

Evolutionary Anthropology Society

Mary K Shenk, Contributing Editor

Stanford University Department of Anthropological Sciences

The Stanford Department of Anthropological Sciences (DAS) was founded in 1998-1999 when the longstanding Stanford Department of Anthropology split along ideological lines. Those interested in narrative and interpretive approaches created the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology while those focused on empirical approaches formed DAS.

Current DAS chair William Durham opines that “as a result of the schism we were given the opportunity to re-create our department from the ground up,” a circumstance had a strong effect on the character of the department. Faculty share a common emphasis on research that is theoretically guided, empirical in nature, and incorporates sound scientific methodology. While not all employ it, DAS is a welcoming environment for evolutionary theory in both its broad and narrow senses. Melissa Brown, a cultural anthropologist focusing on issues of identity in China and Taiwan, said joining DAS was like “coming out of the closet” in that she was finally able to use evolutionary vocabulary when discussing social change.

From a core of six, DAS has grown to include 12 full-time faculty as well as four lecturers and is likely to continue to increase in size; it has also been attracting larger numbers of undergraduate and graduate students every year. DAS was conceived as a four-fields department and thus faculty represent a variety of subdisciplines. Despite this breadth, however, faculty identify several major areas of emphasis: a) paleoanthropology (Richard Klein, David DeGusta) and anthropological genetics (Joanna Mountain), b) environmental and ecological anthropology including a focus on conservation and indigenous peoples (William Durham, Rebecca Bliege Bird, Doug Bird, James Holland Jones), c) human biology and medical anthropology including a focus on health, adaptation, and disease (Ronald Barrett, James Holland Jones), d) archaeology (John Rick, Ian Robertson), and e) cultural anthropology and linguistics, especially related to cultural and linguistic evolution (William Durham, Arthur Wolf, Melissa Brown, James Fox).

Most faculty view the empirical and methodological focus of their department as its greatest strength. In addition, however, Durham describes the departmental atmosphere as having “a sense of excitement, of lots of potential.” He attributes this to the “sense of possibility” created by the department’s newness along with the recent hiring of so many junior faculty—a group which James Holland Jones describes as “very young, energetic, and ambitious” as well as willing to engage in “quite a bit of collaboration” both among themselves and with more established faculty members.

On the top of the list of key extra-departmental resources is the Stanford U library, which not only has great collections but which reportedly honors acquisition requests from faculty quite promptly. Another great resource is the abundance of on-campus research and travel funding opportunities for both faculty and students. “Stanford really stands out in this regard, even in contrast to other research universities” says Richard Klein, “you can almost always find internal funding.” Moreover, faculty and students are often able to make significant use of resources (such as labs) in other departments, especially in the harder sciences. Many DAS students, for instance, have committee members from biology, geology, or genetics. Other on-campus resources include Stanford Institute for the Environment, the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences, and the Institute for International Studies. Finally, the presence in the Bay Area of

institutions such as UC Berkeley and the US Geological Survey provides valuable colleagues and collections.

When DAS was formed, the requirement-based approach of the older graduate program was replaced with what John Rick calls a “dossier approach to education.” This system combines a relatively small and flexible number of requirements with a Graduate Research Plan submitted by students near the end of their first year. This document lays out an “intellectual framework” for the student’s graduate study and details the steps that will be needed to achieve their training and research goals (DAS website). “The graduate program has a lot of flexibility legislated into it,” comments Jones, “students are expected to play a central role in designing their course of study.”

Graduate students admitted to DAS are guaranteed five years of funding, including both fellowships and assistantships (both teaching and research). However, they are also required to apply for external funding on an annual basis. Several faculty in the department have active field programs in which students are able to participate, and funding is often available from departmental or university funds. Recent graduates have been very successful in obtaining academic employment at schools such as UC Davis, U of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the U of Texas at San Antonio. Others, especially those with an evolutionary or ecological emphasis, have chosen non-academic employment with such organizations as the US Forest Service, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, and the nonprofit Business for Social Responsibility.

Somewhat ironically given its origins, several faculty members suggested that having two anthropology departments on campus strengthened DAS by allowing it, in the words of Rick, “to concentrate on a particular epistemological perspective rather than attempt to reflect the entire breadth of the discipline.” Specifically, adds Brown, regardless of the particular topic of study, “training in a broad materialist perspective is possible at Stanford, both in terms of theory and in terms of a more rigorous methodological approach. I wish that were more broadly known.”

Contributions to this column are welcomed and may be sent to Mary Shenk, Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology, University of Washington, 206 Raitt Hall, Box 353412, Seattle, WA 98195-3412 or to mshenk@u.washington.edu. Suggestions of or details on graduate programs related to the interests of the Evolutionary Anthropology Society are especially requested.