



Anthropology

A department in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences offering the B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. in Anthropology.

■ The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

Meg Conkey (University of California, Berkeley)
Leith Mullings (City University of New York Graduate Center)
Robert Sussman (Washington University)

■ Main Issues

The visiting team reported that anthropology is “alive and well” at UMass Amherst, with “enthusiastic teachers” who are also “all active researchers, in spite of enormous teaching loads.” The team concluded that the department could improve its reputation and teaching program “within a very short period of time” with “some reorganization, a slightly different reallocation of time and effort, and a relatively small investment.”

The department’s current standing within the discipline was found to be “excellent,” especially in terms of linking the subfields of anthropology and producing physical anthropology graduates “who have made significant and important interventions in the dialog on race and racism.” The department “has a reputation that is much greater than one would expect” given its size, and “is able to place virtually all” of its Ph.D.s in professional positions in the field.

The team focused on several specific issues:

- The team found that the department “commits itself to an inordinate amount of non-major, General Education (Gen Ed) teaching,” and does so using tenure-system faculty. While this commitment is “commendable,” the team noted that it “comes at some expense of other aspects of the program and that some specific adjustments need to be made.”
- Because of large Gen Ed commitments, “it appears that both the undergraduate majors and the graduate students have suffered.” Both the undergraduate and graduate programs were found to have too little structure, and too few specialized courses. At the graduate level, in particular, the program “relies on an inordinate amount of individual advising from faculty in lieu of a more structured set of requirements.”
- To address these issues several recommendations were advanced: 1) “Moderately cutting back” Gen Ed instruction; 2) allowing advanced graduate students to teach some Gen Ed courses; 3) establishing a curriculum committee to create a more structured, tiered undergraduate program; 4) adopting a similar approach for the graduate program and combining some graduate and upper division undergraduate courses; 5) considering a slight reduction in graduate students; 6) investing in a “moderate number of strategic faculty hires;” and 7) taking steps to make graduate student funding more predictable. The team felt that

these steps would “alleviate some of the most pressing problems” in the department, and allow more faculty time to be devoted to majors, graduate students, and research programs.

The team commended the department for continuing to offer a “holistic” approach to the major subfields of the discipline. The largest of these, at UMass as elsewhere, is cultural and linguistic anthropology, which at UMass focuses on Europe (with research interests also in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and African Americans and Native Americans. The faculty’s theoretical focus on power and equality suggests that, with the addition of two faculty members with a focus on the Afrodiasporic population in the U.S. and Latin America, the department could be “one of the leading institutions of research and graduate training in the historical and current results of enslavement and colonization on human identity and human rights.”

The archaeology program was found to be “very strong” but undersized, teaching half the department’s graduate students with fewer than one third of the faculty. Adding another position with a focus on colonialism and/or slavery was urged as the “highest priority.” The team also urged additional staff support for managing the archaeological collections and lab.

The physical anthropology group was found to be “nationally and internationally recognized” in evolutionary biology and theory, and in biomedical anthropology. The faculty in biological anthropology have been affected by recent and upcoming retirements, however, and as vacancies occur the team recommended adding two positions in this area that “provides a link between the social and biological sciences and between the subdisciplines of anthropology.”

The department is “maximizing” the use of its space and human resources, but certain resources were found to be “woefully lacking” at this time: laboratory space, space allocated to graduate students, support for grant development, and technological infrastructure were all found deficient.

■ Results of the Review

The department expressed broad agreement with the team’s findings and recommendations, and noted that many emerged directly from the department’s self-study. The department agreed that it has “become too closely linked to the General Education program,” and will “direct a significant proportion of faculty efforts” in other directions. Adding to the department’s current focus on contemporary Europe by adding positions in “the anthropology of race, ethnicity, and inequality in America” was endorsed, as was the identification of Native American Studies as an area of current strength and future investment. The department reported that it has already begun work on “major reforms” of the curriculum, and that “much of our work in the coming year will be directed to realizing and implementing these suggestions.” The Dean endorsed and supported the department’s response.