

**Transforming Academia:
Challenges and Opportunities for an
Engaged Anthropology**

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Good Fences Make Good Neighbors: Keeping Anthropology's Subfields Alive and Growing in the 21st Century

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Editors' note: As anthropology completes the 20th century, a fundamental question is the composition of the discipline itself. Will it remain holistic in the American "four fields" sense, encompassing archaeological, biological, linguistic, and sociocultural anthropology? Will it splinter into specialities? Will it become more interdisciplinary, being absorbed into (or absorbing) sister fields while losing the classic four-fields core? Will it disappear?

Anthropology mirrors trends in knowledge generally, expressing many of the issues of contemporary culture. Whether it retains, loses, or transforms its holism is part of a general question of whether integrative understanding is sustained or whether scholarship devolves into the narrow and specialized. If devolution, who has the power to unite or at least to meaningfully interrelate specialized inquiries—perhaps no single discipline or individual, but dynamically shifting combinations and permutations of specialists?

The integrative vision of the four fields is particularly pertinent because it treats relationships that define fault lines, as well as productive synergies central to human thought—the relations between past and present, between nature and culture, between scientific and humanistic methods, between laboratory and participant-observation experiences of knowing. Anthropology is distinctive in its struggle to sustain productive dialogues among these fundamental directions (perhaps best conceived not as four fields but as "force fields") of thought, within one discipline.

In organizational terms, the question of integration is pertinent at several levels. At the national and international level, the issue has already profoundly affected memberships. Specialized organizations abound, including separate organizations for each of the classic four fields as well as numerous other specialized interests—these are intellectual groupings, to be sure, but they also pertain to cultural identities. The largest organization, the American Anthro-

as well as many other specialities and somehow to integrate diverse interests within a unified organization.

The most immediate effect, however, is at the level of the academic department. Even as universities, colleges, community colleges, and distance-learning programs reconfigure higher education, the several hundred departments of anthropology remain crucial locales for sustaining the intellectual integrity of the discipline; departments remain the major vehicles for teaching anthropology, for training anthropologists, and for carrying on anthropological research. Therefore, the larger questions of what shape anthropology will take and what it will encompass are closely linked to the intellectual configuration of departments. Will departments sustain integration of the four fields? Will departments divide into separate specialities? Will departments be transformed in other ways?

Such questions take on immediacy and urgency in the current situation of restructuring and downsizing. How will anthropology departments fare in these circumstances if they are internally divisive or if they splinter into new units? In some situations, the creative reorganization of anthropology departments—including splintering—might be encouraged by broader academic transformation (e.g., creation of new interdisciplinary combinations), so that anthropology flourishes, albeit in new shapes and through new alliances. It would seem, however, that smaller units, the result of fission, stand less hope for survival than do more established, larger units. We would argue that anthropology departments should maintain their integrative format, with the opportunities this organization provides for intellectual synergy, while exploring ways to transform themselves internally, instead of splintering. At the same time, anthropology and anthropologists will, of course, adaptively radiate, finding new niches in the broader ecology of academia and the world.

Among the spectrum of solutions departments have explored in response to the issue of integration, the Harvard format is distinctive and appears to succeed in a kind of civil "agreeing to disagree" mode, recognizing the advantage of a unified common department as well as the distinctive needs of three of the four classic fields.

Whether this or other solutions work and how these relationships are expressed within departments will profoundly affect the shape of anthropology in the coming century.

Adrian Peterson
How can we balance forces in the university of the 21st century? Can anthropology remain a living, growing field of intellectual life while remaining a single unit of academic administration? Can we not only tolerate the activities of our colleagues that seem to be carrying them to more remote corners of the intellectual universe, but actually support them, without undermining ourselves? This is, I think, a central question to be faced by all the larger departments of anthropology in the next decade, at least those that seek to maintain credible activity in more than

one or two subfields. New and creative solutions will be required, and the best solutions have probably not yet appeared.

At Harvard we have adopted one solution—not the best, certainly. And perhaps it is temporary, even for us. I think of it as the “good fences” solution. We have organized our local-level administration into three virtual subdepartments with three undergraduate majors; three graduate programs with separate admissions and pools of funding; and three parallel but largely separate mechanisms for faculty recruitment and promotion. I say separate, in that each so-called wing of the department manages its own destiny, but the other two wings remain interested and involved partners. We teach each other’s students, sit on each other’s committees, review each other’s hires and promotions. But, by limiting the competition for resources and administrative control within the department, we weaken the forces that would make fission seem attractive. Intellectual vigor is maintained, and we retain as well the political clout of a relatively large department within the university structure.

But at what cost? Do our students suffer from being denied the panorama of a holistic discipline of anthropology? Is the faculty poorer for the lack of intellectual engagement with colleagues in other wings? These arguments can be made, but I do not find them persuasive. Our students thrive at all levels and cross wing boundaries without prejudice whenever the desire is there. We require all our undergraduates to take a series of three courses in common, exposing them to all three subdisciplines (social, biological, and archaeological anthropology) represented in our department. But, after that, we allow them the freedom either to focus on one area or to combine two or more into their undergraduate concentration. Forced to generalize in so many areas of education, weary of introductory courses, and eager to involve themselves in research, the students relish the opportunity to dive into an intellectual area more deeply and substantively. When given the choice—and we do give them the choice—they overwhelmingly choose to concentrate in one or another wing of the department rather than spread their efforts over all three. The faculty thrives as well and finds greater respect for each other’s work where it is truly exciting—at the developing frontiers—than they do for the forced and stale conventionality of an intellectual unity that has passed. When areas of true common interest emerge, such as the interaction of culture and biology in reproductive health, engagement across the wings is enthusiastic and not forced.

“Good Fences Make Good Neighbors” presents the particular solution we have arrived at, for now, to the problem of balancing intellectual and administrative tensions. It is a local solution to the way the general problems of intellectual expansion and institutional stasis manifest themselves

not as a global solution. Each department in each university will have to find its own path to the 21st century. But I might have gone to Robert Frost for a different title and called this paper instead “Something There Is That Doesn’t Like A Wall” to draw attention, not to a different solution, but to what I perceive as a great danger. Intellectual vitality cannot be walled in by the intellectual past. We cannot let ourselves be afraid to grow, to expand, and to create new intellectual space around us. If we try to constrain each other’s intellectual activities, we have surely lost our way. At the same time, we must find a way to sustain such growth without turning on our intellectual relatives or ordering things in such a way that our gain is their loss. A true tragedy of the commons looms for academia if we cannot.

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What really is possible? H/D