Evolutionary Anthropology Society

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Graduate Programs in Evolutionary Anthropology Number 2: U of Utah's Graduate Program in Evolutionary Ecology

This is the second column in a series on graduate programs where training can be obtained in the many theoretical approaches of interest to the members of the Evolutionary Anthropology Society. Please contact me if you have information about an appropriate graduate program or if you would like to submit a piece for the series.

The U of Utah's Graduate Program in Evolutionary Ecology (EE program) had its beginnings with the work of Kristen Hawkes, James O'Connell, and Eric Charnov (from the Dept. of Biology) in the late 1970s, making it among the oldest behaviorally-focused evolutionary anthropology programs in the nation. It is also one of the largest, with 11 affiliated faculty members including three archaeologists and two biologists.

Starting in the 1980's, an EE-focused hiring approach resulted in a faculty with diverse but related interests in hunter-gatherer ethnography, ecological archaeology, demography, evolutionary genetics, and evolutionary psychology. Specific areas of research include subsistence patterns in the Great Basin during the Pleistocene and Holocene (Broughton and Metcalfe), the environmental determinants of ethnic diversity (Cashdan), hunting strategies and the importance of grandmothers among the Hadza of Tanzania (Hawkes and O'Connell), the anthropological genetics of prehistoric and modern Native Americans (O'Rourke), and the genetic and demographic history of early humans (Harpending and Rogers).

"A topical interest in hunter-gatherers has always been an important part of the EE program, both archaeologically and ethnographically, since humans evolved as hunter-gatherers" says Alan Rogers, Professor of Anthropology and a faculty affiliate of the EE program. This approach complements the Dept. of Anthropology's focus on empirical work, has led to several major collaborative fieldwork projects, and has inspired influential theoretical work on the evolution of menopause and human longevity, the evolution of sex differences in reproductive and subsistence strategies, and the elucidation of prehistoric subsistence and demographic patterns.

The U of Utah is also one of the very few institutions where students can combine training in archeological methods with the theoretical perspective of evolutionary ecology. The EE program is distinguished by a significant number of faculty who are both archaeologists and evolutionary ecologists; three of the EE-affiliated faculty are archaeologists both by training and research while several others have strong archaeological interests and expertise. Moreover, evolutionary ecology related research is fostered by the U of Utah's Archaeological Center, whose mission includes research on the demography, ecology, and ethnoarchaeology of hunter-gatherers.

A further strength of Utah's EE program is its cooperative approach to research; nearly all of the EE program's faculty are involved in collaborative projects with other EE-affiliated faculty or others, and some are involved more than one such project. Moreover, students are often able to participate in these types of projects and gain the experience of working closely with multiple faculty members. "The thing that strikes me as so different about this department is the degree to which it provides a theatre in which to integrate the work of people who are generally divided into different departments or subdisciplines" says James O'Connell, Chair of the Dept. of Anthropology and Director of the Archaeological Center.

Recent Ph.D.s from Utah have found work within academia, government, and the private sector. Several have tenure or tenure-track jobs (primarily at public universities in the western US), one has a postdoc in the U of Utah School of Medicine, one is in Namibia doing NSF-funded research, another is working for the Utah State Archaeologist's Office, and yet others are working in the field of contract archaeology. "Until the mid-1990's there was no market for evolutionary ecologists within [academic] archaeology or anthropology more generally, but in the past ten years the market has started to open up" says O'Connell. Not only are those with an evolutionary framework now being considered for faculty jobs, he adds, "but now you occasionally even see ads for academic positions where an EE approach is stipulated."

Contributions to this column are welcomed and may be sent to Mary Shenk, Box 353100, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195 or mshenk@u.washington.edu. Suggestions of or details on gradate programs related to the interests of the Evolutionary Anthropology Society are especially requested.