



## **Graduate Education in Anthropology at Brandeis**

Presentation to the Academic Affairs Subcommittee  
of the Board of Trustees

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In 1960, one year after the formal establishment of the doctoral program in anthropology at Brandeis, President Abram Sachar contributed a preface to a Festschrift for Paul Radin, a distinguished anthropologist who taught here in those early days. In this short text President Sachar captured the essential nature of the discipline of anthropology as a humanistic science:

Anthropology is one of the descriptive sciences which is basic to the study of both history and psychology—the study of what men do and how men feel and think. In it lies a key to immemorial customs, to the obscure origins of morality, and to the source as well as the understanding of the arts. No subject is more pertinent to that humanism which Brandeis University believes to be the aim, the focus, and the fruit of higher education. Like all sciences, anthropology must explore what to the layman are technical, when not arid, minutiae; it must spin a web of theories in the hope of catching now and then an elusive conclusion. Yet these patient and painstaking labors are informed with a loving concern for humanity. They are penetrated and ennobled by the conviction that mankind is the proper study of man; and if a touch of this spirit brushes us, anthropology will again fulfill its function of strengthening our allegiance to the humanistic values of life.

I am honored to have an opportunity this afternoon to spend a few minutes with the Academic Affairs Subcommittee of the Board of Trustees to bring you up to date on what has happened to graduate education in anthropology over the last forty-seven years.

### The Structure of the Graduate Programs

Today, there are three closely integrated graduate programs in anthropology at Brandeis: a “stand alone” masters program, a “joint” masters program with Women’s and Gender Studies, and a doctoral program. (Doctoral students receive the M.A. degree along the way toward their Ph.D.) Each of these programs matriculates, on average, four or five students per year. Additionally there is a four-year B.A./M.A. program that accepts one or two exceptionally qualified undergraduate honors students already committed to professional training in the discipline. Masters students arrive on campus

with several different goals: some are exploring anthropology for personal intellectual growth; some come to obtain a first-level of professional certification; and some come to better prepare themselves for applying to doctoral programs elsewhere. The Ph.D. program is highly selective, accepting students who have demonstrated specific research interests in areas where we have curricular strengths and whose applications and personal interviews have generated enthusiastic support from two or more members of the faculty. While the masters programs require one year of residence and an independent research paper, the doctoral program requires three years of residence and a dissertation that contributes new knowledge to the field and that is defended in an open forum. Anthropology is one of the longer doctoral programs, since students intending to do ethnographic or archaeological research abroad need to gain foreign language proficiency and to obtain research funding and national and/or local research permits before they can begin fieldwork, which can last for a year or two.

A thumbnail sketch of the teaching of anthropology at Brandeis would mention that we have about ten faculty members teaching about thirty courses per year to about one thousand students, including about one hundred majors and minors. The department's undergraduate and graduate curriculum can be viewed as a triangle, with broad base of introductory classes designed to attract first-years and sophomores, then a larger set of middle-range courses focused on specific topics (economics, religion, language, kinship, for example) and cultural areas (Latin America, East Asia, Africa and the African diaspora, for example) taken by both upper-level undergraduates and graduate students. Toward the apex of the pyramid are a set of advanced topical seminars, as well as courses in the history of anthropology, contemporary anthropological theory, and research design required of all doctoral students. Beyond the listed course offerings, graduate students gain specialized training in one-on-one tutorials, called "reading and research," that faculty members offer for their advisees and in serving as research assistants funded through faculty members' external grants.

What might appear to be a rather rigid, hierarchical system is, in fact, quite relaxed and fluid, since qualified undergraduates (especially those majoring in anthropology) can, with permission, take even the most advanced graduate seminar, and the doctoral students work as teaching assistants in the larger, lower-level undergraduate classes. Two competitive programs that target advanced graduate students have been particularly important for our department, the University Prize Instructorship, which pays a doctoral student to teach a course in their special area of scholarship, and the Dissertation Year Fellowship, which supports a doctoral student in the final year of dissertation write up.

Undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty also come together in many contexts outside the classroom. Each year the department invites about a dozen anthropologists from other institutions to give colloquium talks. Our students who have returned from some research experience are invited to present their work in informal "brown bag" talks. And several times each semester we offer "hands-on" workshops in research methods or pre-professional skills in a series we call the "practice of anthropology." But I think that the friendly and supportive atmosphere of our department is probably encouraged most by our yearly round of social events, including picnics, post-colloquium receptions, ice cream socials, ethnographic film nights, year-end potlucks, and spontaneous dinners out in Waltham.

## Rebuilding a Department

Approximately five years ago, during the early period of my chairship, the Department of Anthropology faced a crisis: within a period of about two years four full professors announced their intention to leave Brandeis, three through retirement and one lured away to another university. The sudden departure of this group of senior faculty, all of whom had spent the majority of their academic careers teaching at Brandeis, presented the department with a major challenge, as well as an opportunity: to rebuild the department with appointments at the junior level. With the courageous support of the then Dean (given that this was not a period of budgetary bliss at Brandeis), my colleagues and I laid out a multi-year plan for a series of staggered tenure-track searches in the subdisciplinary fields of economic anthropology, the anthropology of religion, linguistic anthropology, and archaeology. Each time that we were able to attract our top candidate to join the faculty made our job in the next search a bit easier.

The young scholars we hired arrived on campus eager to bring their superb professional training (at The Johns Hopkins University, the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, and the University of Pennsylvania), their on-going field research programs (in Mexico, Japan, Kenya, and Guatemala), their clear-headed administrative energy to various departmental roles (such as Undergraduate Advisor and Director of Graduate Studies), and their inspiring teaching skills to the task at hand, to make the study of anthropology once again a vital part of the intellectual life of Brandeis. Not content with the eight “regular” faculty positions, we eagerly applied for interdisciplinary postdoctoral fellowships, first the Mellons and then the Kays. The six postdocs we have hosted over the past few years have enriched the curriculum immensely by enabling us to explore areas outside of our normal scholarly expertise, which in turn has enabled us to build new interdisciplinary bridges across the campus.

In all of this our collective plan combined the intensive refocusing of the anthropology curriculum at the undergraduate as well as graduate levels with an extensive goal of linking our revitalized department to the larger university and Boston-area contexts. One of our first goals was to come to understand that, like many of the small-to-midsize programs in Arts and Sciences, we are a “niche” program: we aim to do extremely well a relatively small number of things. The anthropology department has, accordingly, developed focal strengths in the following areas: the intersection of economic and political institutions and practices; expressive culture, including language-based genres, mass mediated communication, and visual culture; complex societies, studied historically as well as comparatively; household organization and kinship systems as the foundations of social life; religion, ritual, and mythology as heightened domains of cultural symbolism; and the complex linkages among gender, the body, and medical systems. We work to attract students to our three graduate programs whose research interests fit one or more of these intersecting areas. I am happy to report that, as the reputation of our graduate programs grows along with the reputation of our faculty, there has been a marked upward trend in the quality of the undergraduate and masters programs from which we draw our graduate students (this fall, for example, from Oxford University, Harvard College, Tufts University, Wellesley College, Mt. Holyoke College, New York University, and Williams College), and a dramatic corresponding

improvement in the academic performance of these students in our courses. The presence on campus of anthropology graduate students from India, Brazil, Nigeria, Netherlands, Italy, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Bangladesh, Japan, and the Czech Republic has contributed greatly to the international diversity of the Brandeis campus.

All these efforts have had a real impact on the experience of our almost one hundred undergraduate majors and minors, who sit side-by-side with graduate students in many upper-level seminars, who write senior theses more and more based on primary ethnographic, laboratory, and archival research, and who have, over the past decade, been accepted with full fellowships at the most competitive graduate and professional schools in the country.

### Anthropology in the Integrated Curriculum

Finally back at full strength, we immediately sought to make an impact on the campus by creating twenty-two new and innovative courses relevant to other departments and programs, by supporting through energetic collegiality and leadership various interdepartmental programs emerging or strengthening at relatively the same time (including Peace and Conflict Resolution, Women's and Gender Studies, International and Global Studies, Language and Linguistics, Health: Science, Society, and Policy, Religious Studies, Internet Studies, to name a few), and by supporting the development of programs outside the department that would provide a richer environment for us to be anthropologists. At the moment, twenty-five departments and programs, representing all four schools of Arts and Sciences, cross-list a total of seventy anthropology courses, and anthropology faculty have a leadership role in six programs. In addition, given the cross-cultural nature of anthropology as a discipline, the department contributes fifteen courses that fulfill the requirement for Non-Western and Comparative Studies and six University Seminars for first-year undergraduates.

Working with colleagues in more than a half-dozen departments, anthropologists played the key role in the planning and implementation of the new M.A. Program in Cultural Production, which admitted its first class this fall. Although not technically a division of the Department of Anthropology, we do provide an administrative home for Cultural Production and we welcome its graduate students and affiliated faculty to join in all of our departmental activities. Anthropologists, together with colleagues in Classics and Computer Science, proposed a curricular revision that resulted, again just this fall, in the birth of the Interdepartmental Program in Language and Linguistics; and the anthropology department then extended its institutional hospitality to the junior hire in this dynamic new program. And, finally, the department has provided a warm welcome to anthropologists at Brandeis beyond those on our departmental teaching staff, including five Visiting Research Associates, three Affiliated Anthropologists (all at the Heller School), and four active Professors Emeriti.

Throughout this campus outreach we have not neglected our own departmental health. Thanks to some successful fundraising we have been able to create a new facility on our hallway, the Material Culture Study Center, which supports instruction in a number of courses and the research of a group of faculty. Taking advantage of the lively presence of twenty-five anthropologists in the Brandeis community, four years ago we founded the Greater Boston Anthropology Consortium, a collaborative group of

colleagues from Tufts, Wellesley, Olin, Wheaton, Clark, and Wheelock, which sponsors three events each year (a distinguished lecture, a symposium, and a student conference) that rotate among the various regional campuses. This has enabled Brandeis undergraduates and graduate students to meet and work closely with more than forty anthropologists affiliated with GBAC. Smaller groups of Brandeis anthropologists have formed informal reading groups to discuss scholarly literature, present work-in-progress, and host distinguished guests. The Economic Anthropology Working Group, the Symbolic Form Study Group, and the AIDS Study Group provide venues for faculty and graduate students across several disciplines and schools to meet as equal colleagues, an experience we feel has been important for their professional socialization.

### Final Thought

When I step down from the chair at the end of this academic year, perhaps having overstayed my colleagues' welcome by a year or two, I will finally be able to look back on anthropology's struggles and triumphs with a bit more objectivity than I have communicated this afternoon. I think that a university excels department by department, and it has been my experience dealing with the Dean and the Provost that, at Brandeis, energy is repaid with support.

### Appendices:

Anthropologists at Brandeis  
New Anthropology Courses  
Departments and Programs Cross-listing Anthropology Courses

### Documents:

Anthropology Brochure (2005-2006)  
Anthropology Newsletter (2006)  
Anthropology Graduate Student Handbook (2006)

### On-line Resource:

Department of Anthropology Website:  
<http://www.brandeis.edu/departments/anthro/>  
Anthropology Newsletter (2006):  
<http://www.brandeis.edu/departments/anthro/docs/newsletter-Fall06.pdf>