

Evolutionary Anthropology Society

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University of Missouri Department of Anthropology:
Program in Human Adaptation, Ecology, and Evolution

In the 1960's and 1970's, MU's department of anthropology was known for its strengths in cultural resource management and the archaeology of the Missouri and Mississippi river basins. In the 1980's and early 1990's, however, the focus of the department began to shift with the hiring of a number of new faculty members whose focus was broadly biological and/or evolutionary in nature. Biologically-oriented hires included biomedical and demographic anthropologist Lisa Sattenspiel whose work focuses on the effects of infectious disease in human populations, biomedical and cultural anthropologist Mark Flinn who focuses on child health and psychological development in the Caribbean, and paleoanthropologist Carol Ward who focuses on the functional anatomy and evolution of humans and closely related primates in East and South Africa. Also hired during this period were three archaeologists, including zooarchaeologist and vertebrate taphonomist R. Lee Lyman whose research interests include evolutionary archaeology and the history of American archaeology, evolutionary archaeologist Michael O'Brien whose research interests include the application of phylogenetic methods to archaeological data, and paleoethnobotanist Deborah Pearsall who focuses on the evolution of agricultural systems in South America.

Then, in the late 1990's, the department underwent a sea change when it lost nearly half of its faculty in a period of three years. Most of the losses were due to early retirement, but a few chose to take jobs in industry or elsewhere in academia. This situation "gave us a chance to reinvent ourselves" says R. Lee Lyman, who became Chair in 2000 and continues to hold the job. Partly inspired by an administrative need for definition coming from the chancellor's office, and partly by the need to target potential hires, the faculty began to search for a way to characterize their program. The result was a decision to emphasize Human Adaptation, Ecology, and Evolution (HAEE), a conceptualization based on the goal of, in the words of Reed Wadley, "connecting the strengths" of existing faculty research.

With this rubric in mind, the department hired four new faculty in the past five years, and intends to hire at least two more. New hires include environmental anthropologist Reed Wadley whose research involves natural resource management and historical ecology in Indonesia, cultural anthropologist Craig Palmer who studies traditional ecological knowledge among fishers in Newfoundland, bioarchaeologist and forensic anthropologist Daniel Wescott who focuses on long bone biomechanics and secular change and their relationships to activity patterns in the past, and New World archaeologist Todd VanPool who works on cultural transmission in the American Southwest.

The department has several defining features, perhaps the most fundamental of which is its commitment to empiricism across subdisciplines. This wide agreement on science as a mode of research creates what Palmer calls a "relaxed atmosphere of free investigation" in which, says Wadley, "we can actually understand what each other are doing."

Another strength of the department is its emphasis on collaboration. “There are strong links between faculty interests, often across subdisciplinary lines” says Lyman, which leads to a “healthy intellectual environment for both faculty and students.” Evidence of cross-disciplinary and collaborative work is plentiful, both within the department and between anthropologists and faculty from other MU departments. For instance, Palmer and Van Pool are involved in work on the evolution of religion and ritual and its traces in the archeological record, Sattenspiel and Palmer have recently begun work on the evolution of disease, Flinn and Ward work with David Geary in psychology on the evolution of sociality, and Lyman works with natural resource management faculty on bison demography. Palmer calls the level of collaboration in the department “pretty rare; I collaborate one way or another with just about everyone here.”

The department is also notable for its emphasis on broadly-based evolutionary theory. This includes an unusually wide range of evolutionary perspectives, including the origins of agriculture (Pearsall), cultural evolution (Palmer and VanPool), human variation (Wescott), hominid evolution (Ward), evolutionary archaeology (Lyman and O'Brien), human behavioral ecology (Flinn and Wadley), and evolutionary psychology (Flinn and Palmer).

Prospective graduate students are evaluated as usual on grades, GRE scores, and any previous work they might have done. Additionally, fit with a faculty member and the ability to write well are especially key. Students do not receive guaranteed funding, but do have various possibilities open to them including TAs both inside and outside of the department, graduate instructorships, RA opportunities on faculty grants, and hourly work at the Museum of Anthropology.

Grad students at MU have especially good opportunities for both field and lab training. Resources in the department include the MU Museum of Anthropology which has extensive collections related to Missouri archaeology, the Paleoethnobotany Laboratory and its Phytolith Database, and two archaeology field schools—one focusing on the Great Plains and usually held in the Dakotas, and one held in Buena Vista, Peru. The department also has close ties to the Missouri Archaeological Society which oversees the Archaeological Survey of Missouri, a project which documents over 36,000 archaeological sites in the state. Moreover, faculty have ongoing research projects in Indonesia, the Caribbean, Newfoundland and various parts of the US.

Moreover, students and faculty in the MU Dept of Anthropology have frequent contact with other units on campus, including the Departments of Geography and Psychological Sciences, the School of Medicine, and the Division of Biological Sciences—especially the Program in Evolutionary Biology and Ecology and the Conservation Biology Program.

Recent MU anthropology Ph.D.s have obtained faculty positions at UC Davis, Penn State, Washington State University, and Minnesota's Institute of Child Development as well as postdocs at the Smithsonian and SUNY Stony Brook. Professional positions include Director of the US military's Central Identification Facility in Hawai'i and NAGPRA liaison at the Smithsonian.

Faculty seem to enjoy their department, calling it “stimulating and very collegial” (Lyman) and “a good place to work” where “we don't disagree on the fundamentals” (Wadley). And, of the HAAE focus, Palmer concludes “I don't see any signs of the direction

changing; everyone seems very committed and the general view is that it will just get more vibrant over time.”

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.