

Allies on the Front Line: Perspectives from Our Community Partners

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Abstract

In many applied anthropology programs, at both the graduate and undergraduate level, students are regularly placed in agencies and neighborhood organizations that serve the interests of communities facing a range of threats and challenges. In this open forum, we will hear the perspectives of professionals and activists who work with our students in such settings but who don't necessarily have any training in anthropology, themselves. The session will give audience members an opportunity to converse with each other and with our allies in the community whose work is critical to our students' learning experience.

Summary

The purpose of this session was to elicit feedback from agencies and organizations where applied anthropology students do placements and internships at the undergraduate and master's level. Our featured speakers were **Bevin Reid** and **Karl Arne**, from the US EPA, Region 10 based in Seattle, Washington. Karl is in the Office of Ecosystems, Tribal and Public Affairs and Bevin's area was watershed collaboration. Both of them had worked with Anthropology students.

Karl acknowledged that his training was very focused on science and that the EPA has often not appreciated the larger social context within which issues they deal with are located.

Both Bevin and Karl noted that in the current political climate, the EPA is mostly dealing with trying to ensure voluntary compliance with regulations rather than with enforcement. Therefore, it is particularly important that the EPA understands what works and what doesn't.

Both Bevin and Karl had had some excellent experiences working with Anthropology interns. What made the successful internships successful was the fact that the good interns were well-prepared and already had knowledge of the areas in which they would

be working. They were also able to clearly articulate to a scientific audience what an ethnographic perspective could offer for understanding how and why people do or don't participate in particular programs offered by the EPA. Karl noted that he found the interviews one intern had done particularly useful for understanding the range of attitudes in local communities and appreciating locally held beliefs about situations relevant to the EPA. Bevin noted that one student who looked at watershed issues was able to identify how plans might or might not be able to be implemented on the ground. She noted that it was particularly helpful to have students who acted as a bridge between the community and an agency that is seen as exclusively regulatory. At a time of drastic cut-backs in the funding of public sector agencies, the labor provided by the students was seen as invaluable.

Critical points

- For students who have an interest in working on a particular issue, it is important that they come to the agency with some background of their own;
- the reports that anthropology students wrote were in a narrative format; while Karl and Bevin founds these reports to be insightful and they provided interesting information, they were struggling with how to make them conform to the expectations that scientists have for what constitutes scientific research; students needed to be mindful of who the various audiences were for their work;
- For students who have grant money, Bevin and Karl felt that sometimes students underestimated the value of their time and tended to ask for too little—rather than too much—in terms of resources;
- There were a couple of negative experiences Karl and Bevin reported: in one case, a student dropped out of his graduate program before completing the piece of work he had committed to do for the EPA; in another case, an intern just went off and did his own thing, not keeping in close enough contact with Karl and Bevin.