material and the project, the fall course has more instructor guidance, though the project planning is largely steered by the students and their research interests.

The following spring semester is when the student team implements that research plan and works to gather, analyze, and present the data. Typically, most, if not all the students from the fall course continue into the spring. For the 2021-2022 group, five of the six students from the fall course continued into the spring, and three additional students joined the class as well. Because of the intensive load of new material and conducting a research project, student teams dedicate time outside of class to regular meetings and research activities. Each course in this series is 3 credits, so students

meet for 3 hours a week with the professor and then also meet independently as well. This course is decidedly student-led and is mainly focused on students implementing the applied anthropological theories and methods that they learned the semester prior.

## Project Description

Because of Happy Hollow Park's frequent use, its adjacency to a residential area, and its natural draining function for the surrounding neighborhood, the park faces urgent erosion issues. The city government wanted our help to hear from a diverse range of parkgoers to understand how planned changes to the park would impact them. Simultaneously, our professor challenged us to integrate our anthropological training to help our city partner hear not only parkgoers' desires for tangible changes but also their unique, individual experiences in and feelings about the park. Anthropological theories related to placemaking and multiple ontologies were foundational to our approach to understanding Happy Hollow Park and people's experiences there. We focused on the idea that a single location, such as this park within a city, is more than just its geographical positioning; it is something that exists uniquely in each person's mind and experience (M'Charek 2013; Malpas 1999; Mol 2003).

We had two research questions guiding this project. First, what are parkgoers' perspectives of, experiences in, and feelings about the park? Second, how can we help the city government understand and value different lived experiences in this park and to see the park in dynamic ways? Another project goal was to learn from interacting with classmates. Our student team included eight graduate students from the disciplines of communication, political science, anthropology, civil engineering, and computer science. As we discuss below, being in an interdisciplinary team impacted how we implemented our methods, presented our analysis, and functioned as researchers.

We used multiple methods to gather perspectives about the park from members of different stakeholder groups (i.e., active park users, university students, and park-adjacent residents). This diversity of both methods and stakeholders helped address our city partner's concern with hearing from groups that do not typically engage with the city government. We started with passive and participant observations in the park and at community events. Twenty semi-structured interviews explored the "what," "how," and "why" of people's park usage. Surveys available in the park through QR-enabled signs (Figure 1) expanded on the interviews and included a clickable map (Figure 2), allowing users to indicate places they used in the park. Finally, a charette-like design event, "Rediscover Happy Hollow Park," was hosted in conjunction with the City of West Lafayette, Purdue's Department of Landscape Architecture, and Kimley Horn and Associates at the city's wellness center. Community members

“rediscovered” (wording suggested by our partners as an alternative to “redesign,” which may have alarmed park-goers) the park through describing design changes to an artist, seeing their ideas portrayed in renderings of the park itself (Figure 3), and leaving sticky notes with comments on a large park map (Figure 4).



Figures 1 & 2. Yard signs enabled with QR codes (left) allowed easy access to the survey that included a clickable park map (right). (Both images are from author Labadorf).



Figures 3 & 4. Examples of artist renderings of participants' ideas (left) and notes on the map (right). (Images taken by class members during the charette).

These methods generated data that helped us view the park as not just a public amenity but also as a place where users have a high sense of personal ownership. Participants saw the park as a place of many things: a sense of belonging, opportunities to exercise, space for exploration, a site of play, space for community, and home to much wildlife. Above all, participants perceived Happy Hollow Park as a place intended and beneficial for experiencing nature. Our array of disciplinary backgrounds and research methods led us to see the park and the city in unique ways, prompting insights into others' perspectives as well as challenges in sufficiently accounting for all perspectives while contending with our larger responsibilities.

In addition to managing ourselves, our team also had to manage the needs and expectations of our government partner while attending to the needs of participants. The city government wanted to hear from students because the university student population is larger than the number of full-time residents in the area (US Census Bureau n.d.; Purdue University 2023). This made our team both consultants and participants. The government also had many considerations to balance, such as respecting park-adjacent landowners, making the park accessible to different constituencies, and following state regulations and city ordinances. These dynamics complicated our city partner's position, so we frequently reassessed our research scope and our duty as applied anthropologists to prioritize these complex aims. This project allowed us to help the city government prioritize local, often unheard voices when making decisions regarding Happy Hollow Park that kept a natural feel to the park while mitigating erosion.

## Student Experience

Our experiences both inside and outside the classroom offer insight into the importance of applied anthropology education, specifically within an urban setting. Below are extended discussions about our unique learning experiences, detailing the ways in which this course design and implementation were beneficial for us as graduate students and as people.

### *Experiencing an Applied Course*

This applied course design offered a unique style of graduate learning. The class provided a novel, hands-on research experience with the goals of demonstrating and implementing applied anthropology. Many of us came into the class to gain experience in community-focused research, working with an external partner, exploring the complexity between a community and its local government, and blending qualitative and quantitative approaches. The course series addressed these interests by placing the responsibility for the research design and execution, client interaction, and community integration on the students. This atypical, student-led learning experience went beyond the theoretical and provided a real-time exploration

of what it was like to use the park, live in the city, and the complexities involved. Author Kim noted:

I witnessed the multifaceted aspects of the city, its places, and residents in cooperation with the city. Additionally, through a comprehensive exploration of the diverse participants, objectives, materials, and narratives interwoven within Happy Hollow Park, I understood the complexities of the space in multiple layers. Cooperation with colleagues from various disciplines and in different contexts made it possible to focus on practical aspects without being trapped in theoretical discussions within the field of anthropology.

The real-life relevance and applicability of this project's findings also provided outcomes that were unique to this class. This project had tangible outcomes for a government partner whose relationship with the university and the Anthropology department extended beyond our immediate project. Authors Gurganus and Borgelt noted that the scope of these consequences provided a sense of purpose that uniquely empowered us as student researchers.

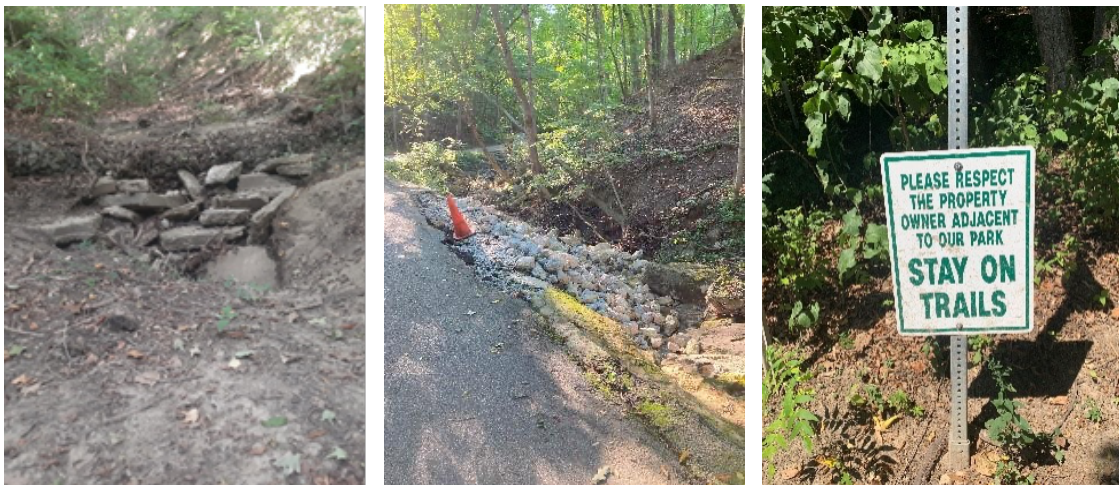
The ways the project methods arose and were implemented were also novel, especially for a graduate course. The charette stood out as offering exciting new pathways to study the city. The event allowed live interactions with park-goers and city residents, forcing students to individually apply what they learned in class. One of our fellow students in the class reflected the following in his charette notes: "Regarding my role and experiences as a student observer during the design charette, it was a bit confusing and awkward at the beginning, and I found myself listening more than asking questions" (shared with permission). Future courses using similar events may benefit from including extensive role playing to prepare for these discussions. The experience also allowed us to see in-person interactions between city residents and a city worker, helping shape our understanding of what the notion of 'the city' can mean by seeing how one city employee can serve as an embodiment of the government for the citizens who engage with the city through him.

#### *Interacting with an Interdisciplinary Team*

Our array of backgrounds and research interests (see Appendix A) led each of us to different interests and priorities in the project's design. Some students focused on people's interactions with the physical landscape, others focused on specific messaging and channels for communication, while others were focused on the power dynamics at play. Along with these varying interests, a major perspective difference that challenged the group was differing expectations regarding the role of theory in the project. For example, the communication students were taught that every aspect of every project must be grounded in specific theories offering frameworks to explain or predict findings in a generalizable scope. Even in inductive work, communication

students look for theory to emerge from the findings. The ways theory was taught and implemented from an anthropological perspective differed slightly in that the anthropology students were more inclined to first understand the project needs, the community context, and available points of intervention and then draw on non-prescriptive concepts from anthropological literature that might shed some light, recognizing that there may not be concepts that completely explain or predict the findings. These disciplinary differences left communication students needing to adjust and recognize that they were indeed doing legitimate scholarly work though their expectations for how theory is integrated into a project were different here than in their training.

Our differences also manifested in varying practices while working on this project. For example, the pictures students took during observations reflected their disciplinary and individual backgrounds. Authors Kim (Anthropology) and Olawolu (Civil Engineering), whose research interests center on environmental issues, focused predominantly on images of erosion and human intervention in the environment, whereas author Labadorf (Communication) included many photos of signs with messaging (Figures 5, 6, and 7). Similarly, although many overlaps existed between the types of notes students took for the charette, several practical differences also appeared. For example, authors Reynolds and Labadorf (Communication) took detailed notes on the exact words that participants said, especially regarding specific requests for the park, whereas authors Kim and Gurganus, with backgrounds in anthropology, focused on capturing the overall feel of the space and interactions and the complex social dynamics and perceptions of the groups involved.



Figures 5, 6, & 7. These images illustrate how each student's photos reflected their disciplinary and research interests. (From left to right, images by Olawolu, Kim, and Labadorf)

Our varying perspectives and practical differences are exemplified in author Kim's note that she often observed instances in which the demographic composition of participants posed limitations, and the time constraints of the project inadvertently excluded certain segments of the population. This concern for representation was broad but largely focused on including city-specific minority and underrepresented populations and wanting to engage with non-white residents and university students. Whereas others were focused on acknowledging non-representation as a project limitation, author Borgelt's (Anthropology) passions stemming from their personal experiences caused them to continually challenge the team to do all we could to overcome these limitations and keep them in the forefront as we analyzed and presented our findings to our partners.

Our team differences also brought interpersonal challenges. One challenge was that much of the discussion during out-of-class meetings was project-focused and centered on moving activities forward rather than discussing why students thought or felt a certain way. Author Gurganus thinks this may have created the assumption that our thoughts were more aligned than they were, setting disparate perspectives aside because of upcoming deadlines. This lack of conceptual cohesion impacted us both while conducting the research and preparing results for our partners. These disconnects demonstrated that it is important to acknowledge and accept the ways disagreement functions in interdisciplinary work and how compromise is an important component of a successful team.

We also navigated numerous other disagreements and miscommunications which sometimes left us without a sense of project direction or clear deadlines. Team members had different expectations for logistical components of the project, such as how much work should be completed before the next meeting and how vocal we should be about ensuring everyone accomplished work on time. Additionally, approaches to qualitative data analysis varied among the disciplines represented, and conflicting terminology used in the students' different disciplines and cultures led to confusion and even hurtful and emotional interactions. Creating a group contract at the course onset covering how to handle interpersonal disagreements, missed deadlines, and work distribution, among other things, could help disagreements be resolved in a smoother and more timely manner through having clear expectations and processes.

### *Urban Experience(s)*

This experience also allowed us a deeper sense of engagement with the space around us and changed our prior conceptualizations of "the city." Initially, we used "the city" as a quick qualifier for our government partner. Many of us, such as author Olawolu, also saw "the city" as the physical structures and boundaries on the map.

After engaging with community members, we understood that who and what makes up the city are dynamic and interactive. Community connection to amenities also impacted our understanding of the significance of available resources. Author Reynolds reflected: “Coming from a rural area, I do not really think about parks as part of the city or necessarily how meaningful they might be to those who dwell in places without nature access.” Our initial conceptions of the city drew distinct lines between the government, the physical environment, and the people living in city spaces and did not account for the value of designed public spaces. Through this experience, this distinction between a government and its community diminished when we realized that community members are active participants in the place-making of their cities and city spaces. As author Kim noted, conceptualizing the city as both political and personal deepened our commitment to the city, even as temporary residents.

## Conclusion

Through these experiences in the city and with our team, we grew as researchers and deepened our understanding of what it means to be a city. Working with and ultimately providing our city partner with a holistic view of the park helped us connect the city government with a larger array of community members. Meanwhile, this specific course design fostered interdisciplinary collaboration while allowing us to focus on skills and applications related to our individual interests. This experience in our city helped us gain unique perspectives on applied work, learning that applied anthropology is just as dynamic as the city we were researching in. Just as the city is more than a location, a government, and people; applied work is more than posters, client meetings, and hosting events – it is about working with people and highlighting real life in context.

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## Appendix A: Author Biographies

Beth Ann Labadorf graduated with a PhD from the Brian Lamb School of Communication in 2024. She is from Indiana and is returning to her alma mater, Bob Jones University, as an Assistant Professor of strategic communication. Her current research interests are in applied work and health communication, focusing on the effects of excessive smartphone use on college students' health and creating effective messaging about this issue for practical health improvement.

Taylor Borgelt is a first-year PhD student in the Department of Anthropology. Originally from Georgia, she studied biology at Howard University as an undergraduate student. Her master's in Anthropology was focused on decolonialism in forensic anthropology, and her current research interests include science communication, health equity, death and dying, and decolonialism.

Gina Reynolds graduated with a PhD from the Brian Lamb School of Communication in 2023 and is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Her research interests include qualitative and quantitative mixed methods, social media effects, and communication in familial units.

Kayla Gurganus is a fifth-year PhD candidate studying political science, and ecological sciences and engineering, with an undergraduate background in anthropology from Ball State University. She currently studies participatory planning and how it affects equity in climate action planning processes at the municipal level.

Seohyung Kim graduated with her MS in Anthropology in 2023. Originally from South Korea, Seohyung studied cultural anthropology at Yonsei University for her undergraduate degree. Her current research is about rethinking and reshaping environment and pollution politics and knowledge against normalcy, exploitation, colonialism, and racism.

Waire Olawolu is a PhD student in the Department of Civil Engineering. Originally from Nigeria, Waire completed his undergraduate degree at the Federal University of Technology Akure with a Bachelor of Engineering and earned his master's degree in Civil Engineering from Purdue University. He currently studies the effect of enabling innovations on sociotechnical system transitions.