Anthropology of Higher Education TIG

Newsletter

By James H. McDonald, Ph.D., University of Montevallo

This year's conference in Philadelphia marks another extremely strong year for the Anthropology of Higher Education TIG with 31 organized events. Ninety-four papers were presented in organized sessions along with 38 roundtable contributions. The sessions were remarkably rich covering an arc of topics almost too diverse to easily characterize. All of them, though, touched upon the diversity of higher education and the challenges of navigating a volatile environment.

The format for presentations is also evolving in some interesting ways. As in Santa Fe, we had two mini-cluster of sessions. This year the focus was on higher education leadership in one, and the international credentialing of in health care in the other. There were also seven roundtables, including two that were capstone sessions summarizing different clusters of sessions.

The leadership mini-cluster had participants with intellectual backgrounds in communication, sociology, law, music, and anthropology / archaeology. Major session themes included adaptation and resilience within leadership and multiple identities in leadership roles. Perhaps one of the most anthropological presentations was delivered by a non-anthropologist – a Professor of English – who did a masterful deconstruction and analysis of the tenure and promotion process. The health care credentialing mini-cluster major theme focused on preparing health care professionals for sustainable futures in a complex, global environment. Among that many topics addressed by papers and panelists was the thorny issue of understanding cultural differences beyond the surface notion of cultural competency.

As with previous years, the meeting was tied up with a final capstone session. Each capstone serves as a reflection and building opportunity. When all this kicked off in 2015 in Pittsburgh, the conference theme was "Continuity and Change." Brian Foster and Don Brenneis put together a series of panels that focused on volatility and transformational change in higher education. At that meeting there were three organized sessions, one capstone session, and an informal discussion about how the anthropology of higher education group might evolve within the SfAA: ten presentations and lots of interest. At that informal session, our main question was were we one and done or did the idea have legs.

From ten to 130+ presentations in three years is a remarkable building project. The capstone in Philadelphia focused on how we can best work to institutionalize our TIG. Fittingly the theme of the 2018 meet was "Sustainable Futures," and that is our goal with the TIG as we move forward. We have succeeded in creating a new governance structure. We are working toward a centralized repository for our activity through a web site, a social media presence and listserv, and database management.

With the 2018 meeting barely in the rearview mirror, we need to already look ahead to the 2019 Portland meeting whose theme is "Engaging Change in Turbulent Times." That certainly seems to fit thematically with the general thrust of the TIG.

Michael Paolisso (U of Maryland, mpaoliss@umd.edu) is serving as the Program Chair and Don Stull (U of Kansas, emeritus, stull@ku.edu) will serve as the Annual Meeting Coordinator. While we have explored session, roundtable, and capstone formats, we might consider experimenting with workshops, plenaries, and posters. Nothing should be off the table.