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Higher Education and the Workforce in NH

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Final Project Reflection

This project exemplifies the principles of applied anthropology because of the amount and type of research and consideration, along with the continually revised input of the stakeholders, that informed it. My inspiration for the project came from my personal experience in helping my mom return to school to finish her bachelor's degree, and my future mother-in-law return to school to study math. As I observed them during this process, I found myself frustrated and disappointed with how hard it was for them to access the resources they needed to reach their educational goals and I was sure that they couldn't have been the only ones dealing with this kind of struggle. Consequently, I decided to research this issue further and began by looking at articles that shared different students' perspectives on why they've had difficulties returning to or staying in school, finding studies that confirmed the common problems that these types of students had. From there, I continued to refine my solution by looking at what schools that were successful at helping non-traditional students were doing and how we at UNH could learn from them to ensure that the solutions proposed would be both effective and feasible for any college. Finally, I refined my project one last time by interviewing a non-traditional student and an academic advisor at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), an institution known for its overall success at assisting non-traditional students. An example of practicing the concepts of applied anthropology in terms of this project came in my approach to conducting the research in that I attempted to minimize my bias or notions of 'expertise' through speaking to and accounting for the needs of the various stakeholders and then refined my ideas accordingly as new information became available. For instance, when I realized that my original idea of having just an educational caseworker position wouldn't work for most students and schools due to financial feasibility on the school's part and because some students might not have the time or

inclination to see an educational counselor, I revised my plan to better address these issues. I proposed the creation of a dedicated webpage which would be financially feasible for most colleges and would, ideally, reach more students and better meet their needs than would simply creating the position of an educational case worker. I approached the problem with the assumption that the stakeholders involved know their needs and what they would want out of the solution and my job was just to listen and weave their ideas together into a more concrete solution.

Although I tried my best to make sure that the needs of all stakeholders were heard and represented in my solution, I think that I could have done better at representing the interests of colleges and universities. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, I was unable to interview campus officials and administrators to understand the university's perspective. This lack of input from colleges/universities means that I'm unsure if my solution would actually be feasible in reality or if it's something that universities would be interested in implementing.

In addition, the solution proposed could have been strengthened by taking a better look at how it would be funded. Although I had some preliminary ideas, such as staffing the educational caseworker position primarily by social work interns (which would reduce the cost of the position and provide unique learning opportunities for local social work students), without specific input from schools on whether these ideas are economically feasible and in compliance with health and safety regulations, I can't be sure of their implementability. Without looking at these ideas and other potential funding sources, I can't be sure that the project would be sustainable over the long term.

This project has helped give me a real life example of how some of the topics that we learned in class (ANTH 612) are used in practice. Specifically, it taught me more about structural

violence, business anthropology, and the rapid assessment methodology. Although the structural violence involved in this project isn't as extreme as some of the examples that we read about in class, it was still evident throughout this project that the structure of college gives an advantage to traditional students and that the nature of our social system makes it difficult for non-traditional students to go back to, and to succeed in, school. Farmer describes structural violence as the violence and discrimination that is built into the structure of society that prevents those in it from ever achieving something better. He specifically uses the example of how the structure of Haitian society promotes death by both brutal beatings and disease (Farmer 1996). While not of the same type as Farmer's example, looking through the lens of modern American society in the case of non-traditional students returning to school, there is a kind of analogous structural violence in that in our society, most physical colleges have an expectation and cater to traditional students which can immediately set up non-traditional students to fail. For example, professors at a more traditional brick and mortar college are more likely to assume that their students have the typical student responsibilities of taking classes, taking care of themselves, and perhaps working a few hours a week. This can be problematic for non-traditional students who almost universally have more responsibilities than this. Another example of how society on the whole is structured against non-traditional students is in the number of scholarships directed towards traditional students, i.e., graduating high school seniors. Although there *are* many scholarships for nontraditional students, oftentimes the qualifications for scholastic aid for non-traditional students is so specific or subjective as to be out of reach for many. This can also be a barrier to non-traditional students completing their education. Although the structural violence faced by non-traditional students isn't life and death as it is in Farmer's example, it still impacts these

students' abilities to go to college and to complete their degrees, which ultimately has a lasting impact on their lives and the lives of their families.

This project also relates to business anthropology in that in order for an effective solution to be realized, the applied anthropologist needs to ascertain and understand what the articulated and unarticulated needs of the students are and to use this information, accordingly, to assist the stakeholders in finding an appropriate solution (Wood 2013). Some of the feedback I received on my video included information about the COLA Navigators program which had had students take a survey detailing what resources they deemed would be most helpful to them. In the semester that followed the survey, tellingly enough, most of the survey participants didn't actually use the resources provided. As pointed out previously, this demonstrates the importance of not just knowing what students *say* they need for resources, but also in discerning what their unarticulated needs actually *are.* For example, in terms of this project, a non-traditional student may need help in learning to write research papers but this service is only helpful if the unarticulated need of being able to access it when it fits into their busy schedule is met. In this sense, non-traditional students are to colleges as consumers are to the business world, they want to buy a product/complete their degree but they won't do that unless all their needs, both spoken and unspoken, are met.

Lastly, this project is a good example of a project that would benefit from the use of the rapid assessment method. The rapid assessment method involves quickly collecting data by employing a variety of specialists to help inform policy or solution (Ervin 2004, 209). This kind of project is perfect for this method as a timely solution is pressing and the problem requires a variety of data to truly understand. The project requires ethnographic information about non-traditional students to determine what they need to succeed, which is the part of this assessment

that my project attempted to accomplish, information about university resources and the plausibility of implementing this solution, an investigation of the financial feasibility, a stakeholder in the community to provide teacher input/insight as to their assessments of perceived needs, and a statistician to run the data on the efficacy of potential solutions. Because of the necessity for the variety of data needed to truly understand this problem, and because of the need to provide implementable solutions to universities in a timely manner, this project is a great example of when the rapid assessment methodology could be used.

Overall, I believe my project was a good examination of an anthropological idea and solution, as it was developed from the beginning with the experience of stakeholders in mind and I sought to draw on my understanding of several of the anthropological methodologies and topics discussed in class. Were I to do the project again during a time where in-person interviews were possible, I would make sure to obtain and include the perspective of the universities so that I could ensure my project was a feasible one that benefitted all parties. Despite its shortcomings, I believe because of the anthropological methodologies used in the implementation of my project, a good first step in helping to recognize the barriers that non-traditional students face in starting or returning to college and making a college education more accessible to all students has been demonstrated.

Works Cited

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