

## Evolutionary Anthropology Society

Mary K Shenk, Contributing Editor

### Washington State University Program in Evolutionary Anthropology

In the past WSU had a small, traditional physical anthropology program. However, over time there was, in faculty member Tim Kohler's words, a "growing recognition that several faculty in archaeology and cultural anthropology shared interests in aspects of evolutionary theory." Then, on the retirement of some of the senior physical anthropologists and the hiring of newer more broadly-focused faculty, a critical mass existed and it was decided to "reorient the program as a general program in evolutionary anthropology that attempts to study past and present human societies using approaches inspired by evolutionary theory."

Thus the Evolutionary Anthropology Program (EAP) has been in place since fall 2003 and has so far attracted six graduate students, a number that faculty hope will more than double within the next few years as word of the program spreads.

Faculty come from diverse subdisciplinary backgrounds but are held together by their interest in evolutionary theory. Jessica Alfaro focuses on the behavioral ecology and phylogenetics of mating strategies in capuchins and closely related primates. John Bodley examines the changing relationships between social scale and social power in both small- and large-scale societies, primarily focusing on Latin America. Barry Hewlett focuses on evolutionary cultural anthropology of infant development, parent-child relationships, and emerging disease in the Central African Republic. Tim Kohler studies social change in Neolithic societies in the American Southwest using computational modeling techniques. Karen Lupo is a zooarchaeologist specializing in the behavior of prehistoric and modern hunter-gatherers in Western North America and the Central African Republic. Rob Quinlan focuses on the behavioral ecology of family, kinship and life-history strategies in the Caribbean. And Steve Weber focuses on the relationship between subsistence patterns and material culture in South Asia and the United States.

One unusual aspect of the department is its holism and subdisciplinary integration. At WSU, "evolutionary anthropology is not just another name for biological anthropology", says Alfaro, "but an interdisciplinary program trying to span the spectrum of evolutionary questions." Faculty backgrounds reflect this description—three were trained as archaeologists, two as cultural anthropologists, and two as biological or biocultural anthropologists—and their research reflects a wide range of evolutionary approaches including dual inheritance theory, behavioral ecology, population genetics, life history theory, genetic algorithms, and evolutionary archaeology. Moreover, all faculty have joint appointments either in two anthropology programs or two departments.

As a program the EAP is, in Hewlett's words, "very field-oriented," with most faculty actively involved in fieldwork at sites to which students can gain access. Additionally, WSU is well-known for its archaeology program, especially the level of technical training available. This makes a particularly good tie-in for students interested in evolutionary approaches to archaeological data.

Other areas of emphasis include fertility and reproduction, the application of methodology and theory from mathematics and biology to problems in anthropology, and the integration of biological and cultural evolutionary theory and methods.

WSU's main campus is in the small town of Pullman in southeastern Washington, set among the scenic Palouse hills. A branch campus in Vancouver (a southwestern Washington city in the Portland, Oregon metro area) is home to faculty members Hewlett and Weber, who retain close ties with students and faculty on the main campus through frequent campus visits, remote teaching of core courses, and by offering teaching and research opportunities for students in Vancouver to fund periods of intensive collaboration.

Graduate students take a series of general core courses during their first year before focusing more closely on the subject matter of the EAP through a series of electives. Lupo says that requirements are “left open intentionally...we are trying to attract and encourage a diversity of interests” among students, who often take courses in other anthropology programs as well as other departments. More specifically, Alfaro describes the EAP students as “highly motivated and involved in their own learning...they pursue their own research opportunities and work on their own papers” often in collaboration with other EAP students.

In terms of funding, faculty explain that while there is no funding guarantee in the EAP “everyone gets something” whether that is a teaching or research position or something else. Additionally, the department as a whole has several internal fellowships on offer, and students of course have access to extramural funding through national competitions.

WSU graduate students have an unusually active Anthropology Graduate Organization, which raises money to send students to conferences and sponsors outside speakers and other events. “The WSU grad student group is pretty unique” says Alfaro, and Lupo adds that the group is “very supportive—they really help each other out; sometimes it keeps students in the program.”

In terms of more general resources, the WSU anthropology department has lab facilities for geoarchaeology, zooarchaeology, and lithic analysis. In addition, Kohler has a lab devoted to agent-based modeling. Outside of the department, Lupo says that the Conner Museum has “fantastic” comparative vertebrate paleontology collections while the Museum of Anthropology has a huge curation facility with extensive archaeological collections, many of which have never been analyzed.

In addition, several EAP faculty are affiliated with the Center for Integrated Biotechnology or the Center for Reproductive Biology at WSU, both of which provide resources for students wishing to train in laboratory work. And Kohler is an external faculty member of the Santa Fe Institute which specializes in multidisciplinary research on complexity and offers various opportunities for student training in New Mexico.

Faculty see their department as a supportive place where a lot gets done. Quinlan describes it as “unusually friendly” with “damn near zero political tension.” And, of Pullman’s small-college-town atmosphere, Lupo comments that “the good thing about this is that you have a tight group of people who can really focus on their work without a lot of distraction.”

*Contributions to this column are welcomed and may be sent to Mary Shenk, Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, CB #8120, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8120 or to [mshenk@u.washington.edu](mailto:mshenk@u.washington.edu). Suggestions of or details on graduate programs related to the interests of the Evolutionary Anthropology Society are especially requested.*