

Frequently Asked Questions: About Anthropology and the Anthropology Major

What is anthropology?

There are as many definitions of anthropology as there are anthropologists, but what they have in common is the idea that we study that part of human behavior that is learned and shared (“culture”) and we adopt a holistic framework that assumes an interconnectedness among aspects of human social systems (e.g., economics, politics, kinship, religion). In the United States, the discipline of anthropology has traditionally included four sub-fields: cultural anthropology, biological anthropology, archaeology and anthropological linguistics. The anthropology department at Smith College focuses on ethnographic approaches to contemporary cultures. However, students in this program will have access to faculty at the other five colleges who offer courses in archaeology and biological anthropology."

What can you do with an anthropology major?

Our graduates have gone on to pursue a wide diversity of fields, including medicine, public health, international human rights and international development, journalism, nursing, primary and secondary education, law, and environmental activism. We have also had a number of alumnae go on to advanced degrees in various sub-fields of anthropology.

Two elements of the anthropology major are particularly useful in a world increasingly marked by global movements of populations: a foundational knowledge of the societies and cultures of distinct parts of the world and a grasp of the methods by which those societies may be studied in a respectful manner. An appreciation for the complexity of cultures is a critical skill in any profession that aims to reach across social divides.

How do I go about selecting a major adviser?

You may be tempted to ask the faculty member you had in an introductory class, but the best idea is to find the member of the department who shares your interests (geographical and/or topical) and from whom you are likely to take at least two classes. That way your adviser will be sure to get to know you well enough to provide good guidance and to write useful letters of reference. Look at the biographies of department members <http://www.smith.edu/anthro/faculty.html> and see whose research and teaching lines up with the direction you expect to take in your studies. Then drop by to chat with him/her during office hours. Remember that you may change your adviser at any time if another faculty member ends up being a better choice.

Why does the anthropology major require competency in a foreign language?

Anyone who has gained even minimal fluency in a foreign language knows how much more than simple communication is involved. Language is a central means by which a people’s worldview is conveyed, reproduced and modified. Since anthropology is dedicated to the profound knowledge of cultures, language learning is a foundational skill.

What courses count as “related” for the major?

Three of the eleven courses required for the major may be in other fields if there is a direct connection between the classes and the student’s interest/focus in anthropology. For example, a student concentrating on African societies may count an African history or political science course toward her major. We will also accept up to two foreign language courses toward this “related” category if they are linked to the student’s geographic interests (e.g., Spanish for students interested in Latin American cultures). Students who wish to concentrate their studies in archaeology or biological anthropology may ask that courses in math and/or the sciences be counted as related if those classes provide the foundation for their anthropological courses. For example, a biological anthropologist might count a biology course in human physiology or human genetics. An archaeologist might need a foundation in statistics or geosciences. In all cases, related courses are counted toward the major only with the approval of the major adviser.

What is a special studies?

A special studies is a credit-bearing course that allows a student to pursue an anthropological subject that is either not represented in any regular class or that the student wishes to learn more about than was possible in a regular course. It may also grow out of an internship experience or a project undertaken during study abroad. Special studies sometimes serve as the basis for a subsequent honors project. It is the responsibility of the student to propose a project to a faculty member, keeping in mind that the work associated with a special studies must be equivalent to that required in a regular course carrying the same number of credits. A special studies may involve the development of an annotated bibliography that will serve as the basis for an honors project, a seminar-like research paper(s), an exhibit of creative work (e.g., documentary video, photography, dance), or any other product agreed to by the student and the supervising faculty member.

A faculty member may not be able to accept a special studies if he/she is insufficiently knowledgeable about the proposed subject or if he/she has already agreed to supervise others for that semester.

Should I do honors?

The honors program is an excellent opportunity for a student to develop advanced research and writing skills, but it is not for everyone. You should have a strong interest in a specific subject that you want to spend a substantial part of your final two semesters at Smith exploring. Although an honors project does not have to be based on independent fieldwork, it must do more than summarize or review an existing body of literature. You should have done some preliminary reading on the subject and have at least an early idea of what you want to show by your research (i.e., your thesis). You will also need to develop a relationship with the faculty member who has the background necessary to support and evaluate your project. It is not wise to approach a faculty member with an honors proposal if you have never taken a course from that person. More information is provided at <http://www.smith.edu/anthro/honors.html>.

What courses taken during study abroad can count toward the major?

It is likely that you will be able to count a number of courses in the category of “related,” but to be considered as a regular anthropology class it must be taught by a professor with an advanced degree in anthropology (including any of the sub-fields). You may be misled by course titles that sound anthropological; you will have to investigate the professor’s training if you want your adviser to accept the course as a regular anthropology class.

May I count a seminar from another school (Five Colleges or study abroad) for the seminar requirement?

You are welcome to take anthropology seminars off campus and they can count toward the major, but they may not replace a Smith class for the seminar requirement. The only exceptions will be for students with an established focus in biological anthropology or linguistics; since we are not in a position to offer seminars in these sub-fields, we will consider a petition to have the seminar requirement fulfilled off campus.

May I count a “history of anthropological theory” class at another school toward the theory requirement?

Yes, with the approval of your adviser. There are appropriate courses offered at several Five College campuses

Do I have to take the anthropological colloquium at Smith?

Yes. We want all our majors to have had a Smith faculty member teach them how to frame an anthropological problem and define a research strategy. We also expect that our students will profit from the opportunity to work with each other in a class restricted to majors.

We encourage both anthropology majors and non-majors to participate in the activities of the Anthropology Club, a student run interest group at Smith College. For more information, see <http://www.smith.edu/anthro/anthroclub.html>

With best wishes, The Anthropology Department Faculty