

Regional

Teaching and using anthropology in the modern world

To many, anthropology brings to mind living in remote places, studying mysterious rituals, or harrowing adventures “Indiana Jones” style.

These images make anthropology seem very exotic and removed from day-to-day life. In reality, anthropology is about understanding human diversity—why it exists for historical and functional reasons, and how human values, beliefs and behaviors affect individuals and societies.

This understanding helps address today’s challenges related to globalization, human conflicts, preservation of cultural heritage and changing environments. Anthropologists work internationally and deal with global issues, but also work in local communities and deal with common, everyday problems. It is one of the most widely applicable disciplines in our modern world.

Erin Finney and Miranda Yancey-Bailey are two SIUE anthropology graduates who make the case for the value of anthropology in the “real world” and in everyday life. Yancey-Bailey is a GIS (geographic information system) specialist with the Illinois State Archaeological Survey (ISAS). Finney works in marketing and development at Governor French Academy, a private school in Belleville.

Like most anthropology majors, they have careers outside university academics.

Anthropologists are employed in many fields such as education, private business and industry, contract archaeology and museums, environmental management, health and human services, legal practice and with nongovernmental organizations and government agencies.

“Anthropology is very much within these areas,” said Finney, as it provides essential perspective on observing and understanding people.

Beyond allowing students to develop skills for interacting with many different types of people, the anthropology program at SIUE focuses on having students “do” anthropology. Experiential activities include



SIUE Anthropology students working on the 2006 Archaeological Field School.

projects with community organizations, field schools, study abroad opportunities and internships.

Both Finney and Yancey-Bailey credit summer archaeology field schools with giving them experience that led directly to job opportunities.

Another way the program emphasizes “real-world” applications is through its undergraduate senior assignment capstone project, in which undergraduate students develop original research or serve in internships.

“I’m grateful for the experience of the senior assignment because it’s not some-

thing that all anthropology departments do,” Yancey-Bailey said. “It really prepares you to go on in your professional life or into graduate school.”

For both graduates, senior assignment helped them transition into their current careers. Yancey-Bailey’s senior assignment involved analysis of artifacts from an archaeological site.

Now working with ISAS, she has been involved in large-scale regional development projects, such as the construction of the Stan Musial Veterans Memorial Bridge in East St. Louis. For this project, she worked with teams that excavated prehistoric and

Railroad. The chief goal of this program is to obtain a listing for the town on the National Register of Historic Places.”

Jennifer Rehg College Talk

Finney’s senior assignment addressed Chinese immigrants and issues assimilating to the United States.

As an undergraduate, she combined her degree in anthropology with a focus on East Asian Studies and Chinese, which later led her to travel to China five times and develop her fluency in the language and her knowledge of Chinese culture.

She started at Governor French Academy teaching Chinese as a way of, “Integrating my anthropology major into the classes,” she explained. According to Finney, one of the most fundamental things she learned through anthropology was “knowing how to observe people”—not by taking notes but by learning how to see things from different perspectives and appreciate human differences. She emphasized the practical importance of this in business, as success is a lot about understanding what people want and need and trying to communicate well.

Yancey-Bailey agreed that one of the most important lessons from anthropology is that of cultural relativism—that what people think and what they do should be understood in the context of their culture.

“Anthropology really opens up your mind to a lot of things,” she said. “I think it prepares you to deal with other people in the best way possible and truly understand other people.”

Jennifer Rehg, is the chair of the department of anthropology at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

For the Intelligencer

historic sites affected by the construction. She said that there are federal laws protecting cultural heritage. A

s the region continues to develop, this type of work will be in demand. She added that her most fulfilling activity so far has been as head researcher for the Brooklyn Public Engagement Program.

“This program supports the small, impoverished community of Brooklyn, Ill.,” Yancey-Bailey explained. “Brooklyn was the first majority black town to be incorporated in the United States. It was founded as a refuge community for former slaves and it served as a major stop on the Underground