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## ARTICLE

# Understanding How Undergraduate Students Experience and Manage Stress: Implications for Teaching and Learning Anthropology

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## Abstract

*Research has shown that negative effects of stress on undergraduate students can have a significant impact on their college experience. Most of what we know about this topic is quantitative, based on surveys that provide self-reported information for large numbers of college students. The present study provides an in-depth qualitative perspective on college students and stress that foregrounds the voices of these emerging adults. Specifically, in this article we (a) share findings from a study using qualitative methods to examine how college students experience and manage stress and (b) provide strategies to help anthropology instructors design and manage their classes to improve learning for students under chronic stress.*

**Keywords:** college students; emerging adulthood; stress; anthropology instruction

## Introduction

The challenges facing modern institutions of higher education affect individuals at all levels, including administrators, teachers, and students (Foster 2017). Colleges and universities across the United States face decreased public funding coupled with increasing competition and public pressure to keep costs reasonable for students who are incurring crippling amounts of student loan debt (Graham and Donaldson 2017). Tenure-track faculty positions continue to dwindle as the number of adjunct instructors grows (Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster 2016), and recent media coverage highlights the exploitation of this overworked, underpaid workforce (Eli 2019; Gabin 2019). Faculty who do obtain secure positions face increasing expectations to produce publications and obtain grants, but salaries are not keeping pace with this expanding workload. At the same time, faculty report encountering stressed-out students who seem disengaged from learning (Blum 2016).

Recent publications from the Society for Applied Anthropology's Issues in Higher Education Topical Interest Group (TIG) highlight the key role of anthropology in understanding how recent changes in higher education impact people and systems (Foster, Graham, and Donaldson 2018). Anthropology, the authors explain, "brings a unique way of 'seeing' and 'looking' at such complexity (Wolcott 2009) that is deeply infused in the discipline's emphasis on cultural analysis and which examines the total human experience (social, biological, linguistic, historical, cultural, psychological)" (Foster, McCarty, and Daniels 2018, 5). Anthropological methods also allow us to uncover and unpack nuances of complex social processes and systems to understand people's day-to-day experiences, especially as they relate to their overall sense of self and their role in the community.

This study turns attention toward students as they navigate what anthropologist Foster (2017) terms "the volatile nature" of higher education. A recent survey of over 67,000 college students from 108 US institutions of higher education found that three out of four students reported feeling stressed and one out of five said they had thought of suicide (Liu et al. 2018). Students reported feeling stressed about everything from the way they look to finances, school pressure, social and romantic relationships, and family problems. Most of the research on college students and stress is quantitative, based on surveys that provide self-reported information for large numbers of college students. The present study provides an in-depth qualitative perspective, adding ethnographic insights to our understanding of how college students experience and manage stress and foregrounding the voices of these emerging adults. Our findings contribute to the quantitative body of literature on stress among college students as well as emerging adulthood studies and literature on the anthropology of higher education that explores the impacts of the rapidly changing nature of colleges and universities.

In this article we (a) share findings from our study that examine qualitatively how college students experience and manage stress and (b) provide strategies for anthropology instructors in designing and managing classes to improve learning for students under chronic stress. Our focus in this paper is on "traditional-aged" (18-24 years) college students who face challenges associated with emerging adulthood. Though, as Tamir and Taylor (this volume) note, enrollment rates of nontraditional students (those 25 years and older) have surpassed those of traditional age college students nationally, at the university where we conducted research, 74 percent of enrolled students are under the age of 25. Since we planned to share findings with our campus's division of university affairs, it was important that our sample reflect the local student population.

Though college student populations and the stressors they experience are increasingly diverse, a unifying experience among many is that stress affects their daily lives. According to the National College Health Assessment, 34 percent of students reported that stress affected their academic performance over the last 12 months. Over

half of those surveyed (57 percent) reported experiencing more than average or tremendous stress in the last year (American College Health Association 2018). The American Institute of Stress (AIS) defines stress as a non-specific response of the body to any demand for change (2017). Many people, including the students we interviewed, define stress in terms of symptoms, focusing on how it makes them feel physically, mentally, and emotionally. Students under stress report experiencing physical symptoms, including increased heart rate, tremors, appetite changes, gastrointestinal complaints, and sleeping problems. Psychological symptoms reported by students under stress include irritability/anger, depressed mood, anxiousness/nervousness, hopelessness, concentration difficulties, and social isolation (Peer, Hillman, and Van Hoet 2015).

Though people usually think of stress in negative terms, it can also be positive. For example, getting into college, taking on a new leadership role, or beginning a new romantic relationship can help students feel motivated, accomplished, and happy. However, negative stress, the focus of this paper, correlates with depression and anxiety (Beiter et al. 2015). In turn, health correlates with academic performance, student retention, and satisfaction with college (Boehm and Kennedy-Phillips 2016; Ickovics et al. 2014). Chronic stress makes it difficult for students to focus on learning and fully engage in their classes, which affects the overall classroom culture. Boehm and Kennedy-Phillips (2016) explain that, “elements in any campus culture that harm community members’ well-being in turn also harm the learning and teaching environment” (22).

The college years represent a period of major transition in nearly all areas of life, including friendships, romantic relationships, education, career, and often, geographic location. Social psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2014) refers to the extended life stage between adolescence and adulthood as “emerging adulthood.” Arnett suggests that certain key features define this period, including continued identity exploration, a focus on the self, a feeling of liminality as youth occupy a space in between adolescence and adulthood, instability resulting from multiple social and environmental shifts, and the increasingly prominent role of social media in everyday life. The college years can involve a period of greater freedom and responsibility as well as the stressors that accompany those lifestyle changes, such as managing finances, multiple demands on their time, and increased pressure to perform academically.

According to the National College Health Assessment, the most common stressors reported by college students include academics (48 percent), finances (34 percent), sleep difficulties (32 percent), intimate relationships (31 percent), family problems (30 percent), other social relationships (29 percent), and career-related issues (24 percent). Additionally, 57 percent reported feeling overwhelmed by all they had to do and 30 percent reported feeling overwhelming anxiety in the last two weeks (ACHA 2018). Students report using a variety of strategies to manage stress, including exercising (Baghurst and Kelley 2014; King et al. 2012), anticipating the stressors before they occur, reaching out to people in their social support network (Peer, Hillman, and Van Hoet

2015), making unhealthy dietary choices, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and engaging in risky sexual behavior (Laska et al. 2009). Other strategies include listening to music, talking or calling someone to vent, taking deep breaths, stretching, praying, imagining something pleasant, meditating, and counting to ten (King et al. 2012).

## **Methods**

Research for this article was conducted at a large public university located in the southern United States; 50 percent of the students are classified as racial or ethnic minorities, including 35 percent who identify as Hispanic or Latino and 11 percent who identify as African American. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. We used a variety of qualitative data collection methods over the course of about five months, including in-depth individual interviews and a focus group interview. In-depth interviews combined direct and indirect questions about stress. Direct questions asked students to reflect on and articulate their experiences with stress; these include what stress feels like in their body, what causes their stress, and how they cope with stress. Indirect questions focused on eliciting narratives about a recent stressful experience, for example, that would shift their focus from the interview to the experience itself, in line with the "danger-of-death" question in sociolinguistic interviews (Labov 1972). This approach engages participants emotionally in the telling of an intense experience to mitigate the effect of the observer's paradox. Participants were also asked to complete a one-page demographic survey with questions about their age, ethnicity, year in school, employment status, and financial assistance. We recruited traditional students through classroom announcements and flyers posted around the college campus.

The sample was comprised of 20 undergraduate students (10 women and 10 men) ranging in age from 18 to 23 years. All but three were juniors or seniors (the sample included one freshman and two sophomores). The sample generally mirrored the ethnic profile of the total student population, with roughly half identifying as an ethnic minority, mostly Hispanic or Latino. Fifteen of the 20 participants worked either full-time or part-time, 17 received financial help from their parents, and 15 received some type of grant or loan to help with school payments. We designed interview and focus group questions to address three research questions: How are college students experiencing stress in their daily lives, and what are their major stressors? What strategies do they use to cope with stress? To what extent do students know about and use campus resources to help them manage stress?

A major limitation of our study is the narrow, small sample. Though the gender, ethnicity, and age demographics of our sample are representative of the university where we conducted research, our findings are not translatable to other populations. For example, we know from quantitative studies that some groups experience greater stress than the general student population, including bisexual and transgender students (Liu et

al. 2018), student veterans (Schonfeld et al. 2015) and students in addiction recovery (Perron et al. 2011). Also, as mentioned above, enrollment of “nontraditional” students has surpassed that of traditional students nationally. Yet, we do not know much about how they experience and manage stress (see Tamir and Taylor in this volume). Future ethnographic research is needed to understand how students of different ages, ethnicities, and sexual and gendered identities experience and cope with stress.

## **Common Stressors among College Students**

In terms of what stresses college students out, findings from this study reflect those of previous quantitative research summarized earlier. The three most frequently reported stressors were time management, finances, and schoolwork (specifically tests, homework, and group projects). Other common stressors included maintaining grades or overall GPA, trying to meet high self-expectations, social relationships (including both romantic relationships and friendships), school deadlines, family troubles, having multiple responsibilities, having a job, struggling with classes, and the pressure of deciding on a future career.

### *Time Management*

Time management was a major stressor for students when it came to balancing multiple tasks throughout each week. For example, some students reported that they struggled with managing time between school and their job or school and spending time with friends. When asked what stressed him out as a college student, Sean, a 20-year-old senior, replied “the juggling aspect of it. . . . You have all of your friends asking if you want to hang out, or go out and party . . . and then having to tell them no, that you need to stay in and study or do something specific. . . . That’s pretty stressful.” Other students, like Erica, talked about the stress of managing school and work schedules. She explained:

Definitely my job. . . . It’s a little hectic at times. Like, now I go to class 8 until noon and then I have to do my work between noon and 5 because I have to go to sleep because I work nights. Like, from 10pm to 3am . . . and then you have to drag yourself out of bed and yeah. . . . But I mean, that’s probably the most stressful right now.

It was clear from interviews that many students felt overwhelmed by their competing social, academic, and work demands.

### *Finances*

Many participants also talked about struggling with finances. Specifically, stressors included budgeting without the help of a parent, having to work many hours to make enough money, and even being able to afford enough meals until their next paycheck or

financial aid disbursement. Sean, mentioned earlier, described his financial stress by saying, "It was a maturity thing." He explained:

Well, I mean . . . there's a lot more financial freedom that you have to deal with in college so, I guess doing the "adulating." . . . Having to pay your taxes, getting your water bill on time, not spending your money on pot or alcohol so you can actually pay for food and pay for nice food that's healthy that's gonna fuel you better (rather) than just junk food, which is easy.

This transition into college shaped Sean's sense of identity from being under his parents' care to having to take on the added responsibilities of an adult role.

Other students struggled with the amount of support being offered by their parents or with receiving no support at all. Elizabeth, a 20-year-old junior, described the stress of managing her finances without the help of her parents:

Because my parents don't cover anything, so it's like I have to pay for my student fees and then I had to go to the clinic the other day and I owe, like, another sum of money for that. And then, I didn't think it was going to be that much but it was; it was a crazy amount. And then, having to pay my rent obviously and the stuff that my FAFSA didn't cover. It's all due in November . . . and then groceries, you know.

Although 17 of the 20 participants reported receiving financial support from their parents or guardians, most had to work and rely on financial aid as well to make ends meet. The chronic stress of worrying about how to pay for all of the costs associated with college and day-to-day life was a theme that emerged in almost all of the interviews.

### *Schoolwork*

Students talked about the everyday stress of homework and grades, but tests and finals were a focus of the narratives as they resulted in heightened stress. Tim, a 19-year-old sophomore, said that finals, group projects, and presentations stressed him out. He elaborated on why final exams in particular are so stressful:

The fact that it encompasses the entire semester. So, it's like sixteen weeks' worth of material that I have to make sure I know. And some of it is the stuff that has been previously covered earlier in the semester. It's still scary to go back to because I don't remember how much I understand or if I forgot anything. And then there's also new content which, if I'm still struggling to understand that, then it's also difficult to be able to go back and review what is supposed to be already established.

When asked to talk about presentations he said that he hates "being in front of a group of people and having to talk. And when it's an entire classroom it makes it even worse."

Group projects were more of a stressor to some students. Jacob explained, “When you’re depending on other people to kind of hold up their end and you can kind of see that they may not be putting as much effort as they should be, that’s pretty stressful if you are the person who is putting in effort.” Most students who felt stress from group projects attributed it to either having to work with other students or having to present in front of a large crowd. The vast majority of students who reported schoolwork as a stressor were men (88 percent).

### *Social Media*

During interviews, we asked students how they felt about social media. This question was prompted by Taylor’s related research on social media use among college students, which revealed social media to be a stressor among emerging adults. Preliminary findings from Taylor’s research suggest that social media invites comparison in terms of physical appearance, achievements, popularity, and lifestyle. Additionally, for some, especially women, the use of social media editing tools on images of themselves magnified and intensified scrutiny of perceived flaws, which negatively affected their sense of self. In some platforms, such as Instagram, the perceived imperative to appear happy and positive all of the time resulted in students feeling stifled in their expression of self and reluctant to reach out if they were struggling emotionally.

Many students we interviewed for the present study reported that the content on their social media sites stressed them out. For example, students talked about feeling frustrated by what others are posting, feeling badly about themselves as a result of what others are saying or doing online, taking on the stress others are experiencing and sharing on social media, dwelling on things that other people have said, feeling jealous of what other people were doing (traveling, being out at the bar, etc.), and feeling that there were high social expectations about how life should be in college. Some participants also reported that social media was stressful because it distracted them from their work.

It was primarily women (67 percent) who talked about the stress of social media. Bethany, for example, explained that seeing her friends having fun on social media makes her feel excluded and like she is missing out.

But it [social media] is a huge stressor because, not only do I see people out having fun and of course like, I’m happy for you, but then I’m like, why wasn’t I invited or, you know what I mean? Or then I’m like, oh, well I don’t have money to go to Europe, you know when everyone else is studying abroad. . . . Because then it makes me think that, you know, I’m not as cool cause I’m not going and doing all these fun things, you know. And so . . . it’s definitely a downer on my self-esteem, which causes stress.

Many of the women talked about how social media invited comparison, and they described pressure to live up to an expectation of the “college experience” as a fun and



exciting time that includes travel, parties, and a sense of adventure. For most of these participants, their day-to-day lives did not live up to these expectations, and spending time on social media seemed to cause a lot of stress and self-doubt.

## **Emotional and Physical Effects of Stress**

Students defined stress in terms of how it made them feel physically and emotionally. Overall, participants reported experiencing a total of 32 physical symptoms and 24 psychological symptoms during interviews. The most common physical symptom was muscle tension throughout the body (most commonly in the neck, shoulders, and back). Other symptoms frequently mentioned were shaking or fidgeting, headaches, stomachaches, increased heart rate, sweating, fatigue, nausea, feeling anxious, pressure, stuttering, and stress hives. Some students explained their stress in very brief terms, but others were more descriptive. Nicole, for example, explained in detail how she experienced stress:

Running thoughts. I have described it before as you have a clogged sink but you turn the faucet on full blast. You know? You don't have the capacity to even deal with the thoughts that might already be there. You're already blocked up and then you start all of a sudden gushing everything in and then it starts pouring out. And when it's pouring out that's really when the stress starts to manifest and you start feeling ill. Cause there's a capacity you can take but if you can't drain it, you'll flood.

Nicole clearly articulated feeling flooded by stress. Most students described this phenomenon more generally as feeling overwhelmed and panicky about all they had to do, and it was a strong theme that emerged across the sample.

## **Stress Management Strategies**

The two most common strategies students used for managing stress were exercising and talking or spending time with friends or family. Men (62 percent) were more likely to report exercising to relieve stress. Women (71 percent) were more likely to report talking or spending time with a friend or family member. Other stress management strategies included listening to music, playing video games, reading, watching Netflix, stress eating, taking a nap, and putting everything else aside to face the stressor head on.

### *Exercise*

Students reported engaging in a variety of physical activities, including running, resistance training, walking, and yoga. Of these, the most common were running or walking. Many reported that exercise helped distract them from the stress they were experiencing. Others explained that exercising made them feel either relaxed or too exhausted to stress about anything. Timothy, for example, explained:

Well, I go running. That helps. I'll run a few miles. I mean, it keeps the body healthy and all that and whatnot. But, running really helps reduce the tension in my muscles I feel at times. So, after running I'll feel tired but I'll still feel really relaxed and my head is clear and all that stuff. . . . It's something I really try to hammer into my schedule so that once I am stressed, the first thing that comes to my mind is, I'll just go running instead of binge eating or chain smoking.

Most students said they liked to exercise alone and that they engaged in exercise as a way to distance themselves from the "norm" in their lives. By removing themselves from the normal routine of classes, work, and socializing, students were able to get away from the source of the stress and take a break from thinking about it.

### *Talking With Friends and Family*

The second most common stress reliever reported was talking or spending time with friends and family members. Many said that when they felt very stressed out they called someone close to them or spent time with family or friends. When hanging out with friends, students talked about spending time indoors watching movies or going out to eat or drink. Zach, for example, explained that spending time with friends is usually his first choice in dealing with stress:

Mostly, though, I just hang out with my friends. . . . I would say hanging out with my friends is pretty good because it takes my mind off of work, it gives me other things to focus on. Less practical, I suppose, more social, but I enjoy their company. There's lots of intellectual discussions, I'm still active, we're going out and doing things. So, that's a pretty good one.

Students who mentioned talking on the phone with friends or family usually preferred to call a parent, sibling, grandparent, or their significant other. In some cases, they would combine a phone call with things like going for a walk or a drive. For many, talking about their stress, or even something completely different, to someone close to them resulted in feeling more relaxed.

## **Understanding Stress through Narratives**

During individual interviews, we asked students to talk about a time recently when they felt stressed out and describe what that experience was like. The goal was to elicit a story, or narrative, from each student. The most frequent topic of stress narratives was schoolwork and exams, followed by finances, family, work, and social life. Generally, the narrative accounts mirrored data presented in the earlier sections on physical and emotional effects. However, the way students talked about managing stress in narrative accounts differed from responses to direct questions presented earlier. A strong theme of escape emerged from narrative data. Although some students reported using stress management strategies reported earlier (e.g., exercise, talking to a friend), in their stress

narratives, most students talked about a strong desire to escape their stress and/or be alone. Students also tended to present themselves as vulnerable protagonists who were dealing with situations completely out of their control.

Lindsey, for example, could not afford a textbook, which was making it difficult for her to finish a class assignment. Her narrative began with a description of her intensifying stress over the textbook and then shifted to her stress over relying on her boyfriend for money.

It's been that point of the summer where I'm just waiting for my financial aid day to come in so I can pay for my summer classes. So, I've got like ten dollars in my bank account, and it was a couple weeks ago where I was just stressed to the point of just crying when I was with my boyfriend. And I didn't have money to pay for this textbook that I needed for class. And I had an assignment due for the textbook and I was just pretty much shut down. I mean, I remember I just started getting my things and I wanted to go home 'cause I just wanted to just be on the road, be back at my apartment where I just like, freak out by myself. And it was just one of those things where stress, that stress of not being able to get the textbook, made me just want to kind of run away from the situation. I just wanted to be by myself. But, when I was getting my things together, my boyfriend actually came in and he told me that he transferred money to my bank account, which was two hundred dollars, so I could buy my books for class, which stressed me out even more because I was like, how am I gonna pay him back? Which, of course, he told me not to but, I think that was just one of the most recent situations where I was just really stressed out trying to figure out how I'm gonna get this book.

Lindsey describes feeling "shut down" in the face of her stress and wanting to run away and be alone so she could "freak out" by herself.

Other students did not explicitly talk about wanting to run away or be alone, but described situations where they distanced themselves from the stressful situation to calm down. Jared, for example, explained how he felt and reacted when he realized his hours were reduced drastically at work:

It was pretty stressful. I was pretty upset because I wanted more hours and I feel like I wasn't being given a good shot at getting more hours and that was pretty stressful. I mean, my body started shaking a bit and my mind was just out of place. One thing I did after I got off work, I took a drive down to [a nearby town] and drove around listening to country music, since I like country music. . . . [The stress] started to go down a bit because I was listening to music I love, but also I was looking at some beautiful parts of [the city] that I hadn't seen before 'cause [it] is beautiful since it's very foresty. So, it's just beautiful to drive out there.

Similar to Lindsey's narrative above, Jared began by focusing on the physical and emotional effects of his stress and then shifted to talk about how he took a drive alone in a nearby town, where the beautiful scenery and his favorite music took his mind off the stressful situation. These two example narratives reflect the prominent theme of escape from a stressful situation that emerged across the sample.

## **Knowledge and Use of Campus Resources**

The university counseling center offers a range of resources to help students manage stress, including support groups, individual counseling, a stress relief technology program, and a plethora of information about how to recognize and manage stress. Despite efforts by campus wellness staff to publicize these resources designed to help students manage stress, only half of students interviewed were aware of them. Only 20 percent of students (all women) reported using campus resources for stress management. These women had all participated in short term individual or group counseling at the campus counseling center; only one participant was still attending counseling at the time of the interview. Although these few students felt that campus counseling had helped them in the past, they articulated a variety of reasons for no longer participating, including that counseling was not helpful enough for what they were going through, the information/advice provided in counseling was little more than common sense, feeling uncomfortable talking to a stranger, feeling concerned about friends and family finding out they were in counseling, and feeling like they did not want to confront their stress. Most students who knew about campus resources for stress management said they would not use them because they wanted to handle stress alone.

Zach is an example of a student who prefers to manage stress alone. He sees campus as a place to focus on work and home as a space where he can deal with his stress:

I've probably seen some presentations or something that were given in the engineering department about stress. But that was not really a choice. That was because it was given in a class. If it's got anything to do with campus I'm here because I'm working. Pretty much all of my stress management is done at home. I'm going to relax as far away from anything with the [university] logo as possible.

Because Zach sees campus as a source of stress, he wants to get away from campus to relax and manage his stress. He was not alone in expressing this sentiment. One of the biggest stressors reported by students was classwork, which meant that campus represented a site of stress for them. For many, escaping stress meant spending as much time off campus as possible.

The desire to handle stress alone emerged in many student stress narratives. For example, Brian said, "I've always kind of been the person that, I don't really seek help when I should probably ask for it. But that's also just because I feel like, with the way I've been brought up, life is never really that bad. You can get through things." Because Brian

saw himself as an independent person who can handle things on his own, he did not feel the need to participate in any programs or resources for stress management. Another participant, Paul, similarly said, "I don't know. I guess it's some ego thing. It's like, I don't need to admit I need help with anything." One student, Sarah, explained that she used to say she didn't seek help for stress management because she did not have enough time. Then she added, "Now that I'm talking about it, I think it was just because I didn't want to put myself in that situation of just like, having to discuss it with people that I didn't really know." These examples reveal the difficulty students may have admitting they need help with stress and seeking it out. This barrier to service provision is compounded by the desire of many students to escape the site of their stress, which may include the campus where these stress management resources are located.

### **Implications for Anthropology Classes**

For students dealing with chronic stress punctuated by periods of heightened stress over exams, grades, unexpected costs they cannot afford, competing demands on their time, and social pressure to live up to what their friends are doing and the "college life" in general, focusing on academics can be challenging. Students bring their life experiences into the classroom, and college instructors have an opportunity to make learning relevant by connecting course material with what students are experiencing in their everyday lives. To do this, college instructors must first understand what students are bringing into the classroom that may either inhibit or enhance learning. Since students nationwide are reporting that stress affects their ability to focus on school, having insight into how students experience and manage stress, as well as what triggers it, can inform how instructors design and manage classes to improve student learning. In particular, anthropology as a discipline lends itself to introspection, discussion, reflection, and analysis of human experiences. Spencer (2011) argues that emotional reflexivity is crucial for learning fieldwork and engaging deeply with ethnography. She writes, "Articulating emotions as part of the lived experience of research, learning and teaching can offer insights into the encounters not only of fieldwork but those of the classroom too – as ethnographic encounters" (2011, 70). Teaching students to apply anthropological methods and analytic lenses to the day-to-day stress they and their peers experience could be a valuable learning exercise as well as providing a safe space for talking about their stress.

Most students in our study were unaware of campus resources for stress management and/or unwilling to use them. Not only were students uncomfortable with the idea of seeking help for stress, most wanted to escape the site of their stress, which included campus. It is important to note that just because we found a strong tendency among our small research sample to avoid campus resources does not mean these resources were not valuable for the student population at large. Rather, our study suggests a need for alternative pathways to the campus-sponsored stress management programs, and we suggest the anthropology classroom might be one of those alternative pathways.

Reflecting on stress and stress management practices as part of teaching and learning about ethnography and fieldwork can be a fruitful exercise in both applied and more traditional anthropology classes. This section presents ideas for integrating stress-related reflection, discussion, and management into various types of anthropology classes based on the authors' teaching experiences.

### *Career Preparation in Applied Anthropology*

Applied anthropology classes are generally geared toward putting anthropology to work to solve real-world problems in local, national, and international spheres. Students also learn about social norms of professional work settings and how to operate within the context of deadlines, budget constraints, and interdisciplinary teams. Skills students need to succeed in the professional world include flexibility, problem-solving, effective communication, time management, and goal setting, to name a few. Taylor teaches a cultural applied anthropology class for undergraduate and graduate students every year that introduces career options, including program evaluation, user research, and marketing/consumer research, in a variety of settings, such as non-profits, corporations, NGOs, and educational and governmental organizations (Denny and Sunderland 2014; Ladner 2014; Nolan 2013, 2017). The curriculum emphasizes skills needed for these careers as well as strategies for understanding and fitting into a variety of workplace cultures.

As preparation for the class activities and assignments described below, Taylor weaves discussion of the unique skills that anthropologists contribute to various career options and workplace settings into each unit throughout the semester. Examples of such skills include the following: see the big picture; understand the cultural implications of plans, proposals, and changes; appreciate the perspective of others and capture their stories; get at what people cannot say through observation; readily adapt to new situations and change; understand what is going on between people (group or organizational dynamics); and assimilate large amounts of information quickly. The purpose of this ongoing exercise is to prepare students to articulate to potential employers what they bring to the table as anthropologists. Those who seek jobs related to their degree in anthropology will likely compete with applicants who have degrees in more publicly recognizable disciplines, such as sociology or psychology, for jobs as a researcher, qualitative analyst, or program advisor. That is, potential employers are more likely to know about psychology or sociology than anthropology, which people who are unfamiliar with the discipline often reduce to archaeology. Students learn about anthropological workplace skills for each unit through instructor lectures, guest lectures by local practicing anthropologists, and course readings (e.g., Nolan 2013, 2017). They are required to keep a journal of anthropological skills and how they apply to career options and workplace settings throughout the semester, which enables them to engage in wrap-up discussions about anthropological skills for each unit with little guidance from the instructor. At the end of the semester, students must incorporate the appropriate

anthropological skills into their cover letter and résumé in the final job application assignment.

An applied or practicing anthropology curriculum designed to prepare students for the workplace would ideally provide opportunities for students to reflect on how they experience and manage stress as well as how to anticipate problems and find solutions. In the applied anthropology class taught by Taylor, students practice troubleshooting everyday workplace stressors involving teamwork, ethics, deadlines, communication, office politics, and responding to client needs to teach the process of taking solutions-oriented approaches when faced with challenges. During class, Taylor presents students with brief scenarios based on her decade of experience in various research and administrative roles. Examples include the following: "Another member of your project team is behaving passive aggressively toward you in meetings (e.g., taking credit for your ideas, rolling his/her eyes when you talk, whispering to colleagues during your presentations). How would you handle this?"; "Your boss calls you in to express concern about your work performance. How would you respond?"; "You are asked to complete a task that requires skills outside of your expertise. What would you do?"; "You are the only qualitative analyst on a mixed methods project team, and the three quantitative analysts on the team are ignoring your input. How would you handle that?"

Students form small groups of three or four and discuss potential solutions for the problems presented within their groups, including the strengths and weaknesses of each potential solution and which anthropological skills they could apply to the problem. Then, each group takes turns sharing their ideas with the whole class, and other class members are encouraged to ask questions and provide feedback. This often leads to students (and the instructor) sharing scenarios of real life work challenges they have faced, including lessons learned. Students receive a participation grade for their engagement in these in-class exercises. Many students have never encountered these types of challenges in a workplace setting, and the prospect of having to navigate such issues is stressful. Giving students a low-stakes environment in which to talk about how they would approach solutions to problems helps ease their stress and provides them with some tools for successfully navigating common workplace issues.

Students in the class, many of whom are seniors and preparing to graduate, have often never written a résumé or cover letter. Most have no idea where to look for professional jobs or what they might even be qualified to do. The fear of not knowing how to obtain a professional job coupled with the pressure to find immediate employment after college emerges as a major stressor for students every year. Taylor encourages students to share their fears and concerns about this process during a class discussion when she introduces the assignment and reviews expectations and the grading rubric. It quickly becomes clear during this discussion that their stress stems from a lack of information about how to navigate the process, including where to look for jobs, how to write a résumé and cover letter, how to handle an interview, and how to manage

the details of interpersonal communication all along the way. Taylor provides students with a brief resource guide that lists job titles (e.g., program/qualitative analyst, program advisor, strategy consultant, research assistant/associate, social scientist, program evaluator), websites where they can look for jobs (e.g., Indeed.com, SimplyHired.com, LinkedIn, local area staffing agencies, American Evaluation Association jobs page, USA Jobs, Idealist.org), and tips for standing out as a job candidate (e.g., seek out an internship for professional experience; take an ethnographic or qualitative methods class to prepare for research positions; take statistics to be able to work effectively with quantitative researchers on mixed-methods projects; take advantage of your university's writing center to become a better writer). Information for this list comes from class readings, practicing anthropologists who guest lecture, and Taylor's own professional experience.

At the end of the semester, students are required to identify a job or internship for which they are qualified and write a cover letter and résumé tailored for the position. They participate in a brief job interview and receive immediate feedback on their performance as the final exam. They are required in their job application materials and interview to make a strong case for how, as an anthropologist, they are qualified for the job. They use Taylor's job resource guide along with their anthropological skills journal to prepare for and complete this final assignment. Students report feeling a lot of angst as they develop the final job application materials and prepare for the mock interview. Some are so nervous during the interview that their voices and hands shake or they sweat profusely. Afterward, students report feeling much more confident about their ability find and apply for a job and, most importantly, to articulate their qualifications as an anthropologist to potential employers.

### *Time Management*

Since time management is a major stressor for students, explicitly teaching how to work backward from project and test deadlines to set milestone goals can be helpful as well. This is not a skill unique to anthropology, but is important for students' career success nonetheless. Time management is one of the most important skills students will need throughout their lives and especially in the workplace, making it an essential component of an applied anthropology curriculum. In the applied anthropology class Taylor teaches annually, she demonstrates how to work backward from a timeline and has students practice the process with deadlines on the syllabus. Taylor teaches this skill to graduate students she advises as well. In the first semester, for example, she shows students how to work backward from a deadline to set milestone dates for proposal development, defense, and submission of paperwork to the graduate college. For each milestone date, Taylor and her graduate students agree on an outcome in the form of a draft of whatever the student is working on for their thesis or a written progress report. By the beginning of the second year, Taylor expects her graduate advisees to lead this



planning process. The goal is to empower students to manage their time effectively to reduce stress and facilitate academic and professional success.

### *Ethnographic Reflection and Analysis*

For more traditional and theoretical cultural anthropology classes, reflections on stress can be incorporated into a unit on participant observation and/or autoethnography. Discussions about methods and the process of ethnographers situating themselves in time and place could involve reflections on sensory experiences during field research. A hands-on fieldwork activity would best facilitate such a reflection. Students could do small-scale participant observation activities related to stress where their field notes include reflections on their own experiences. More specifically, as part of a unit or discussion on autoethnography, students could do small-scale autoethnography exercises on topics relevant to their lives, including stress. For example, the instructor could provide students with a reflection prompt asking them to identify and discuss their major stressors, how stress makes them feel emotionally and physically, and strategies they use to manage stress. The exercise could be grounded within a narrative approach that requires students to discuss a recent stress-related experience in terms of the story (description of what happened), experience (how they felt about or perceived the experience), and meaning (how they made sense of the experience). We teach anthropology students to look inward and explore their own experiences as researchers as well as situate themselves within their ethnographic community. Providing space for discussion and small-scale hands on ethnographic exercises could be one way for students to explore and reflect on their experiences with stress within a broader context of the human experience.

For example, social media emerged as a major stressor for the students in our study. One idea for a reflective assignment to help students tune into the social and emotional impacts of their social media use is a digital ethnographic research project. Such a project could involve students keeping an ethnographic journal for a period where they record daily observations about their social media use as well as observations of how people interact on the sites. Information recorded in journals could include: how much time they spend on social media, what kinds of content gets the most and fewest likes, themes to people's posts and captions, how they feel when they get/don't get likes or comments on their posts, and how they feel when they are scrolling through other people's posts. Additionally, students could explore the broader forces that structure these emotional impacts through a literature review. This would provide a socio-economic context for understanding their individual experiences with social media. Students could analyze their journal entries for emergent themes and incorporate analysis of extant research on broader forces that shape emotional experiences with social media to produce a digital project. This assignment could even be expanded to include interviews with peers as part of a mini-ethnography project, as well.

In all of Taylor's cultural anthropology classes, students are required to apply what they are learning by engaging in original research. This most often takes the form of a mini-ethnography project that guides students through the process of developing a topic and research questions, gathering data using interviews and participant observation, analyzing the data, and presenting findings in a written paper and/or oral presentation. Stress as a research focus is relevant to class topics across cultural, medical, and linguistic anthropology. Anthropology educators have emphasized the importance of students participating in fieldwork in order to fully engage in and understand ethnography. "What better way to understand how anthropologists do anthropology than envisioning how they themselves would ethnographically investigate an aspect of their own society or culture, or, in many cases, that of another" (Riviere 2014, 16). Investigating stress within their own community, whether that is fellow college students, co-workers, or family members, and within themselves can be a useful analytic lens for personally connecting to and understanding an aspect of their own culture.

It is evident that students are experiencing and managing stress in diverse ways. As they take on additional responsibilities throughout their college career, stress can become increasingly overwhelming, making students feel vulnerable and unable to deal with situations that feel out of their control. Incorporating knowledge of how students experience stress into anthropology classrooms may allow educators to better help students manage their stress without feeling the additional stress of talking with a stranger or admitting that they need help. Using some of the aforementioned activities in the classroom, such as teaching students how to prepare for a chosen career field, allowing time to reflect on how they experience different situations, or even conducting a mini-ethnography project, could provide alternative pathways for helping students process and manage stress. Such activities can be incorporated to align with course objectives while helping students become more self-aware about their own stress as they navigate greater independence and responsibility in their own lives.

#### *Understanding and Responding to Structural Causes of Stress*

Teaching students to be self-aware and providing a space for thinking through and practicing problem-solving strategies is important; however, it is equally important to guide students in understanding the structural conditions that cause their stress, such as public disinvestment of higher education resulting in increased costs and student loan burdens. These topics could also be the focus of student reflective assignments or research projects similar to those described earlier to help students understand the connections between individual experiences and structural conditions as they relate to the complexities of higher education.

Incorporating into the curriculum recent critical anthropological work on the topic, including articles and chapters from the SfAA Issues in Higher Education TIG referenced earlier (Foster 2017; Foster, Graham, and Donaldson 2018), could be an

effective tool for both organizing discussion and empowering students and faculty. Such articles take a critical, solutions-oriented approach to addressing seemingly overwhelming and complex structural issues facing higher education, including gender and race inequalities, economic impacts of policy on faculty and students, the role of institutional leadership and politics in policy-making, and the need for meaningful engagement of diverse students and faculty across disciplines. This type of anthropological literature can provide guidance for addressing structural conditions that negatively affect students. Further, the TIG offers a venue for faculty and graduate students to engage in conversation and participate in efforts to enact change.

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