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Career Advice for Anthropology Undergraduates

John T. Omohundro

In the previous article we learned that anthropologists regularly use their skills in the world of work and that employers are beginning to recognize the value of employees who are trained in anthropology. But the fact remains that many Americans do not fully understand what anthropology is and have little idea what students who major in anthropology can do for them. Worse, students themselves may not consciously recognize the work skills that anthropology has taught them or how to translate these skills into a language prospective employers can understand. John Omohundro tackles this problem of recognition in recognition here. I have two answers, which may not be as impressive to the reader as they are to me. The first is that, "...I..." and the second is that, "...I..."...
problem of recognition and translation in this selection. Using a concept he calls “transcultural presentation,” he lists some of the skills that anthropology teaches students and shows how these skills can be translated by graduating students into résumé language for employers.

The following scene happens at least once a semester. A distraught student pokes her (or his) head through my office door.

“Scuse me . . . Are you busy? I need to ask you something.”

“No, Grebbleberry, come in, sit down. What’s bothering you?”

“Well, I really like anthropology. In fact, I want to drop my major in [deleted] and declare anthropology. But I told my parents and they were freaked out. My mother cried and my father threatened to cut me off. And my friends think I’ve lost it completely. Now they have me scared. I’m afraid I won’t be able to get a job. What am I going to do?”

This student has all the symptoms of anthro shock. I’m tempted to smile in recognition of the syndrome but to Grebbleberry there is nothing amusing here. I have two answers: the difficult answer and the easy answer. The difficult answer, which I would like to give, is a problem because students are not prepared to believe me. The difficult answer is:

“For most careers, it doesn’t matter much what you major in, as long as you like the subject and are good at it. The point of a major in a liberal arts education is to give practice at studying something in depth. One’s major is not the same thing as job training. The careers that follow from most undergraduate majors are not and cannot be specified, even if the world doesn’t change— but it does, frequently. There is no direct, obvious, and inevitable connection between college disciplines and the occupational titles people carry.”

Although many years of teaching and advising convince me that the difficult answer I’ve just described is true, I don’t respond with that answer anymore. First, I have to treat the “anthro shock”—the fear gripping the student that, “. . . mocked and alone, I’m going to starve.” So, instead I reply with the easy answer:

“Take courage. There are many things you can do for a living that use your anthropological knowledge and skills. I can help you discover them and prepare for them.”

Only then does the student’s color begin to return; the anthro shock is in remission. Later, perhaps, after we’ve begun a career development program, I might introduce the difficult answer. But Grebbleberry still won’t believe me, because my answer goes against most of what pundits, peers, parents, and even some professors have told her. This article presents some of the evidence that I have gathered for the claims made in the “easy” answer, to assist advisors to respond quickly and effectively to anthro shock.
Becoming a Career Advisor

Good advice is sorely needed and in short supply. Too many of the students I have supervised appeared flustered and ill-prepared when people ask them naive but usually sincere questions about what anthropology is, what it is good for; and what the student is going to "do with it." My advisees usually answered these questions apologetically or parried them with self-deprecating humor. Bill Gates can get away with being apologetic and self-deprecating; my students need to present themselves more positively. Furthermore, many students and parents acquire their understanding of anthropology through students rather than professors, so it behooves us to raise the quality of the understanding that our major students impart. In turn, by improving their self-presentation our students will become more confident, more ambitious, and ultimately more successful in finding good work.

My career advising grew out of efforts to be a good teacher of the liberal arts, one who helps students move on to self-actualization in the world after college. The advising also grew out of my research in adaptive problem-solving by residents of small coastal communities in Newfoundland. Using the adaptive problem-solving approach, I ask, how do students find out about the world of work and how do they find their place in it? Twenty years ago, I began to develop career workshops within my department, then expanded them into workshops at anthropology conferences, and lately assembled those materials into a workbook, *Careers in Anthropology* (1998). I use the book as a supplementary text in courses, as a workbook in careers workshops, and as an advising guide to students who declare anthropology as a major. This article is drawn from that book.

Because my experience with careers has been limited to academic ones, I collaborate with my college’s career planning counselor. Lacking important parts of the whole picture, we are insufficient individually to anthropology majors. I have learned about résumés, interviews, and employer expectations, while my career planning colleagues have learned about the usefulness of anthropological perspectives and methods. Even if students consult both of us separately, they tend to perceive us as talking past one another; so they sometimes become frustrated and drop out of the process. But when the career planner and I work together, we see the value in each other’s knowledge and how to blend it with concepts from our own fields. The career planners, for example, are delighted to learn that anthropology includes training in participant observation, object reconstruction and cataloging, and cognitive mapping, among other activities. They in turn have taught me what employers call those activities and how to highlight them on student résumés to increase what linguistic anthropologists call "indexicality," or talking on the same wavelength.

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While working with the career planners, and counseling and tracking my advisees, I discovered that undergraduate anthropology alumni not only find meaningful work in which they use their anthropology, but they can use their anthropology to get hired to do that work. To demonstrate this idea I drafted and field tested exercises in which anthropological research techniques, such as ethnomethods, life history, demography, participant observation, social-network analysis, key informant interviews, and survey data analysis, are applied to the tasks of selecting and pursuing interesting work. I also realized that when they are advising for careers, professors can use anthropological perspectives and data-collection techniques to better understand what students and employers know and need. Let us look briefly at what that might be.

**Career Planning in Cross-Cultural Perspective**

Except for a handful of publications distributed by the American Anthropological Association, few anthropologists have addressed the subject of career planning for undergraduate majors. One exception, James Spradley’s “Career Education from a Cultural Perspective,” has shaped my conception of the problem. Spradley observes that in most cultures, such as the Amish in northern New York, the Inuit in central Canada, or the Masai in Kenya, children live close to the world of adult work. As they approach their own adulthood, youths understand clearly what adult work is and what they must do to take it up. There aren't many choices, but there isn't much anxiety either: The transition is smooth and supported by ritual, such as coming-of-age ceremonies.

The modern West, Spradley continues, is quite different. Career options are unclear to the beginner. A gulf yawns between their lives and what adults do. What kinds of careers are there over that gulf? What do people do in those positions? How do I decide which position is for me? How do I cross this gulf and get into the picture? The small-scale, nonindustrial cultures allowed twenty years of enculturation to adult careers. By comparison, Spradley observes, the postindustrial world expects youths to make a more complex transition from sixteen years of schooling to adult work in a matter of months or as little as a single weekend. And our culture has no ritual to ease the change.

It takes each student a while to assemble some kind of bridge across that gulf between college life and adult life. The average length of time in the U.S. between graduating with a B.A. and getting hired is six months to one year. That delay isn't usually because there aren't any jobs for liberal arts students. The delay is largely a cultural problem: new graduates simply don't know what to do next. A career counselor at Dartmouth College puts the problem like this: "Although liberal arts majors are qualified for dozens of jobs, they have no idea

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how to market themselves successfully." They eventually figure it out and get back in the picture. Two years after graduation, two-thirds are employed full time (many of the others are in further study). Three-quarters of the employed are in positions related to their field of study.

My counseling efforts have aimed to enculturate students to the career life while they are still in college, thus abbreviating that liminal state after the baccalaureate degree. Of course, that's a tactical calculation. Looking back on sixteen years of formal education and looking ahead to a worklife of forty or more years, many of my advisees want to enter a liminal state for awhile. Nevertheless, other students are eager to move on. Those who made the effort during their college years to select a starting career, identify some employers, and prepare themselves for that career were rewarded by finding interesting work more quickly than those who waited until after they graduated. Students will have to make some time for this work in a busy college life. As my career planning colleague says, "Looking for a job is itself a job."

If students take up this job of career planning, their anthropology teachers can be valuable motivators and informants. However, not all professors say much about careers to their advisees or their classes. I know this is so because for years I have advised students from other colleges who sought me out at conferences, or when they were home visiting their parents, because they were suffering from anthrop shock untended by their own professors.

Why are some professors avoiding giving career advice? Some feel that after years in the ivory tower they don't understand the work world that their students want to enter. Times have changed, they say, since they were looking for a position. It is widely repeated in the college community that after graduation many students will enter careers that don't exist yet. Also, it is widely repeated that most people change careers (not just employers, but lines of work) several times in their working life. My career planning colleagues have amassed evidence to support these popular conceptions. So, "how can we know what to advise students today?" some of my colleagues wonder. Other professors define career advice, just as they do elementary writing instruction, as a task someone else should do.

A third reason that some professors avoid counseling for careers is that they don't approve of the idea of college as a place to credential people for jobs. In their view, student "vocationalism," or seeing college as a route to a good career, shifts the professor's role from liberator of young minds to gatekeeper of yuppedom. Professors who teach critical approaches to culture want to inculturate resistance and a desire to change, not a desire to join, the system.

Anthropologist Michael Moffatt, in an insightful ethnography of residence halls and student culture, caused me to re-think student concern about jobs. Moffatt suggests that professors who disdain student "vocationalism" are being hypocritcal. After all, professors got their job by going to college, so why shouldn't the

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students want the same? Students expect that what they call their "job" will place them in the American middle classes, where their occupation will be a key element in their identity. They expect that job to offer them challenge, growth, rewards, security, and a chance to make the world a better place—all of which are goals deserving support from anthropology professors.

**Translating the Skills**

What does the student need to find that job and thus meet those goals? Career advice is partly a matter of teaching students to imagine themselves in a new way (the ethnographic "other's" way) and to construct a few basic models of what it's like in the working world.

Imagining themselves in a new way involves learning what employers (one of those ethnographic "others") really want (or think they want) and then reviewing one's education and experience for evidence of having acquired those desirable qualities. Seen in an anthropological light, this process may be called "trans-cultural self-presentation" and is similar to what the ethnographer initiates when entering the field and attempting to build rapport. Here are some data to assist that process.

Anthro shock contains the fear that one will acquire no marketable skills. " Marketable skills" implies there are other kinds as well. In fact, there are few skills that a liberal arts student acquires that aren't marketable. But there are temporary enthusiasms influencing which skills are considered desirable this year and what vocabulary is used to describe those skills. Anthropology students are well equipped to examine language, identify trends, and adapt to them by translating their own skills and knowledge into language appropriate for the setting.

Table 1 describes some skills that anthropology majors have an opportunity to develop at my college and, I am sure, at many other undergraduate institutions supporting a major. These are phrased in language immediately recognizable by the anthropology student and teacher.

Table 2 identifies twelve abilities often acquired through the undergraduate anthropology major. Fewer students and teachers will recognize their major as rephrased in this table, but employers will take notice. I advise my students to select anthropology and other courses intentionally to increase their competence in the abilities listed in Table 1 and then, when presenting themselves to potential graduate schools or employers, to highlight those abilities in the terms used in Table 2. Summer jobs, internships, volunteer work, as well as college classes may provide practice in the desirable activities (read "marketable skills").

Advanced majors in our senior seminar practice this transcultural self-presentation with exercises in composing résumé language. I begin by examining a résumé as a cultural text, an element in the process of seeking and offering jobs. We consider when and how their intended readers approach résumés. I argue that the résumé, in little more than a page, is intended to provoke interest in the writer as a person who can do (or learn to do) what the
TABLE 1  Some Transferable Skills in the Anthropology Major

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interacting with people of diverse cultures, making allowance for difference in customs and beliefs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Providing insight into social problems by supplying information about how problems—such as aging, conflict, or bereavement—are dealt with in other cultures</td>
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<td>Interviewing people to obtain information about their attitudes, knowledge, and behavior</td>
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<td>Using statistics and computers to analyze data</td>
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<td>Adapting approaches used in public relations, marketing, or politics to different population groups</td>
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<td>Appraising; classifying; and cataloging rare, old, or valuable objects</td>
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<td>Repairing, reconstructing, and preserving cultural artifacts by selecting chemical treatment, temperature, humidity, and storage methods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drawing maps and constructing scale models</td>
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<tr>
<td>Photographing sites, objects, people, and events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpreting or translating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using scientific equipment and measuring devices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing craft techniques</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cooperating in an ethnographic or archaeological research team</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making policy based on social science research data, problem-solving methods, and professional ethical standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Designing research projects and applying for grants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing a research paper in appropriate format and style</td>
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<td>Orally presenting research results</td>
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<tr>
<td>Applying a variety of ethnographic data collection techniques: ethnosemantics, proverbs, life histories, ethnobiology, folklore, event analysis, genealogies, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Producing and editing a scholarly journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leading a pre-professional organization such as a student anthropology society or honors society</td>
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<td>Developing public relations for a museum, field project, or conference</td>
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<td>Designing, building, installing, and acting as docent for museum exhibits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching, instructing, tutoring, and team-teaching with peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Studying a second language</td>
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What Careers Do Anthropology B.A.’s Pursue?

Students can be brought out of anthro shock by infusions of empirical data. Surveys have been conducted to assess what work anthropology students are prepared for and what fields alumni actually entered. In *Anthropology and Jobs*, H. Russell Bernard and Willis Sibley identified thirteen fields that the

anthropology B.A., journalism, police

twenty-eight fields
to the M.A. or M.S.
fields included diet
and community de

Ten years later
alumni from 32 li
ents, 62% worked
government. 16% v

\(^{3}\)H. Russell Bernard and
American Anthropologi
cal Association, 197

\(^{4}\)Lawrence W. Kratts an
Newsletter (November 1
TABLE 2 Résumé Language for Anthropological Abilities

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social agility</td>
<td>In an unfamiliar social or career-related setting, you learn to size up quickly the “rules of the game.” You can become accepted more quickly than you could without anthropology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>As you must often learn about a culture from within it, you learn how to interview and observe as a participant.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>You learn how to find patterns in the behavior of a cultural group. This allows you to generalize about their behavior and predict what they might do in a given situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social sensitivity</td>
<td>While other people’s ways of doing things may be different from your own, you learn the importance of events and conditions that have contributed to this difference. You also recognize that other cultures view your ways as strange. You learn the value of behaving toward others with appropriate preparation, care, and understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy in interpreting behavior</td>
<td>You become familiar with the range of behavior in different cultures. You learn how to look at cultural causes of behavior before assigning causes yourself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging conclusions</td>
<td>You learn that analyses of human behavior are open to challenge. You learn how to use new knowledge to test past conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting information</td>
<td>You learn how to use data collected by others, reorganizing or interpreting it to reach original conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplifying information</td>
<td>As anthropology is conducted among publics as well as about them, you learn how to simplify technical information for communication to non-technical people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualizing</td>
<td>Attention to details is a trait of anthropology. However, you learn that any detail might not be as important as its context, and can even be misleading when context is ignored.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>Often functioning within a cultural group, or acting upon culturally sensitive issues, you learn to approach problems with care. Before acting, you learn how to identify the problem, set your goals, decide upon the actions you will take, and calculate possible effects on other people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasive writing</td>
<td>Anthropology strives to represent the behavior of one group to another group, and is in continual need of interpretation. You learn the value of bringing someone else to your view through written argument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social perspective</td>
<td>You learn how to perceive the acts of individuals and local groups as cause and effect of larger sociocultural systems. This enables you to “act locally and think globally.”</td>
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anthropology B.A. could enter with no additional training. These included journalism, police work, and the travel or tour industry. They also identified twenty-eight fields the anthropology B.A. could enter if additional training, up to the M.A. or M.S. level in the appropriate discipline, was acquired. These fields included dietetics, market research, city planning, museums, personnel, and community development, to name a few.

Ten years later, two of my students conducted a survey of anthropology alumni from 32 liberal arts colleges in the northeast U.S. Of the 616 respondents, 62% worked in the profit sector; 9% in the non-profit sector; and 6% in government. 16% were still in a graduate or professional school.


The respondents’ occupations were sorted into seventeen categories. Academics accounted for 19%, some of whom were in disciplines other than anthropology, but managers (“director,” “administrator,” etc.) dominated at 19%. It appears that a large number of anthropology majors become actors in a bureaucracy, supervising others. Medicine, communications, and business together accounted for another 16% of respondents’ current positions.

Does this range of work positions outside of anthropology, as usually conceived, signal a failure on our part to place our advisees in positions that will utilize their major? I don’t think so, and neither do the alumni. 71% of the northeast alumni agreed with the statement, “my anthropology education helps me in my current work.” An owner of a small business wrote, “All aspects of the [antique] business are satisfying: attending antique shows, unearthing an early item, researching its age and provenance, restoring or repairing it, and educating a potential customer about it...”

Most (81%) of the alumni returning the survey claimed they were satisfied and challenged by their current work, and 74% felt their decision to major in anthropology was a good one. Some alumni waxed enthusiastic about anthropology as the foundation for a liberal arts education. “Go for it; no one in business will ever hold a liberal arts education against you... In the long run this will mark you as superior to a crowd of business students...” Alumni highlighted the value in their current work of cultural relativism, examining human behavior holistically, and using qualitative research methods, all acquired in the major. A social services administrator reported, “I work as a management analyst in a county social services agency. While it is difficult to get an anthro degree recognized as relevant, the anthropological approach is, I feel, one of the best for this sort of job. I’m always translating...”

More recent surveys of alumni, such as the six colleges in the North Carolina system in 1988 and a SUNY Plattsburgh survey in 1993, produced similar results. The majority of anthropology majors are 1) glad they majored in anthropology, 2) using some or all of the skills and perspectives they acquired in the major, and 3) enjoying their work, even if few of them are hanging out shingles bearing the title “anthropologist.”

Along with their satisfaction, the alumni have some complaints and some advice for current students and their teachers. Overall, alumni were disappointed with the quality and quantity of career advice they received while undergraduates. They also see now that they would have benefitted from more careful choices of electives and course work outside of anthropology.

The northeast alumni urged current students to take courses in math, statistics, communications, economics, science, and computing. This advice matches that offered by alumni from most majors, who recommend courses in

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8James Armstrong, personal communication, 1993.

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Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been twofold: to shock anthropology undergraduates and their professors into recognizing that anthropology is an important and useful field of study, and methods could be more widely used by anthropology students. The purpose of this chapter has been twofold: to shock anthropology undergraduates and their professors into recognizing that anthropology is an important and useful field of study, and methods could be more widely used by anthropology students.

Surveys of alumni who have majored in anthropology indicate that they are satisfied with the training they received and that they are using the skills and perspectives they acquired in their major. In addition, the alumni are enjoying their work, even if few of them are hanging out shingles bearing the title “anthropologist.”

In sum, the alumni are influential work, but they also have some complaints and advice for current students and their teachers. Overall, alumni were disappointed with the quality and quantity of career advice they received while undergraduates. They also see now that they would have benefitted from more careful choices of electives and course work outside of anthropology.

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Review Questions

1. According to the chapter, how do anthropologists benefit from the training they receive in college?  
2. What is the most important advice that anthropology students should follow in order to succeed in their future careers?
administration, writing, interpersonal relations, economics, accounting, and math. In our northeast survey, anthropology alumni also strongly urged students to gain as much practical experience as possible through field schools, lab and methods courses, senior theses, independent research projects, overseas study, and collaboration with professors’ research.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to help anthropology teachers deal with the challenge of preparing their students for the real world. I advocate swift first aid with the easy answer, but it is essential to have the evidence to back up that answer. I also advocate cooperation with careers planning professionals. Anthropology offers many marketable skills, or good training for a variety of fields of work, but students, working within the world view of college life and transcript semantics, often don’t know how to translate their abilities into ones the rest of the world wants.

Surveys of alumni show that they pursue many lines of work, enjoy their work, are using their anthropological perspective and skills, and are glad they majored in anthropology. Their self-descriptions in surveys suggest that they majored in anthropology because its fundamental concepts and methods for understanding human behavior matched their long-established dispositions. After college, they found satisfying employment in positions where those same dispositions—now more developed through the major—were welcome and useful. This led me to a self-discovery theory of liberal arts education. That is, college is a place where the student, as a blank slate ready to become a cog, learns “what I need to know to get a job.” Instead, college is a place where the student discovers “what I like to do” and then refines his or her ability to do it. I’ve discovered that many career planning professionals knew this all along.

In sum, the evidence is that anthropology students not only find meaningful work, but they can use their anthropology to get that work, and we teachers can use our anthropology to improve our career advising. Not every anthropologist feels comfortable giving career advice, for several reasons, some of which I sympathize with and some I don’t. Not every student needs to rush from college to a career, either, but I have discussed here some ways to help them if they want to move along.

Postscript: Grebbleberry recovered and is now doing fine as a technical illustrator in Oregon, coupling her artistic ability to her love of archaeology.

Review Questions

1. According to Omohundro, what are the “hard” and “easy” answers to the question, “What can I do with an anthropology major?”

2. What is the difference between the way people in small-scale and complex societies make the transition into the world of work?