

Evolutionary Anthropology Society

Mary K Shenk, Contributing Editor

Graduate Study in Evolutionary Approaches to Human Behavior at the University of Michigan

"I think it's fair to say that Michigan has been a center for the study of evolution and social behavior since the mid-1970s," says Beverly Strassman, Professor of Anthropology. Faculty in that period included Richard Alexander, Richard Wrangham, and Randolph (Randy) Nesse, and there were numerous graduate students, undergrads and postdocs who shared their interests. Throughout the 1980s joint workshops and small conferences were held between the University of Michigan, Northwestern University, and McMaster University, while larger conferences held at Michigan in April and October of 1988 led to the founding of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society (www.hbes.com).

Also in the 1980s, Michigan's Evolution and Human Behavior Program was formed under the leadership of Richard Alexander. Reborn in the 1990s as the Evolution and Human Adaptation Program (EHAP) directed by Randy Nesse, this program is best known for the seminar series it sponsors each year that brings in a wide range of well-known speakers on topics related to human behavioral ecology, evolutionary psychology, cultural evolution, and evolutionary theory more generally. EHAP has faculty affiliates from 10 departments on campus, its seminars provide training for a wide variety of students, and its mailing list serves as a forum for information exchange.

Current faculty doing research in evolution and behavior at Michigan are distributed across a number of departments. Anthropology faculty include Beverly Strassman, who focuses on the biology-culture interface and life history theory, behavioral ecologist John Mitani who works with wild chimpanzees, and behavioral ecologist and endocrinologist Jacinta Beehner who focuses on geladas. Psychology faculty include Randy Nesse, who specializes in evolutionary psychology and Darwinian medicine as they relate to psychiatric disorders such as depression, and Barbara Smuts, who takes an evolutionary perspective on the function and dynamics of long-term social relationships in primates and other animals. Bobbi Low, a behavioral ecologist working on human mating systems as well as issues of resource use and the environment, is housed in the School of Natural Resources. Other EHAP faculty include Richard Alexander, Scott Atran, Robert Axelrod, Gene Bernstein, Alan Gibbard, Richard Nisbett, and Carl Simon.

Because faculty likely to appeal to evolutionary-minded graduate students are not located in a single department, Michigan professors advise that the best admissions strategy is to pick the discipline that you want to get a Ph.D. in, pick the person you would like to work with in that department, and then apply with that department and person in mind. Once you become a student at Michigan, your chair will come from your home department but other EHAP faculty will be able to serve as committee members or occasionally as co-chairs. Recent anthropology and ecology Ph.D. Pablo Nepomnaschy, whose committee was co-chaired by Strassman and Low, says that Michigan faculty "have a very open-door policy for students" and recalls that professors from biology, psychology, and public health all had important influences on his research.

Faculty agree that Michigan's greatest strength in terms of evolutionary approaches is the diversity of the work going on across campus and the links made by researchers between departments and fields of study. Low comments that "Michigan has very thin walls between disciplines; people here end up doing very interdisciplinary research." And Nesse adds that "the group of scientists studying evolution and human behavior is not isolated, but integrated and closely interlinked with the rest of campus." This broadness also extends to students, whose wide-ranging training may end up qualifying them for an array of jobs and opportunities in different academic departments as well as in other arenas.

In addition to the theoretical training available in numerous places across campus, Michigan's top-ranked anthropology department has a variety of unique opportunities to offer evolutionary-minded students. There are good options for fieldwork training, including Strassman's field site in Mali. There are high-quality lab training facilities and faculty with expertise in behavioral endocrinology (Beehner and Strassman). In collaboration with Michael Hammer at the University of Arizona, Strassman has recently begun a unique project to "use genetic markers and population genetics techniques to answer traditional anthropological questions about social organization and kinship." While this project is still ramping up, there are currently training opportunities for both the field and wet lab aspects of this research. For students interested in doing comparative work with non-human primates, Mitani and Beehner both have active primate field programs and several primatologists in the psychology department (Smuts, Thore Bergman, Stephanie Preston) offer cognitive and neuroscience perspectives. Additionally, there is strong training in archaeology and human origins for interested students.

Starting with the next round of admissions, all incoming anthropology graduate students will receive 5 years of support. In addition to this, Michigan students have access to numerous sources of competitive funding through such organizations such as the Rackham Graduate School, the Institute for Social Research, the Office of the Vice President for Research, the Regents Fellowship program, and the Life Program. Some of these sources offer fellowships, some research support, and some travel support.

Other campus resources likely to be of use to evolutionary anthropologists include the top-notch library and computing facilities which were praised by everyone I spoke with. In addition, the large interdisciplinary Institute for Social Research offers training, funding, data access, and research services in the fields of population studies, group dynamics, and survey research through its many subdivisions. The Center for the Study of Complex Systems is a useful resource for students interested in training in or conducting research using computational modeling techniques. Also, the Psychology Department, the School of Public Policy, and other units on campus are highly ranked, making them great places to get additional or interdisciplinary training.

While Michigan may not have all of its evolutionary expertise gathered in the same one or two academic departments, faculty and students see this as an advantage. Low argues that "it is a good thing that there are a variety of graduate program habitats out there...it's a sign of diversity in the field." And Nesse adds that, in terms of what Michigan has to offer, "there is no substitute for being part of a great university."

Contributions to this column are welcomed and may be sent to mshenk@unc.edu. EAS columns are archived at www.evolutionaryanthropologysociety.org.