Opinion

This degree changed my life. And it's essential to a changing America.

Anthropology taught me how to translate human experience into knowledge institutions can act on.

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I am the daughter of immigrants who fled civil war in Sri Lanka and came to the United States with very little. They wanted one thing for me: economic security. They did not care what I studied, as long as it opened doors never available to them.

As a first-generation college student, I did not plan to major in anthropology. It was a course I took because it fit my schedule, not because I had any sense of where it might lead.

It changed everything.

It led to a career I could not have otherwise built: research positions at nonprofit think tanks and Ivy League universities; work as a health care consultant; graduate training in public health and then a PhD in anthropology; positions at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. State Department — where I helped coordinate the refugee response for Sudan and South Sudan — and, finally, a faculty chair at a research university.

None of these roles had "anthropologist" in the title. All of them required exactly what anthropology taught me to do.

I tell this story not to celebrate myself but because I am watching something troubling unfold in American higher education — and I want to be precise about what is at stake.

Every spring, the same headlines reappear. This year, citing a Federal Reserve Bank of New York study, many news outlets reported that anthropology majors have the highest unemployment rate among recent college graduates — 7.9 percent — with more than half working in jobs that don't typically require a college degree. The conclusion drawn is familiar: Anthropology is a poor investment, a degree that naive students pursue at their financial peril — and that universities can afford to eliminate.

This argument, however, rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of what the numbers mean — and it arrives at precisely the wrong moment.

Start with the unemployment rate. Computer engineering, routinely held up as the gold standard of employable majors, has a recent graduate unemployment rate of 7.8 percent — statistically indistinguishable from anthropology's rate. No one is calling for the elimination of computer engineering programs.

The 55 percent underemployment figure for anthropology graduates is more sobering. But liberal arts majors are at nearly 55 percent underemployment as well. Business management: 53 percent. Sociology: 52 percent. History: 50 percent. Underemployment is not an anthropology problem. It is a structural problem in an economy that concentrates well-compensated opportunity in a narrowing band of sectors while demanding credentials for nearly everything else.

More fundamentally, the Bureau of Labor Statistics counts only 8,800 people nationally holding the job title "anthropologist or archaeologist." This is not a measure of where anthropology-trained graduates work. It is a measure of how rarely employers use that title. The public health researcher at the CDC, the user experience (UX) designer at a technology firm, the policy analyst at an international development organization — none of these appear in the count of anthropologists, though many hold anthropology degrees.

I know this not only from my own path but from watching what happens at American University. Fifty-one percent of AU students who graduated with an anthropology degree since 2018 originally intended to major in something else. They found anthropology the way I did: through a general education course that ignited something inside them. They came in as prospective international relations students or journalism majors and left as anthropologists — and then went on to become federal policy analysts, World Bank social development specialists, researchers at the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress, community organizers, educators, advocates and founders of organizations addressing homelessness and displacement.

These outcomes were not produced by luck. They were produced by a discipline that teaches students to do something remarkably difficult and remarkably rare: to move between close attention to individual lives and systemic analysis of the structures that shape them; to ask whose voices are absent from any account of reality; to hold complexity in mind without flattening it into a data point.

We are living in what is called the age of big data. Algorithms make consequential decisions about who gets a job interview, who is flagged by a predictive policing system, who receives a loan, whose medical symptoms are taken seriously. And yet the hardest problems facing institutions, governments and companies right now are not technical ones. They are human ones.

Why do health interventions that succeed in clinical trials fail in communities? Why do artificial intelligence systems trained on historical data reproduce and amplify the inequities embedded in that history? Why did a global pandemic reveal, in real time, that our data systems had almost no capacity to capture the lived experience of the people most at risk?

These are anthropological questions. They require the ability to ask not only what the data shows but whose data it is, what it was designed to measure, who was never counted and what power relations shaped what got recorded and what got erased. In a world of algorithmic governance, institutions that lack people trained to ask these questions are flying with instruments they cannot read.

Intel, Google and Microsoft have employed anthropologists in central research roles for decades because ethnographic methods produce insights that surveys and optimization models cannot. UX research — now a significant and growing employment sector — draws directly on participant observation, qualitative interviewing and the interpretive frameworks anthropology has refined over more than a century.

When the University of Akron eliminates its anthropology department, or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro closes one that trained generations of students, they are dismantling the institutional space where students learn to interrogate the very systems — enrollment metrics, labor market data, return-on-investment calculations — being used to justify eliminating them.

My parents wanted economic security for me, and anthropology delivered it. It taught me how to think, how to listen, how to translate the complexity of human experience into knowledge that institutions could act on. That is an essential skill in the age of big data.

The students discovering anthropology in college today deserve the same chance I got. Every department that closes is a door that never opens for a student who, without it, may never find the tools to make sense of the world they've inherited.