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# Anthropology

## Minor in Anthropology at CSU

### 18 semester hours that must include:

- Cultural Anthropology;
- Two courses selected from ANTH 1107, 1145, or 2136;
- Nine credit hours of upper-division ANTH courses.

[View Minor Requirements](#)

What is Anthropology?

## The Study of Humankind

The word *anthropology* itself tells the basic story--from the Greek *anthropos* ("human") and *logia* ("study")--it is the study of humankind, from its beginnings millions of years ago to the present day.

Nothing human is alien to anthropology. Indeed, of the many disciplines that study our species, *Homo sapiens*, only anthropology seeks to understand the whole panorama--in geographic space and evolutionary time--of human existence.

Though easy to define, anthropology is difficult to describe. Its subject matter is both exotic (e.g., star lore of the Australian aborigines) and commonplace (anatomy of the foot). And its focus is both sweeping (the evolution of language) and microscopic (the use-wear of obsidian tools). Anthropologists may study ancient Mayan hieroglyphics, the music of African Pygmies, and the corporate culture of a U.S. car manufacturer.

But always, the common goal links these vastly different projects: to advance knowledge of who we are, how we came to be that way--and where we may go in the future.

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*I am a human, and nothing human can be of indifference to me.*

--Terence, *The Self-Torturer*

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*Curiosity.* In a sense, we all "do" anthropology because it is rooted in a universal human trait: curiosity. We are curious about ourselves and about other people, the living as well as the dead, here and around the globe. We ask anthropological questions:

- *Do all societies have marriage customs?*
- *As a species, are human beings innately violent or peaceful?*
- *Did the earliest humans have light or dark skins?*
- *When did people first begin speaking a language?*
- *How related are humans, monkeys and chimpanzees?*
- *Are Homo Sapien brains still evolving?*

Such questions are part of a folk anthropology practiced in school yards, office buildings and neighborhood cafes. But if we are all amateur anthropologists, what do the professionals study? How does the science of anthropology differ from ordinary opinion sharing and "common sense"?

*Comparative Method.* As a discipline, anthropology begins with a simple yet powerful idea: any detail of our behavior can be understood better when it is seen against the backdrop of the full range of human behavior. This, the comparative method, attempts to explain similarities and differences among people holistically, in the context of humanity as a whole.

Any detail of our behavior can best be understood when it is seen in the context provided by the full range of human behavior.

Anthropology seeks to uncover principles of behavior that apply to all human communities. To an anthropologist, diversity itself--seen in body shapes and sizes, customs, clothing, speech, religion, and worldview--provides a frame of reference for understanding any single aspect of life in any given community.

To illustrate, imagine having our entire lives in a world of red. Our food, our clothing, our car--even the street we live on--everything around us a different shade of red. And yet ironically, in a scarlet world, isn't it true that we will have no real grasp of the color red itself, nor even the concept of color, without being able to compare red with yellow, blue, green, and all the hues of the rainbow?

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*We [anthropologists] have been the first to insist on a number of things: that the world does not divide into the pious and the superstitious; that there are sculptures in jungles and paintings in deserts; that political order is possible without centralized power and principled justice without codified rules; that the norms of reason were not fixed in Greece, the evolution of morality not consummated in England. Most important, we were the first to insist that we see the lives of others through lenses of our own grinding and that they look back on ours through ones of their own.--Clifford Geertz*

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## Evolutionary Perspective

As a field, anthropology brings an explicit, evolutionary approach to the study of human behavior. Each of anthropology's four main subfields--sociocultural, biological, archaeology, and linguistic anthropology--acknowledges that Homo has a long evolutionary history that must be studied if one is to know what it means to be a human being.

## Cultural Anthropology

In North America the discipline's largest branch, cultural anthropology, applies the comparative method and evolutionary perspective to human culture. Culture represents the entire database of knowledge, values, and traditional ways of viewing the world, which have been transmitted from one generation ahead to the next--nongenetically, apart from DNA--through words, concepts, and symbols.

Cultural anthropologists study humans through a descriptive lens called the ethnographic method, based on participant observation, in tandem with face-to-face interviews, normally conducted in the native tongue. Ethnographers compare what they see and hear themselves with the observations and findings of studies conducted in other societies. Originally, anthropologists pieced together a complete way of life for a culture, viewed as a whole. Today, the more likely focus is on a narrower aspect of cultural life, such as economics, politics, religion or art.

Cultural anthropologists seek to understand the internal logic of another society. It helps outsiders make sense of behaviors that, like face painting or scarification, may seem bizarre or senseless. Through the comparative method an anthropologist learns to avoid "ethnocentrism," the tendency to interpret strange customs on the basis of preconceptions derived from one's own cultural background. Moreover, this same process helps us see our own society--the color "red" again--through fresh eyes.

We can turn the principle around and see our everyday surroundings in a new light, with the same sense of wonder and discovery anthropologists experience when studying life in a Brazilian rain-forest tribe. Though many picture cultural anthropologists thousands of miles from home residing in thatched huts amid wicker fences, growing numbers now study U.S. groups instead, applying anthropological perspectives to their own culture and society.

## Linguistic Anthropology

One aspect of culture holds a special fascination for most anthropologists: language--hallmark of the human species. The organization of systems of sound into language has enabled Homo sapiens to transcend the limits of individual memory. Speech is the most efficient medium of communication since DNA for transmitting information across generations. It is upon language that culture itself depends--and within language that humanity's knowledge resides.

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*"As you commanded me, I, Spider Woman, have created these First People. They are fully and firmly formed; they have movement. But they cannot talk. That is the proper thing they lack. So I want you to give them speech."*

*So Sotuknang gave them speech, a different language to each color, with respect for each other's difference. He gave them also the wisdom and the power to reproduce and multiply.*

*--Hopi Indian Emergence Myth*

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Linguistic anthropologists, representing one of the discipline's traditional branches, look at the history, evolution, and internal structure of human languages. They study prehistoric links between different societies, and explores the use and meaning of verbal concepts with which humans communicate and reason. Linguistic anthropologists seek to explain the very nature of language itself, including hidden connections among language, brain, and behavior.

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Linguistic anthropologists, of course, are not the only ones who study historical dimensions of culture. Anthropologists recognize that, in seeking to understand today's society, they should not confine attention only to present-day groups. They also need information about what came before. But how can they trace the long-ago prehistory, reaching far back into the millennia, of societies that left no written record?

## Archaeology

Fortunately, the human record is written not only in alphabets and books, but is preserved in other kinds of material remains--in cave paintings, pictographs, discarded stone tools, earthenware vessels, religious figurines, abandoned baskets--which is to say, in tattered shreds and patches of ancient societies. Archaeologists interpret this often fragmentary but fascinating record to reassemble long-ago cultures and forgotten ways of life.

Archaeologists, long interested in the classical societies of Greece, Rome, and Egypt, have extended their studies in two directions--backward some 3 million years to the bones and stone tools of our protohuman ancestors, and forward to the reconstruction of lifeways and communities of 19th-century America. Regarding the latter, many archaeologists work in the growing field of cultural resource management, to help federal, state, and local governments preserve our nation's architectural, historical, and cultural heritage.

## Biological Anthropology

But human history begins in a different place further back in time. It starts at least 4 million years ago, when a population of apelike creatures from eastern Africa turned onto a unique evolutionary road. Thus, the anthropologist's comparative perspective must be expanded to include more than prehistoric human societies, for behavior has primate roots as well. To fully understand humankind we must learn more about its place in the natural habitat of living things.

Biological (or physical) anthropology looks at Homo sapiens as a genus and species, tracing their biological origins, evolutionary development, and genetic diversity. Biological anthropologists study the biocultural prehistory of Homo to understand human nature and, ultimately, the evolution of the brain and nervous system itself.

These, then, are the four main branches that make anthropology whole: cultural, linguistic, archaeology, and biological anthropology. Anthropology asks a most difficult and most important question: What does it mean to be human? While the question may never be fully answered, the study of anthropology--what the noted anthropologist Loren Eiseley has called the "immense journey"--has attracted some of the world's greatest thinkers, whose discoveries forever changed our understanding of ourselves.

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*Know then thyself . . .*

--Alexander Pope

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## **Anthropology as a Career**

Anthropologists conduct scientific and humanistic studies of the culture and evolution of humans. Each of the four fields of American anthropology has its own skills, theories, and databases of special knowledge. Most anthropologists, therefore, pursue careers in only one of the four subdisciplines. Anthropologists may specialize in two or more geographic areas of the world, such as Oceania, Latin America, and Africa, for reasons of comparison.

More than 350 U.S. colleges and universities offer an undergraduate major in anthropology, and many more offer coursework. Because the subject matter of anthropology is so broad, an undergraduate major or concentration can be part of a broad liberal arts background for men and women interested in medicine, government, business, and law. More information on college and university anthropology can be found in the American Anthropological Association's *AAA Guide*, published yearly.

## **Training**

A doctorate is recommended for full professional status as an anthropologist, although work in museums, physical anthropology labs, and field archaeology is often possible with a master's degree. There are more nonacademic career opportunities available to Ph.D. anthropologists, currently, than there are jobs in the academy itself. Increasingly, Ph.D. students begin their training with academic as well as nonacademic careers in mind, and seek admission to programs that include applied-anthropology courses.

## **Academic Work Setting**

Academic settings include departments of anthropology, nonanthropology departments (e.g., linguistics, anatomy, cultural studies, women's studies, fisheries), campus ethnic centers (African American studies, Latino studies), campus area studies (Pacific studies, Mexican studies, Latin American studies), campus research institutes (demography centers, survey research institutes, archaeology centers), and campus museums.

## **Nonacademic Work Setting**

In recent years, many anthropologists have chosen to utilize their specialized training in a variety of nonacademic careers. Cultural and linguistic anthropologists work in federal, state and local government, international agencies, healthcare centers, nonprofit associations, research institutes and marketing firms as research directors, science analysts and program officers. Biological anthropologists work in biomedical research, human engineering, private genetics laboratories, and pharmaceutical firms. Archaeologists work off campus in environmental projects, human-impact assessment, and resource management.

At present there is no discernible limit for Ph.D. anthropologists targeting the nonacademic realm for employment. The global economy's focus on internationalism, information and research and anthropology's world of interests mesh. Today, half of new doctorates find professional jobs off campus.

Additional information on careers in anthropology is available from AAA.

## For More Information

The American Anthropological Association (AAA), founded in 1902, is the world's largest organization of men and women interested in anthropology. Its purposes are to encourage research, promote the public understanding of anthropology, and foster the use of anthropological information in addressing human problems. Anyone with a professional or scholarly interest in anthropology is invited to join. For further details, please contact [AAA](#).

*Authored by David Givens*

Careers in Anthropology  
[Careers in Anthropology](#)

Faculty

### **Warren B. Church**

Professor of Anthropology and Archaeology  
Anthropology Program Director  
Department of Earth and Space Sciences

- B.A., M.A., University of Colorado (1981, 1988)
- M.Phil., Ph.D., Yale University (1990, 1996)

[\(Prof. Church's Home Page\)](#)

[\(Prof. Church's Research Web page at Academia.edu\)](#)

### **David R. Schwimmer**

Professor of Geology  
Department of Earth and Space Sciences

- B.S. (Geology; Minor: Anthropology) University of Wisconsin (1967)
- M.A. (Geology) State University of New York, Buffalo (1969)
- Ph.D. (Paleontology) State University of New York, Stony Brook (1973)

Study Abroad

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