Research Goal/Intro

I worked closely with Kelly Thaker at the Center for Applied Anthropology at Foothill College to design a research program that would create career networking opportunities for students while examining the role anthropologists play in the tech world, and more broadly the evolving role of anthropology in the 21st century. We were interested in the ways in which Anthropology is changing from its traditional research role and purview to one that integrates itself with the design and production of technology products that aim to solve problems facing consumer subsets and society as a whole. In the wake of funding cuts to career services on college campuses, through research like this we hope to influence the design of programs within anthropology departments that identify emerging career paths for Anthropology graduates, create relationships between department and industry professionals, and inform an evolving cultural anthropology curriculum. Our research project culminated in a presentation at the 41st Annual Western Departments of Anthropology and Sociology Undergraduate Research Conference at Santa Clara University. Some of the topics we covered included corporate anthropology in product design, the concept of thick data to make meaning out of big data, and open questions in the emerging sub-discipline of design anthropology.

* Methodology: Our initial research design included identifying a target population, generating quantitative and qualitative survey and interview questions, and recruiting participants using networking techniques that mirrored the career exploration process. We worked in an uncharted space, which made it difficult to implement a strict research design. We struggled with how to approach top-level executives and using the norms of the business world. As we worked, a research framework developed organically.
* Methodology Version II: We designed a research framework to interview professionals at technology companies who had a background in anthropology and asked specifically about how they use their academic training in their work. This was a student-driven process out of which our research framework organically developed. We went through seven main iterative steps, which included ideation, scoping, design, planning, research, synthesis, and creation of a Foothill College knowledge base.  Our design included qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. We contacted interviewees through LinkedIn and professional connections. We conducted both interviews and brief surveys at the end.  Our literature review included works on design anthropology, design thinking, and corporate anthropology.
* Findings: We repeatedly ran into the question of when to stop collecting data and start synthesizing, fearing that we had not collected enough data for clear patterns to emerge. Also of concern was how to refine the scope of our questions so that we could generate meaningful data and provide relevant answers to our research questions. Our research and interviews indicated that ethnographic methods are used by applied anthropologists on collaborative teams including engineers and MBAs.   
    
  Furthermore, we came across the term “thick data,” which is used to describe the contextualized data that ethnographic inquiry provides.  This is opposed to the concept of “big data,” which focuses on collecting data points about users.  The idea is that thick data will help companies better understand the meaning of the data points they collect in order to generate appropriate responses.
* Theoretical implications: We found that our process of research and synthesis was iterative and closely resembled the design thinking model, indicating overlap between the fields of design and social research. Anthropologists concerned with the future of ethnographic methods should ask what is included in the sweet spot between anthropology and design, what is left out, and whether the values supported by the shared methods are congruent with the goals of cultural anthropology today.