

Evolutionary Anthropology Society

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Evolutionary Anthropology at the University of Oregon

Anthropology at the University of Oregon (UO) traces its origins to the arrival of Luther Cressman to join the Oregon department of sociology in 1929. Anthropology became a separate department under Cressman in 1935 and awarded its first M.A. in 1938. The department expanded to include all four fields of anthropology in the 1940s, and in 1952 was authorized to award the Ph.D.

Also in the 1930s the Oregon Legislature created the University of Oregon Museum of Natural History based partly around the existing anthropological collections of UO. The Museum was designated to serve as the repository for all anthropological holdings of the state of Oregon.

Current evolutionarily-oriented faculty span Oregon's three subdisciplines of archaeology, biological anthropology, and biocultural anthropology. Archaeologists include Doug Kennett, who specializes in the behavioral ecology of prehistoric coastal foragers and farmers of the Pacific and Pacific Rim, and Sarah McClure who focuses on historical and evolutionary ecological approaches to the origins of agriculture and animal husbandry in the Western Mediterranean.

Biological anthropologists include paleontologist and morphometrician Stephen Frost who focuses on the evolution of cercopithecoid primates and their relationship with human evolution and global climate change, primatologist Frances White who studies the evolution, ecology, and genetics of primate social systems among bonobos in the Congo and lemurs in various field sites, human biologist Josh Snodgrass whose research focuses on human adaptation to environmental stress among circumpolar populations in Siberia, and paleoanthropologist John Lukacs who specializes in the paleopathology and dental anthropology of South Asia

Bio-Cultural anthropologists include Larry Sugiyama who takes behavioral ecology and evolutionary psychology approaches to attractiveness, health, and social exchange among Shiwiar forager-horticulturalists in the Ecuadorian Amazon and Geraldine Moreno-Black who focuses on nutrition and health of children in the U.S., Ecuador and Thailand.

Recent hires have been growth positions rather than replacement positions, and evolutionary approaches are one of the directions of that growth.

Evolutionary work at UO concentrates around the several themes. Diet, foraging strategies and nutrition are shared interests of Kennett, Lukacs, Moreno-Black, Snodgrass, Sugiyama, and White. Sexual selection and life history theory in humans and primates are shared interests of Snodgrass, Sugiyama, and White. Conflict, warfare and agonistic interactions are interests of Kennett, Sugiyama, and White. Dental and skeletal approaches to past populations of humans and nonhuman primates are shared interests of Frost, Lukacs, and Museum director Jon Erlandson. Finally, human-environmental interactions including subsistence transitions are shared interest of Frost, Kennett, McClure, Snodgrass, and incoming archaeologist Gyoung-Ah Lee. Snodgrass suggests that the strength of the UO program lies in its "diversity of evolutionary approaches; we look at similar topics with distinct perspectives and techniques."

One advantage of UO for students is that "faculty get along well, especially those with an evolutionary focus," says Frost. White adds that faculty are "very approachable." Subdisciplinary walls are porous and faculty encourage students to do work that crosses into different fields and subfields. Another advantage for UO grad students is the access to numerous fieldsites through faculty research. "Pretty much everyone here is a fieldworker," says Lukacs, and while most faculty bring their own students to the field many are willing to take other people's students as well.

UO students also have good access to lab facilities including a scanning electron microscope for microwear surface analysis, a mass spectrometer for isotopic chemistry, and a portable laser surface scanner for doing three dimensional morphometrics. And UO's Museum of Natural and Cultural History has close ties with the anthropology department. It houses collections of artifacts from Native America, Oceania, Southeast Asia, and Africa and offers research opportunities and occasionally instruction.

Funding for grad students comes from numerous sources inside and outside the department. There are regularly TAs in the anthropology department, but anthropology students are also often able to find TAs in psychology, biology, and other fields such as religious studies. Students also receive funding by working as RAs or lab techs on anthropology faculty research. The museum also has TA and RA lines available in archaeology or biological anthropology, there are occasional departmental instructorships, and some students also obtain teaching fellowships which provide funding for a full year.

Important extra-departmental resources on campus include the Institute of Cognitive and Decision Sciences (ICDS), an interdisciplinary research center with a very broad-based interest in human evolution. Current directed by White, ICDS provides a forum for interaction through a speaker series, seminars, and research interest groups, giving anthropology faculty opportunities for collaboration and anthropology grad students access to advice and mentoring from faculty in other fields. ICDS also provides funding for faculty and graduate student projects, and has recently begun working on three cross-cutting research themes including the evolution of war, evolutionary medicine, and the evolution of human mating systems.

Also important for those with biological interests is the Center for Ecology and Evolutionary Biology which helps develop research facilities and sponsors seminars, workshops, and lectures. Additionally, UO's anthropology department has had ties with the Oregon Regional Primate Research Center in Beaverton since the 1960's. Students have done projects at the primate center or using some of its collections of skeletons and cadavers, 500 of which are housed in the UO anthropology department. One special feature of these collections is that many of the animals were related and there is important genealogical and biological data associated with each skeleton, significantly broadening the types of research that can be done with them.

Finally, the Oregon Health and Science University in Portland is planning on expanding to offer medical training at UO. Under this initiative, gross anatomy and related courses would be taught by UO biological anthropologists. Benefits for UO anthropology would be additional hires in evolutionary anatomy, fellowships in support of grad students, and possibly a new MD/PhD program.

PhD graduates of UO have recently gone on to jobs in academia at such institutions as the Ohio State University, the University of Edmonton, and the University of Auckland. Others have taken jobs in conservation (at such organizations as the World Wildlife Fund) and cultural resource management (in such places as the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office).

One unusual characteristic of UO is that "evolutionary approaches are seen as relevant and valuable across campus," says White. For example, the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies put together a program of study that included topics in human prehistory and human biology, and the Humanities Center has hosted such high profile speakers as Sarah Hrdy and Peter Brown. White was also recently involved in talks with faculty in Women's Studies about putting together a sexuality minor that would include coursework in biological and evolutionary approaches to sex and sexuality.

Frost sums things up by saying "We have a lot of active faculty, and the evolutionary part of the department is growing. There is a sense of momentum in the department and on campus."

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