

VITAL TOPICS FORUM

Cultivating a Socially Conscious, Activist, and Inclusive Forensic Anthropology

Barriers to entry and success in forensic anthropology

Sean D. Tallman^{1,2}  | Rebecca L. George³  | A. Ja'net Baide⁴ |
 Fatimah A. Bouderdaben⁵ | Alba E. Craig⁶ | Sydney S. Garcia⁷  | Matthew C. Go⁸  |
 Jesse R. Goliath⁹  | Elizabeth Miller¹⁰ | Marin A. Pilloud¹¹ 

¹Department of Anatomy & Neurobiology, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, MA 02118²Department of Anthropology, Boston University, Boston, MA 02215³Department of Anthropology & Sociology, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC 28723⁴Department of Anthropology, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112⁵Department of Anthropology, Texas State University San Marcos, San Marcos, TX 78666⁶Department of Human Biology, University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN 46227⁷SNA International, supporting the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, HI 96853⁸SNA International, supporting the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, HI 96853⁹Department of Anthropology and Middle Eastern Cultures, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS 39762¹⁰Department of Anthropology, California State University, Los Angeles, CA 90032¹¹Department of Anthropology, University of Nevada, Reno, NV 89557

Correspondence

Sean D. Tallman, Boston University School of Medicine, Department of Anatomy & Neurobiology, 72 E. Concord St. L1004, Boston, MA 02118.

Email: sean.tallman@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

As with all scientific and academic disciplines, forensic anthropology upholds numerous barriers to entry and challenges to retention. Due to the field's homogeneity, lack of self-criticality, and maintenance of the status quo, many of these barriers remain unchecked, under-discussed, and ultimately unchallenged. For example, the majority of nondisabled, neurotypical, cisgender, heterosexual white practitioners have faced relatively few barriers to success compared to those from systematically excluded groups. Thus, many may be wholly unaware of the inequitable challenges faced by individuals with marginalized identities, no matter how well-intentioned individuals from the majority may be. Moreover, many who have faced—or posed—barriers often consider such challenges to be an inherent and expected aspect that comes with the territory of participating in a highly competitive field like forensic anthropology. With their bereavements unrecorded, those that elect to leave the field due to the emotional and psychological stresses associated with academic hazing, harassment, discrimination, and ongoing marginalization are deemed inadequate by the remaining majority simply because they were unable to withstand the challenges. Accordingly, the remaining majority neglects to consider the inequitable structures that *failed* those that left and, instead, they rationalize attrition based on their personal challenges that they over-

came. This problematic framing—that normalizes barriers and fails to address inequitable challenges while situating those that leave as “shedding the weak”—has led to uninformed professionals in positions of power, as well as superficial approaches to improving diversity, equity, and inclusion. Without understanding the *lived experiences* of individuals from systematically excluded groups and the barriers to entry and success that they face, forensic anthropology will continue to marginalize, other, and expunge those who do not fit the majority mold.

This piece, coauthored by ten anthropologists who inhabit diverse and intersectional identities from systematically excluded groups, highlights some of the major barriers to success that we have faced throughout our educational and professional experiences. We contend that positionality is important in forensic anthropology as it both enables and constrains individual successes and, for many of us, informs our scholarship, pedagogy, and practice. That is, we cannot divorce our identities from our engagement with (forensic) anthropology, nor should we try, and this confers significant benefits to the field. We started this process by each writing personal narratives on the barriers that we have encountered throughout our forensic anthropology trajectories. Subsequently, we met virtually on several occasions to discuss these experiences, which identified twelve thematic barriers. While in no way exhaustive or solely restricted to forensic

anthropology, the barriers are presented as brief encyclopedia-style entries that have direct relevance to forensic anthropology membership and practice. Importantly, each barrier was authored by an individual or individuals who identify as marginalized scholars and/or have been personally impacted by inequitable challenges. Additionally, the encyclopedia-style entries are augmented with personal testimonies from numerous people in the field of forensic anthropology that underscore specific lived experiences. These humanizing personal experiences uniquely highlight how students and professionals in forensic anthropology—as multifaceted individuals—confront and navigate challenges that are often hidden to the majority. Further, we conclude with actionable recommendations to help mitigate structural barriers in the field.

We hope that people who engage with this work will reflect on the challenges faced by their colleagues and students who are from systematically excluded groups and how the culture of forensic anthropology—with these barriers baked in—has negatively impacted the discipline by greatly limiting the participation of marginalized scholars. Relatedly, we hope that readers and forensic anthropology as a whole self-reflect on how individual and collective behaviors, norms, and culture contribute to inequitable challenges and attrition and make a commitment to correct course. It should be noted that this piece captures only the perspectives of those who are in forensic anthropology, and therefore it does not shed light on how our culture and systems have specifically failed those that left the field.

ACADEMIC GENEALOGY AND ELITISM

The discipline of forensic anthropology is incredibly small, which creates opportunity for growth inhibition, cronyism, favoritism, and partiality. This situation can lead to biases based on one's academic genealogy, which includes their institution of matriculation and academic adviser. Opinions may be formed about an individual based on this genealogy, such as assumptions about their knowledge base, abilities, training, biases, and potential success in the field. Consequently, these assumptions can create or inhibit opportunities for individuals.

A specific example where this genealogical preference can be seen is in letters of recommendation. Letters from certain individuals may be weighted more heavily based on perceived reputation. In some cases, letters from a small group of individuals are required in applications. For example, to apply to become a member of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS)—the primary and largest professional organization for forensic scientists in the United States, wherein anthropology is one of eleven disciplines or “sections”—one needs to submit a letter of recommendation from a current member or fellow. The same is true to apply to sit for the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA) certification exam, where the applicant needs to acquire three letters of recommendation from two institutions, one of which needs to come from a diplomate of the ABFA. Such requirements create a barrier to entry if one simply does not know or have access to the “right people.”

Further, the biases of academic genealogy and elitism within the discipline can be seen played out at the annual scientific meeting of the AAFS, where certain universities and individuals tend to be celebrated over others. This recognition can be formal, in the form of awards, recognition, and advancement. However, it is also generally expected that one would extoll adulations in an informal setting, which can extend to a notion of performative informality and highlight the myth of meritocracy (Leighton 2020). It is not merely enough to be an excellent scholar; one must also go to the “right schools,” know the “right people,” and be able to perform an informal relationship with other scholars, colleagues, and peers. Moreover, at the AAFS conference, the established senior fellows of the Anthropology Section often refer to themselves as the “silverbacks,” thereby insinuating their dominance in the discipline. It is expected that these disciplinary elders receive deferential treatment based on their standing and potential influence on one's career. These same individuals are often the most vocal about maintaining the status quo to defend their standing and power within the discipline. This dynamic is difficult to navigate for the uninitiated and creates a toxic culture that bars people from entry or pushes them out.

Moreover, the “right schools” generally do not include community colleges, which are frequently looked down on or dismissed entirely in academic spheres, in part because forensic anthropology is not commonly taught at the community college level and few forensic anthropologists are employed by community colleges. Yet, community colleges are vital for the inclusion of nontraditional and first-generation students in academia, in addition to those who cannot afford a more traditional university or college experience. For those who do not grow up with family members who went to college, community colleges provide a critical link to higher education and academia. First-generation college students are statistically more likely to attend community colleges compared to non-first-generation college students (Cataldi, Bennet, and Chen 2018). Further, for students who need to work to support others, community colleges provide quality education with lower tuition, increased flexibility (e.g., night classes, hybrid classes), and innovative teaching strategies to accommodate a truly diverse student body. Additionally, community colleges offer a valid path to academic employment and may be preferable over traditional universities due to the lack of jobs at seemingly more prestigious research universities and colleges, the ability to positively impact a diverse student body, and the desire to maintain a healthy work/life balance.

For many of us, it is easy to take for granted the knowledge or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Cooper, Cala, and Brownell 2021; Tilbrook and Shifrer 2022) to navigate academic contexts; study; apply to graduate programs, jobs, scholarships, or grants; and ascend the academic/professional ladder. Some of this knowledge may be tacitly or explicitly bestowed by family members who preceded us in college and graduate school. However, for first-generation college students, who make up one-third of postsecondary education in the United States (Skomsvold 2015), much of this knowledge is gained through experience, trial and error, and peer mentorships. Moreover, many STEM

careers are largely inaccessible to first-generation college students (Bettencourt et al. 2020).

Testimonials

“I was a first-generation college student who attended community college and started my anthropology career as a community college adjunct. Despite the important role that community college played in exposing me to four-field anthropology, archaeological field schools, and impactful and inspiring teaching, I was frequently told to omit my AA degree on my CV and online presence since, according to higher-ups in forensic anthropology (who did not go to community college), only graduate degrees mattered. Now, as a professor at an elite-facing institution in a university-rich area, I rarely, if ever, encounter another professor who attended community college, or who presents community college as a career option to students. In the shadow of an ivy league university, it’s easy to feel judged about having attended state schools, let alone a community college. This is unfortunate, as community colleges play a critical role in diversifying academia broadly and anthropology specifically due to their ability to reach nontraditional, underrepresented, and undeclared students. I now proudly include my AA degree on my CV, websites, and presentations since it was vital to my educational and career paths, and I believe it’s important for others to see that.”—Sean D. Tallman

“I obtained my MA and PhD in bioarchaeology/paleopathology from universities with no forensic anthropology programs. To many, that meant I should not practice forensic anthropology despite my subsequent informal internship with one of the greats in our field. Before retirement my graduate students also suffered from my academic genealogy, finding it difficult to obtain admission into PhD programs despite their stellar academic achievements and graduate work in the field of forensic anthropology through internships at a very busy medical examiner’s office.”—Beth Miller

AGE AND AGEISM

Ageism manifests in many ways in forensic anthropology. Students—both undergraduate and graduate—are often considered too young and inexperienced to meaningfully contribute to research and broader discussions in forensic anthropology. For example, it was not until 2018 that the Anthropology Section of the AAFS began allowing undergraduate student members. This change occurred after a protracted discussion, wherein opponents to the inclusion of undergraduate students—many of them “silverbacks”—argued that the AAFS should serve the needs of established professionals primarily and graduate students secondarily. While undergraduate and graduate students are now allowed to join the AAFS as student members, they cannot vote on important topics that will affect their involvement. In fact, members of the AAFS cannot vote until they are full members—that is, after progressing through the “student,” “trainee,” and “associate member”

categories, which requires service to and regular attendance at the AAFS annual meeting. This highly stratified system and accompanying voter rights favors older members, as it takes years to advance through the academy. Additionally, the AAFS does not offer paths for students to participate in leadership or organizational positions, such as student liaisons with the Board of Directors (BoD) or with annual conference preparation. While the Anthropology Section of the AAFS recently implemented a student liaison position to amplify student voices and issues within the section, the entire academy has not equally embraced the role of students.

However, students represent the future of the field and are often more knowledgeable than older individuals about pressing issues related to social justice, societal attitudes, and innovative research ideas—topics that are necessary for the future relevance of forensic anthropology. Relatedly, the lack of formal mentorship programs in forensic anthropology further amplifies the disparity in perceived knowledge and experience between students and professionals. Without formal mentorships, students are obligated to navigate the complexities of the field on their own and with their peers, as has been done in previous generations of forensic anthropologists. Moreover, Winburn, Tallman, et al. (2022) found that the insecurities and anxieties that may plague the younger generation of forensic anthropologists (students and professionals alike) are deemed, problematically, as negative mentee attributes by older mentors, yet nothing is done to mitigate anxieties that originate from individually navigating the complexities of the field.

Additionally, older forensic anthropologists in the AAFS may believe that their age excuses them from understanding the needs of the younger generation and how their behaviors contradict diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. This aloofness and maintenance of the status quo enables older members to retain racist, homophobic, and discriminatory perspectives. Such perspectives can and do lead to the harassment of, primarily, younger women and those from systematically excluded groups at the AAFS annual scientific meeting, in the field, and in educational programs. Conversely, nontraditional students who are older are often overlooked for opportunities because of age expectations in academia (i.e., students are generally young). Similarly, older individuals who complete their graduate degrees are often overlooked for tenure-track assistant professor positions because they are deemed too old by search committees (McKee 2014).

Testimonial

“When I started studying for my undergraduate degree in anthropology, I was sixteen years old, and although for some (and for me, in particular) youth was an advantage, others did not see it the same way. I remember that our osteology and forensic anthropology classes would go to the Institute of Forensic Sciences to see forensic cases; however, I could not attend since I was ‘too young to enter the autopsy suite.’ Likewise, as a graduate student, I have experienced moments where, although I have forensic anthropology knowledge, people doubt my abilities in the discipline (including forensic recruitment agencies)

because I am young. The truth is that as a very young student, one experiences many challenges like these, and sometimes they fill us with anxiety and cause us to question our ability to achieve what we want in the discipline. Certainly, there is still a lot of work to be done, but I think that discussing these issues in academia and in other forums is important for emerging anthropologists, for the community, and the discipline itself.”—Meisshialette Ortiz

DISABILITY AND ABLEISM

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, amended in 2008, and provides “a clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities.” The act defines “disability” as: (a) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual; (b) a record of such an impairment; or (c) being regarded as having such an impairment. Despite this, the AAFS, and forensic anthropology in general, remains severely ableist. While the AAFS fulfills the letter of the law in finding venues for the meetings, it is often a case of “separate but equal” in application. For example, at numerous annual meeting convention centers, a person with limited mobility must travel between floors and long distances to access meeting rooms. The time spent in transit between rooms on different floors is significantly greater than for those who do not require assistive mobility devices. Generally, there is no designated handicapped seating in the meeting rooms, as the chairs are attached and not designed with those with limited mobility in mind, the aisles are narrow, and access to the microphones during question-and-answer periods are limited or nonexistent. The platforms for speakers at the AAFS meetings are usually raised with stairs, often without even a handrail for assistance. The computers available for attendee use are frequently on standing desks or podiums, limiting access to those using wheelchairs and other assistive mobility devices. The cafes and eating establishments in most convention centers are crowded and difficult to navigate with any type of assistive mobility device. While some accommodations may be requested for the meetings, such as headphones for the hearing impaired, they frequently are insufficient for the needs of the disabled and meet only the minimal standards of the ADA.

In addition to the difficulties associated with attending the annual AAFS meetings, disability is seen as an insurmountable barrier to actively pursuing work within forensic anthropology. Mobility issues are seen to prohibit entry into the discipline because of the fieldwork often required, along with the physical difficulties of working in an autopsy setting while using an assistive device. Hearing and sight disabilities require either assistive devices or people such as interpreters to be present, thereby “limiting” the impaired individual in their career choice. Even though there are numerous accommodations for both individuals and offices for most disabilities, the forensic anthropology community seems set in believing that disability equates with an inability to perform forensic anthropological analyses. Finally, many of the individual members of the forensic anthropology community seem to

view disability as either contagious or frightening and assume anyone requiring assistive devices for mobility, sight, hearing, or other conditions are unable to use their brains and one or more of their body parts. As a result, they often avoid all interaction with the disabled.

Testimonials

“I am a white, neurodiverse, LGBTQ+ female forensic anthropologist who received her MA and PhD in bioarchaeology, thus I check many of the boxes for Diversity and Inclusion. While all of the above have led to discrimination against me in forensic anthropology (along with a major weight bias in the field!), none are as profound as the ableism I have experienced since my cancer diagnosis and subsequent mobility assistance requirements. The AAFS meetings in general and the Anthropology Section in particular are ableistic and not at all friendly to those requiring mobility assistance devices. At every meeting I am relegated to the back of the lecture room because of the narrowness of the aisles (between chairs and between sections). To speak during Q&A periods I have to yell from the back of the room because I am unable to access the microphone. Because of the crowding in the meeting rooms my view of presenters and slide presentations is often obscured by the standing-room crowd. At some meetings I have been unable to even enter a small meeting room because of the size of the doors or the placement of furniture so close to the doors they do not open fully. I often have to move chairs out of the way to find space for a wheelchair or mobility scooter. I cannot access the stage at all, since no ramps are present; were I to chair or moderate a session, I would be unable to do so from the podium. Because of these factors, I have given only poster presentations since 2017. Meeting others for lunch generally involves me leaving a lecture ten to fifteen minutes early to access the few and far between elevators in convention centers, which requires extra time to move between floors. It also generally involves someone else getting my food and bringing it to me as the eateries are crowded, small, and do not allow manipulation of assistive devices. Finally, from the first time I appeared in a wheelchair I was asked by other forensic anthropologists when I would be retiring under the assumption that requiring mobility assistance meant I could no longer do my job. In an already stressful time, fighting an aggressive cancer and having to make major lifestyle changes, fighting the AAFS and other forensic anthropologists for basic accommodations made everything worse.”—Beth Miller

“Having to push for safety, accommodations, and accessibility is an obstacle no one should have to overcome in any context, yet it proves to be one of the most significant barriers many of us face while pursuing anthropology. I have struggled not insignificantly as a chronically ill, neurodivergent, queer person in this field, having to pass, mask, and conform to make others comfortable. However, none of these qualifiers have been as difficult to maneuver as have my disabilities. Since my disabilities are invisible, I find myself exhausted by trying to keep them that way, so that I am not excluded by the unfortunate majority who devalue the disabled and chronically ill. I have had my health and

safety neglected so as not to put others in an uncomfortable situation. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was put in a dangerous situation wherein I was made to work in close quarters with unmasked individuals by my supervisors, who were well aware I was immunocompromised and anxious about the day's work. Though I was assured they would ensure my safety, they made it clear that self-advocacy would be the only clear way to do so. This is only one instance, and I know that I must be comfortable with making others uncomfortable in pushing for what I and others need. It is deflating and discouraging to know that doing so may cause social obstacles that may be insurmountable in moving forward. The acquisition of accommodations or accessibility only after asking for them does not make something accessible. Rather, it adds yet another prerequisite for chronically ill and disabled folks who want to succeed in this field, forcing us to either sacrifice our own health and comfort or seem uncompromising and demanding in the face of our own well-being."—Jess Hotaling

FINANCIAL BURDENS

To practice in the field of forensic anthropology, one must complete higher education at the MA and PhD levels. So how does this affect students who are statistically disadvantaged for education attainment? Factors such as parental education and academic preparation heavily impact students' success rates in higher education. It has for some time been noted that SAT scores are more reflective of socioeconomic status and academic preparation (Baum and Flores 2011) than student potential. It is only recently, largely due to the global COVID pandemic, that many universities have begun eliminating the SAT and GRE examinations as a requirement for admission. Furthermore, first-generation college students are more likely to come from low socioeconomic status, as their parents have no college experience. These factors compound the challenges of succeeding in college for students with low-income backgrounds by increased financial barriers, little to no knowledge related to funding opportunities, and cultural differences that can lead to discrimination (see also "Academic Genealogy and Elitism"). Scholarship and grant literacy is an essential component contributing to success in graduate school of which first-generation college students often have little to no knowledge. For example, many students who navigate the Free Application for Student Federal Aid (FAFSA) application system independently are not informed of the anticipated change in identification with FAFSA to an independent student once beginning graduate studies, which leads to differences in funding opportunities beyond undergraduate studies (not to mention the complexity with the application process itself). Moreover, additional requirements in the field of forensic anthropology are advanced field techniques (e.g., archaeological field schools and forensic-focused short courses) and diversifying training by attending different learning institutions throughout your academic career, which typically entails relocating out of state, two encouraged prerequisites that pose tremendous financial barriers for students from low-income backgrounds.

Testimonials

"As a first-generation and first American Latina student who has worked from a disadvantaged background to higher education, I have overcome significant obstacles and challenges. Barriers consisted of differences in public education systems. It wasn't until I attended Baylor University (which I soon withdrew from due to financial burdens) where I learned about the field of anthropology. I felt I was very behind compared to my colleagues who were often aspiring archaeologists since childhood. Working multiple jobs to afford the opportunity of higher education was my norm. During my first semester of graduate school, I simultaneously held three positions, which was just enough to get me by. This, however, I tried to keep secret as faculty frowned upon a student who was 'not fully committed to their studies.'"—Anonymous

"The only reason I was able to attend graduate school was because I was fortunate enough to earn two assistantships, during my master's and PhD work. While that financial assistance paid for my tuition and I used student loans for living expenses, I had barely anything left over after paying rent. I did not have any family members in a position to be able to help me, so I was on my own. I experienced several consequences of struggling financially for a decade, and these included not being able to participate in an international field school. I was unaware of where to go to ask for help—or if help was even available. I remember approaching one of my beloved professors when I was in danger of losing my financial aid, and while she meant well, she also didn't know what a solution for me might be. While the barrier of not being able to attend an international field school did not ultimately affect my career (fortunately there was a local one which I attended instead), the experience reinforced the financial barriers my family had faced my entire life, and placed the checkpoints I thought I had to achieve out of reach. I'm not saying it would be easy, but what a difference it would make if field school directors committed to finding ways to cut costs to ensure that students without deep pockets could attend."—Elizabeth A. DiGangi

"I spent two years of my undergrad transient, bordering homelessness, working fifty- to sixty-hour weeks just to get by—this while taking a nineteen-credit-hour course load. Obviously, my grades plummeted. When I was able to find some stability by my junior year, it was already too late. I had lost the small scholarship I had my first semester, and my GPA was now too low to qualify for any others. Honestly, looking back I wonder if it would have been a better choice to drop out. I ended up doubling down instead. Student loans sustained me for what my still fifty-hour workweek couldn't. I missed out on a lot of opportunities in undergrad because I needed to eat and pay tuition. Study sessions, friendships, sleep. I would go from 8 a.m. to 2 a.m. nearly every day: work, school, work, homework, sleep on repeat. With my low GPA I thought I would never get into a graduate program, eventually I did, but my need to work to live didn't simply go away. Now it feels that I have the perception of being 'unreliable' and 'not dedicated' when the reality is I have to eat and the 'opportunities' of grad school do not

work on a busy schedule—especially when those opportunities aren't paid."—Anonymous

"Growing up poor as a queer nonbinary first-gen college student from a very rural town (>300) made it difficult to navigate higher education because I did not have financial support that others may have had. I had to take out student loans on my own and work outside of school to help support field projects and research. Most field schools are around US\$3,000 or more and do not include airfare. The first lesson I learnt about studying anthropology was that it is a privilege to be able to participate in field projects. Had I not had assistance from local granting agencies and financial support from my community, I would not have been able to continue with my studies."—Benjamin J. Schaefer

"While many in the discipline wish to appear to support international students and those with lesser financial resources, it is a fact that I paid approximately US\$43,000 per year for four years' tuition at my university, and it is a fact that I received minimal help from faculty in how to pay for it. (a) Working as much as my visa would allow me to, (b) financial support from family, (c) bank loans, and (d) careful navigation of credit card expenditure were only some of the strategies I employed to survive. Years after attaining my MPhil and PhD degrees in biological anthropology, I still question whether it was worth all the financial stress and struggle. I do not question whether I am lucky to have 'made it,' since so many out there end up not affording. Whether we receive education or training is (and has for a long time been) a monetary issue. Not enough academic decision-makers want to change anything about these exclusionary systems."—Michael B. C. Rivera

IMMIGRATION STATUS

In absolute terms, the United States receives more immigrants than any other nation. One in four people living in the United States is either foreign-born or is the child of an immigrant (Blau and Mackie 2017). One in six workers in the US labor force is an immigrant, with one in four in STEM occupations (American Immigration Council 2017). Three in four patents from the top ten patent-producing US universities have at least one immigrant inventor (Partnership for a New American Economy 2012), and one in four new companies are created by immigrant entrepreneurs (Blanding 2016). Additionally, foreign-born adults in the United States hold bachelor's and master's degrees at approximately the same rate as natural-born Americans and are more likely to hold doctorates or professional degrees (Olsen-Medina and Batalova 2020; Waters and Pineau 2015). While these statistics show that immigrants participate heavily in society, there is no demographic data available on immigrants within forensic anthropology, whether as students or professionals, although, anecdotally, this number is likely to be small.

There are four general immigration-status categories in the United States: citizen, resident, nonimmigrant, and undocumented immigrant. Many of the barriers faced by people wishing to enter forensic anthropology as a profession will affect those who belong to one of the latter three categories. In general, permanent residents cannot be

directly employed by the federal government (e.g., at the Department of Defense's Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency), which is the largest employer of full-time forensic anthropologists in the United States, nor by some state or local governments. Nonimmigrants legally live, study, and work in the United States on a temporary basis and must continuously renew or jump between visa types to remain in the country. Undocumented immigrants cannot legally work and risk being deported daily; there is no federal or state law that prohibits them from attending higher education, but institutions may decide to bar them from admission or reveal their status to authorities. The process for nonimmigrants and undocumented immigrants to apply for a change in status to permanent residency can be arduous and demands significant financial and social capital often unavailable to people in these categories.

Many immigrants face several forms of workplace discrimination, which can include exploitation, dangerous working conditions, wage theft, wage disparity, and physical and emotional abuse. Immigrant students may face special concerns with regards to admission, higher tuition rates, financial aid eligibility, harassment from professors and fellow students, and forced return to their home country upon graduating. Immigrants may also find their previous experiences or credentials that were obtained in a foreign country become unrecognized or belittled when brought to the United States. Anti-immigrant rhetoric can also pervade classrooms and workplaces, discouraging further participation in the field. Immigrant deaths make up a significant portion of forensic casework (e.g., unidentified US-Mexico border crossers, human trafficking), and more immigrant forensic anthropologists would provide an essential perspective and empathy to ameliorating these issues.

Testimonial

"Though I can claim an immigrant identity across three countries since birth, never had I felt more othered as an immigrant than in forensic anthropology or academia generally. When I moved to North America for college from the 'Third World,' my grades were adjusted (sc., demoted) by the school to reflect their standard, which disqualified me from entrance scholarships that I would have otherwise gotten. Don't even get me started on IELTS/TOEFL. In graduate school, I was asked in front of a class by a professor if I knew if there was a breed of hairless dog in Korea that was meant for easier consumption, assuming I was Korean (I'm not) and ate dog (I don't), this during a lecture on dietary stable isotopes. The professor realized their mistake—that I was actually from the Philippines and not Korea—and apologized, quickly followed by asking if the Philippines had a breed of hairless dog for eating. In another incident, I had prepared a spread of Filipino food for all attendees during my qualification exams (thinking it was appropriate as my dissertation proposal was on the Philippines). One professor who did not attend but came after tasted the food in front of me, immediately spat it out into a napkin, and then exclaimed, 'Absolutely not!' Aghast, I relayed the story to one of my mentors, who laughed it off and said the vomit-prone professor was hilarious. During

a proposal-writing seminar, I was asked to justify my choice to study the Philippines as a Filipino, but similar critiques were not imposed on my white American classmates studying Argentina or Brazil. Another instance during small talk at the office, locally hired workmen in Cambodia were referred to by a coworker as 'little brown men shoveling dirt.' Having come from Southeast Asia myself, I wondered if they thought the same of me, or perhaps I was not little enough nor brown enough to constitute having come from the same stock; otherwise, they surely would not have said it within my earshot. Last but not all there is, during my painful process to obtain a green card one director sympathized with me, questioning why I was having such a hard time with US immigration services when I was the 'desirable' kind of immigrant as opposed to the 'you know, rest of them.' These microaggressions ('micro' is a misnomer if you ask me) compound with systemic forces to exclude and other immigrants from the field, which, to be fair, is par for the course for anthropology anyway."—Matthew Go

LGBTQ+ CHALLENGES

Only since June 2020 have LGBTQ+ individuals been federally protected from workplace discrimination (Liptak 2020). Moreover, LGBTQ+ individuals face myriad micro- and macro-aggressions that challenge participation in the sciences compared to their non-LGBTQ+ colleagues, including harassment, career obstacles, exclusion, and devaluation that result in depression, work-related stress, insomnia, and attrition (Cech and Waidzunus 2021). In particular, LGBTQ+ scientists of color and women are the most affected by these disadvantages. Additionally, LGBTQ+ scientists report less organic mentorship opportunities due to their occurrence in overwhelmingly heteronormative educational and workplace contexts (Hughes 2018). Discipline-specific challenges to diversity further compound these issues in forensic anthropology and include limited employment opportunities, extreme competition and territorial behavior, participation in biased professional frameworks (i.e., law enforcement and military), and the field's retention of meritocracy (Tallman and Bird 2022). These challenges, while not limited to LGBTQ+ individuals, have led to 24 percent of AAFS Anthropology Section members reporting that they have experienced harassment and 42 percent reporting that they have witnessed harassment. To address some of these issues, Jon Bethard, Cate Bird, and Sean Tallman—three founding members of the AAFS Anthropology Section's Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Committee—organized an LGBTQ+ and allies' night out during the annual AAFS meetings from 2017 to 2020 to foster community, initiate dialogs, and break down social barriers. While these events were well attended by all levels of AAFS membership, including by past and future AAFS presidents, they were not sanctioned by the organization and their future remains uncertain due to the lingering effects of the AAFS BoD's lack of commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion—as demonstrated through the BoD's decision to disband the Anthropology Section's Diversity D&I Committee in 2020 (Tallman 2020). Thus, the obstacles faced by LGBTQ+ scientists broadly and forensic anthropologists specifically,

coupled with a lack of support from professional organizations such as the AAFS, necessitates LGBTQ+-focused inclusion strategies to ensure retention in forensic anthropology.

Testimonials

"As one of the few professionally out, gay male forensic anthropologists to lead military archaeological recovery missions at the US Department of Defense's Central Identification Laboratory—one of the oldest and largest forensic anthropology laboratories in the world—I regularly, if unwittingly, upended peoples' perceptions of what it meant to be gay. Hiking, camping for weeks on end, excavating all day, and infrequent (if any) showers are not stereotypically considered 'gay.' I frequently heard homophobic slurs, jokes, and comments by team members as they didn't realize I was gay (or didn't care). Less frequently, I experienced more lowkey homophobia from coworkers or supervisors. Each deployment was accompanied by weighing the decision to come out to military team members, who, for much of my tenure, were still required to follow 'don't ask, don't tell'—Is it worth the hassle to come out (especially if I never work with them again)? Won't they get the hint if I don't talk about a wife, girlfriend, or heteronormative topics? If I come out, am I making myself susceptible to homophobic micro- and macro-aggressions or even violence? Is the country I'm deploying to safe for LGBTQ+ individuals? While I frequently came out to select members or entire teams, such decision-making serves as a reminder that LGBTQ+ individuals don't just come out once; we are constantly evaluating and navigating the coming out process, even when we are 'fully out.' Because of this, we are generally hyperaware of our surroundings and interpersonal dynamics, which, in turn, can exhaust our emotional bandwidth. This process may become easier with time and positive societal changes, but it's still a stressor that occupies valuable mental space in certain contexts including the forensic sciences, which, in my experience, is toxically heteronormative. This is further exemplified by the fact that it took years of attending the AAFS annual conferences before meeting another professionally out LGBTQ+ forensic anthropologist, all the while hearing homophobic comments from some well-respected anthropologists and forensic scientists. Moreover, at an AAFS reception not too long ago, I was once asked by straight colleagues to speak with a fellow LGBTQ+ colleague about their 'inappropriate behavior' because they had brought their same-sex partner and were showing mild affection that would go unnoticed if they were hetero (e.g., hand-holding, arms around another). My straight colleagues, some of whom attended such receptions with their partners and kids, claimed to worry that the older generation of forensic anthropologists, particularly the 'silverbacks,' would be offended at queer public displays of affection. While I refused to speak to my queer colleague because they should be able to show affection with their partner, my straight colleagues failed to acknowledge their homophobia, privilege, or positionality which is significantly bolstered by the culture of forensic anthropology."—Sean D. Tallman

“As a bisexual woman who was in a twenty-five-year-long heterosexual marriage, I have always had straight-passing privilege. It’s a privilege I’m keenly aware of, as I know some of my colleagues can’t ‘pass’ and face harassment and discrimination as a result. I haven’t often talked about my LGBTQ+ status with colleagues, in part because I tend to keep my personal life fairly private, in part because I was afraid of the fallout, and in part because I have imposter syndrome—because I can pass as straight, I feel conflicted about claiming this part of my identity given the struggles other members of the community face. Once, a lesbian coworker referred to me and another colleague as ‘straight people.’ When I indicated that there was only one heterosexual person present (i.e., that I was not straight), she burst into tears because she felt so much relief that she was not alone. Because of her reaction, I’ve decided to be ‘fully out.’ The more of us there are who are open about our identity, the more acceptance and community we’ll find and the more diverse the field will become.”—Joan Baker

“There’s nothing like being a trans-identifying person in a room of cissexual people when the discussion of biological sex is brought up. The range of comments is broad, but it generally ends up being a debate over the validity of who I am as a person. This is doubly true in academic spaces where there is almost a desperation for the reality of binary biological sex. There have also been instances of my experiences being invalidated by cis people in the field because I don’t ‘look’ trans or I haven’t transitioned. It’s a pretty consistent struggle.”—Thomas Delgado

“I identify as gay and nonbinary. Beginning in high school I endured verbal harassment for my ‘gay voice’ and ‘flamboyant mannerisms,’ and had both peers and strangers hurl homophobic slurs my way. These experiences left me feeling vulnerable to ridicule and judgment throughout my academic/professional career. I found it difficult to feel confident when presenting and networking at conferences. It was difficult to believe that I would be taken seriously and chose to hide my authentic self so that I would not be denied professional opportunities. As I continued to process my gender identity, I acknowledged that I preferred pronouns different than I had previously identified, and that my wardrobe tastes were no longer along traditional expectations. I, however, feared the backlash, especially when interviewing for new jobs. These experiences, however, are exactly the reason I found it important to be open and proud of my identity, to help provide a more inclusive space, promote more diverse research and practice, and be representation for students.”—Donovan Adams

“As a queer nonbinary person, I queer everything I do simply because of who I am. In my forensic anthropology class, I challenge students to think around the false binary that plagues the discipline. Teaching at a college where the majority of my students identify as trans and/or nonbinary, I challenge these preconceived notions of binaries because there are so many people, like me, that would otherwise ‘fall through the cracks’—rather than just patching up the leaks, it is better to replace the whole system where equity in death is common practice. Sex and gender have never been binary—and to assume that these are natural

facts within our own mammalian biology is concerning. Biology is not destiny; assuming so is antithetical to scientific research.”—Benjamin J. Schaefer

“Mentors, colleagues, and students never expect me to be gay at first. They see an Asian man (which in itself is not that common) and seem to take some time before it makes sense to them that I prefer men and have had the same male partner for as many years as I have pursued a career in anthropological research, teaching, and science communication. Some stare at me. Others stay distant and prefer to talk to other cis het men who can speak of their wives or girlfriends. And, sadly, I have been told that they whisper homophobic comments behind closed doors. Throughout my years, I have witnessed professors sharing ideas, anecdotes, jokes, and even unscientific journal articles that reinforce sex and gender binaries, heteronormative ideologies, and misogynistic views on gender roles—whether the topics in question are forensic profiling, genomic science, prehistoric archaeology, or human evolutionary studies. I view many LGBTQ+ friends and colleagues in anthropology as smart, determined, considerate scholars, but it is not easy being queer in this discipline.”—Michael B. C. Rivera

“When I began studying forensic anthropology in the early 2000s, I was already comfortably living openly as a lesbian. But entering this field was like reverting to a culture of 1950s idealism, where predominantly white cisgender heterosexuals created unbiased scientific ‘truths’ in pursuit of justice. I was struck not only by discrete (and neat) categories the field perpetuated, but also the professional culture it cultivated. As a young student, I didn’t know any openly gay professionals but was privileged to be a young white, cisgender woman who passed as straight. Perceived sexuality was whispered and gay slurs like ‘dyke’ and ‘fag’ were bandied about casually at the bar of the annual AAFS scientific meeting. This bigotry extended to scientific interpretations; I once heard a quaint story about a renowned forensic anthropologist who claimed he could determine the sexual orientation of a decedent from skeletal remains. As a student, I was in no position to challenge this bigotry, nor were heterosexual colleagues who were allies. But that silence (on my part and others) created a wound indelibly linked to this field and its normative professional culture, a culture which rewards those ‘in the club’ with better access to people in power and to advancement opportunities. This wound has been hard to heal. As the years advanced and my LGBTQ+ and ally colleagues transformed to close friends, I’ve felt more comfortable being open about my sexual orientation. And while my intersectional identity has afforded me more privilege than others (people of color, transgender individuals, etc.), it is still exhausting to constantly navigate disclosing my LGBTQ+ identity in the various spaces of forensics (e.g., place of work, professional organizations, partner institutions, working abroad, etc.). Passing as straight may be the easiest route but would only reinforce a bygone image of professional idealism. Today, I purposefully disclose my lesbian identity in the hopes of actively strengthening the LGBTQ+ community in forensics and limiting the attrition of younger LGBTQ+ forensic scientists. While open homophobia may not be as rife as it was almost twenty years ago, our field still needs to grow and

reflect on how biases underpin not only our professional culture, but also our scientific endeavors. I strongly believe that fostering diversity in the forensics community will change our scientific lens—for the better.”—Cate Bird

NEURODIVERSITY

Neurodiverse people are also the subject of ableism in forensic anthropology (see “Disability and Ableism”). Neurodiversity is generally defined to include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorders, dyspraxia/developmental coordination Tourette syndrome, and dyslexia/dyscalculia/dysgraphia (of which dyslexia is the most common) (Doyle 2020; Weinberg and Doyle 2017). The term neurodiversity was first used in the disability rights movement in 1999 by Singer (1999), and the definition of the term is still in flux. Many of the conditions listed above individually fall under the ADA.

Two methods of defining neurodiversity are medically and socially, and the definitions differ significantly. Medical models view neurodiversity as a defect in the individual and pathologize neurodiversity as “diseases,” “disorders,” or conditions to be treated, cured, or even eradicated so that the “sufferer” conforms to defined norms. In these models, medical and social service professionals are the only people who can “fix” these disabilities. Social models of disability recognize that the barriers causing disability are not due to characteristics of the person but rather due to unsuitable environments; social models further recognize the value of diverse neurology through time and space. In social models of disability, the solutions lie in changing society to remove barriers to functioning in daily life. A comprehensive overview of definitions and the need for research is found in Doyle and McDowall (2022), although there are numerous articles in scientific journals and books. Currently, there is too little research on neurodiversity to definitively state a position in forensic anthropology (see Doyle and McDowall 2022).

The field of forensic anthropology and academia in general demand hyperproductivity as a means to define success. Regular publishing, casework, fieldwork, developing/maintaining research agendas, teaching, service to the profession, and mentoring in forensic anthropology may be significantly more challenging for neurodiverse individuals. All of these barriers are impediments to achieving success and advancement within the discipline. Neurodiversity can be considered an “invisible disability” in that it is not something visible from the outside. This invisibility may lead people to have certain expectations of individuals without fully understanding what that individual is experiencing.

Testimonial

“As a woman diagnosed with ADHD in her forties and autism in her fifties, I’ve struggled to fit in my entire career. I spent decades wondering why some things that were difficult for me appeared so easy for other people; I presumed it was because I was a bad person who

just wasn’t trying hard enough. While my ability to hyperfocus, attention to detail, pattern recognition abilities, logic, productivity levels, and adherence to policies and procedures were generally seen as positives, I found it difficult to understand and follow neurotypical social norms and was often mystified by my colleagues’ actions, interactions, and reactions. My direct way of communicating was called rude, and I was criticized and ostracized for calling attention to actions that I perceived as wrong and that my autistic brain simply couldn’t ignore. My work environment was full of things that caused me enormous stress due to sensory issues, including bright lights, busy workspaces full of noise, chatty coworkers, itchy lab coats, and latex gloves that not only felt terrible but eventually caused rashes. I was in constant sensory overload and had frequent internal meltdowns (that occasionally manifested externally as angry outbursts). Finding a new job where I can work from home and where my neurodiversity is viewed as an asset has been an enormous gift, one I don’t think I would find in any existing forensic anthropology space, whether government, academic, or NGO. While I value the opportunity to learn and to connect with colleagues, attending the AAFS meetings has always been a bit terrifying for me. The enormous numbers of people feel frankly overwhelming and come with a near certainty that people will bump into me and trigger a fight-or-flight response. The constant buzz of conversations keeps me in a hypervigilant state and prevents me from focusing on anything but the constant hustle and bustle, thanks to an auditory processing disorder that makes it impossible for me to hear and understand one conversation when there are others going on nearby. Because the conference center chairs are connected to each other, I always bring enough belongings (coat, bookbag, book, etc.) to block off the chairs on either side to prevent social and physical contact with strangers. I dread running the gauntlet of dozens of attendees standing outside the door of every conference room, not least because I know the noise of their chatter will infiltrate the conference room and make it difficult (if not impossible) for me to hear or focus on the presentations. The bright LED downlights in the conference rooms frequently give me migraines, and conference centers rarely offer quiet areas with soft ambient lighting for respite from sensory overload. On top of the sensory nightmare I face at the meetings, I’ve also felt the sting of rebuke (both explicit and implicit) from colleagues intimating that I don’t spend enough time talking to and encouraging young forensic anthropologists, when in reality, it takes everything I have simply to be in attendance—I just don’t have the energy or the wherewithal to perform neurotypical social rituals that I barely understand and mimic poorly.”—Joan Baker

PARENTAL STATUS

Many countries are quite progressive with attitudes toward parental status. Unfortunately, the United States is not one of them. There is currently no paid parental leave guaranteed in the United States. Such policies are at the discretion of the employer to accommodate; there are no protections for parents or other caregivers. A lack of parental leave puts parents in an incredibly difficult position while welcoming a new member into their family. Working families also experience a high

and growing burden of health-care costs (Glickman and Weiner 2019). Further, costs of daycare are prohibitive, and recent work has shown that forensic anthropologists often do not make a salary that is commensurate with their training (Passalacqua, Chu, and Pilloud 2020). For graduate students who are parents, the financial situation is even more dire. Moreover, finding reliable and safe daycare can be challenging. Parents can be faced with long waiting lists, poor facilities, inadequate care, and poorly trained staff.

There may also be gendered stigma related to being a parent. Working mothers may be considered to be poor parents and less effective workers. They may also be paid less; there is a well-documented “mother wage penalty” or “motherhood penalty” in the workforce in which mothers earn approximately 5 percent less *per child* (Budig and England 2001). This penalty holds even when accounting for other factors, such as gender (i.e., fathers are not affected), social race, education, and experience (Pilloud and Passalacqua 2022). For fathers, it is culturally acceptable to have a family, unless family duties are seen as a competing interest or distraction to work productivity. Within a forensic anthropological setting, individuals may be expected to be on call to assist in medicolegal investigations and/or feel obliged to work long hours to achieve an unrealistic ideal of productivity—all of which are difficult when one is caring for children, particularly if single parenting.

Testimonial

“I had my first child while still in graduate school. The cost of daycare was prohibitive, and my partner worked full-time, which meant most of the parental duties fell to me as I was teaching and writing my dissertation. The lack of institutional support made it incredibly difficult to write and finish. I had my second child while working full-time for the federal government. There is no protected maternal leave for federal employees. I had to take sick leave and leave without pay to care for my newborn baby. When I asked to return part-time (without pay) so I could still spend time with my baby while I was nursing, I was told no. I could not afford to take any more time off completely without pay, so I was forced to return back to work full-time when my baby was only a few months old. This difficult return to work made me distracted, as I felt guilty and depressed that I couldn’t have more time with my baby. As my children have grown, I am still torn as how to best balance a demanding workload and my time with them. And, I have made deliberate career choices that allowed me the flexibility to care for my children.”—Marin Pilloud

RACE, ETHNICITY, AND RACISM

BIPOC students and professionals in the field of forensic anthropology often experience a lack of diversity in their environments and in the curriculum. In particular, there is a lack of representation of professional BIPOC forensic anthropologists (both professors and other professionals), and the literature is dominated by non-BIPOC scholars.

This is a testament to the deficiency in the field to provide a place for BIPOC individuals to voice their concerns and needs to spearhead positive change away from the outdated, racist, and misogynistic tenets of the field. Instead, non-BIPOC anthropologists (especially those who hold seniority/power) frequently assume that the presence/existence of BIPOC students and professionals in the field is equivalent to improved diversity, equity, and inclusion in the field. However, these past two years have demonstrated that this is not the case, as several organizations, such as the AAFS, and senior-level individuals within the field of forensic anthropology have failed to take a clear stance against racism out of fear that such a stance will jeopardize forensic anthropologists’ supposed “unbiased and objective” expertise in courtroom testimony (see McCrane, Hsiao, and Tallman’s “Implementing an Antiracist Framework in Forensic Anthropology: Our Responsibility in Professional Organizations and as Scientists” in this forum). Moreover, BIPOC scholars are often told by their non-BIPOC peers that they were accepted to programs solely because of their racial background or through affirmative action, despite having strong academic and professional credentials. Such statements stem from a lack of understanding and are largely due to the lack of diversity in our discipline. If forensic anthropology is to remain a relevant field, we have to continuously recruit and retain diversity at all levels, from undergraduate to the professoriate, especially in regard to the changing population demographics and declining university budgets in social science fields. The lack of diversity in our field represents a loss of talent and of the potential for future contributors to the scientific pool. It is not enough to simply add the name of a BIPOC anthropologist to a publication or a project if their contributions will be overlooked or edited to seem more palatable to the institution they are fighting to change. Tokenism is a serious concern for BIPOC students and professionals in the field that is frequently an avoided topic of conversation. Inclusivity is not a buzzword; it is an imperative.

Testimonials

“As a person of color, it can be exhausting trying to be a professional in our field and deal with the constant conscious and unconscious microaggressions that occur. Forensic anthropologists are trained to be social scientists but use ancestry methods that perpetuate biological concepts of race, disregard or don’t understand the racial and social disparities that exist in the medicolegal system, and use tokenism to enhance diversity efforts. Moreover, we have governing bodies that dissolve diversity, equity, and inclusion committees that serve to address these issues. Actions like these make forensic anthropology less welcoming to people of color and do not increase diversity or representation in the field. I am one of the few who has made it through and is trying to ‘stick it out’ to help change the field but that is not okay.”—Anonymous

“As a student of color, being in academic spaces in this field has proven to be a constant battle for acknowledgment and positive change. As a student, I have often been told that I do not have the experience

to understand the intricacies of the field or that my opinion on certain matters will not be taken seriously because of my academic status. Yet, there have been multiple times where I have been offered to collaborate on projects and publications under the assumption that my contribution as a person of color will be significant and my opinion prioritized but am always met with resistance. In a field that unquestionably lacks diversity, academic status should not be a factor when discussing issues that directly affect BIPOC professionals and students alike.”—Anonymous

“As a queer, female-bodied, mixed-race person of color, my experiences in graduate school and navigating academia have been fraught with racism. There are countless daily examples: as a member of a non-federally-recognized tribe, I have been told directly by anthropologists that my experiences and perspectives of Indigenous rights issues do not count. I have also been declared an immigrant (I am not) by anthropology professors in front of a class to serve as their example of someone who surely would not relate to American history. Or been described as ‘bold’ for disagreeing with the notion that humans are moving toward racial speciation. Or watching my colleagues nonchalantly use Indigenous remains in their research, when it is well known the attempts to repatriate them have been half-hearted at best. When not highlighted as an ‘other,’ I am also sometimes rendered completely invisible. For instance, observing Caucasian colleagues get praise, while I am not recognized for the same achievements—sometimes even on the same project. Or working somewhere for several years as the only anthropologist of color, and having administrators consistently omit me from emails, or even claim they don’t know who I am. Oh, and a problematic land acknowledgment in which anthropologists choose from among many Indigenous groups that have converged and diverged over centuries in a single space, migrated throughout the US, and likely only include the federally (colonially) recognized does not make it better.”—Anonymous

“As a biracial African American woman with light-colored skin, I’m sadly used to being otherized and to being present in spaces that predominantly consist of white people—often people who don’t really know what to make of me. So while I didn’t see my social race as a barrier to entering forensic anthropology per se, a discipline I recognized as primarily white, microaggressions have abounded. These have included being overlooked to add my perspective to being present for off-color racist jokes told by senior colleagues. The uphill battle of promoting my antiracist stance for the practice of the discipline has been a microaggression as well, because of the colleagues who simply refuse to acknowledge or even engage with the fact that forensic anthropology was born from, and contributes to, racist systems. Each refusal is a denial of my lived experience and my witnessing of the experiences of many of my friends and family members.”—Elizabeth A. DiGangi

“I am incredibly tired of arguing with other anthropologists about race, racism, and how to diversify who participates in this discipline. Taking our field forward in directions that better serve (racialized and marginalized) communities, and gives all members of community equal

opportunity and access, requires a sensitivity and humility that should come naturally to any researcher of humankind. Nonetheless, an insidious and willful ignorance persists. Why this problem strikes me to my core is because I never wanted to be an advocate or public communicator about these issues. I simply wanted to tell stories about people using scientific and humanities approaches, but, as Toni Morrison points out, exclusionary systems and racist ideologies are truly distractions keeping people of color from doing the work they want to do. Who we have currently directing research on the human condition largely renders the enterprise colonial and elitist. This hegemony in knowledge production has immense effects on the field going into the 2020s—everybody in museums or universities, on editorial boards and association/society committees, has a responsibility to help solve these problems. This is because current practices are terribly reminiscent of how anthropology was run before, and the approaches in some scholastic circles have not evolved. I will always hope to see better. It angers me. It breaks my heart.”—Michael B. C. Rivera

RELIGION

The freedom of religion is a right granted in the first amendment of the US Constitution. Despite this freedom, the United States is overwhelmingly represented by one religion, Christianity, with 70 percent of Americans identifying as some variant of Christian and only 5 percent of Americans identifying with non-Christian religions (PRRI 2021). Due to this being a majority-Christian nation, many societal systems cater to Christianity, academia being one of them. To be a practicing forensic anthropologist, graduate schooling is required, and academia is not inclusive to other religions besides Christianity. In most US-based universities, the academic school year caters to Christianity by ensuring all major Christian holidays (e.g., Christmas, Good Friday, every Sunday, etc.) are days where school is not in session. This is not the case for any other religion, and it is a significant barrier for non-Christian religious students who must play catch-up when taking off school for their own religious holidays. Moreover, the blatant favoritism to Christianity in the United States leads to the othering of non-Christian religions, which produces emotional barriers and feelings of isolation.

Interestingly, while the system is very accommodating to Christianity, college graduates are generally less religious than noncollege graduates (Pew Research Center 2017). Specifically in the fields of biological and forensic anthropology, one of the main discussions concerning religion is that of evolution. Overwhelmingly, this discussion centers on a socially imposed “religion vs. science” dichotomy that leaves religious individuals feeling unwelcome in the field. This is common in introductory biological anthropology courses, where incoming students are first introduced to this field. When they feel like their identity as a religious person is incompatible with the field, they are more likely to leave. It is also a discussion that equates religion with Christianity. This can be especially frustrating for students who identify as non-Christian religious individuals. Many other religions are not at odds with the theory of evolution, and being erased from the

conversation just furthers the non-Christian religious students from feeling included and belonging in the field.

Besides academia and schooling, other aspects of the field are exclusive to non-Christian religious individuals. For example, networking is an important aspect of forensic anthropology, and a majority of those opportunities revolve around socializing in bars, particularly at annual conferences. Drinking alcohol is something that many Muslims do not partake in due to religious beliefs, but to take advantage of networking opportunities, they are forced into awkward situations that make them feel uncomfortable or othered due to their aversion to alcohol.

Testimonials

“As a Muslim hijabi in the field of forensic anthropology, I have felt excluded on multiple occasions. Because I wear a hijab, my otherness is very apparent and has made many people around me uncomfortable. This has also led to many people making assumptions (generally incorrectly) about who I am as a person. I will never forget my first anthropology course where, on the very first day, the professor spent the entire period asserting that there is no room for religion in anthropology. Of course, I was the only hijabi in the 200+ person class and I could feel everyone staring at me as if I didn’t belong. If it wasn’t for having an amazing TA for the lab portion of that class, I probably would not have continued to explore anthropology and continue on my forensic anthropology path. This is just one of the many barriers I have had to face being Muslim in this field. Important to note are the many Friday prayers I would miss (Fridays are for Muslims what Sundays are to Christians) due to schooling. While I would have an excused absence, the amount of work I would miss and have to work extra in the following weeks after Muslim holidays ultimately made me decide to stop celebrating Muslim holidays throughout the school year. It always seemed unfair that Christians would have a month to celebrate their biggest holiday (Christmas) while I was only granted 1 day of excused absence (even though it traditionally lasts three days, and getting ready for it takes time too, and my family lived in another city so travel time was also not taken into account). Being Muslim in this field has been extremely difficult to feel like I belong. I have felt, on multiple occasions, that I have had to choose between my religion and being successful in this field. This field is already emotionally draining, competitive, and difficult as is, a sense of unbelonging on top of those obstacles is probably a huge factor in why there are so few Muslim forensic anthropologists.”—Fatimah Bouderdaben

“My personal experience, even having completed my undergrad in the Bible Belt, is that Christianity is not accepted in the field of anthropology. The collective sentiment in anthropology feels ‘anti-Christian’ and pro-atheism. I think this sentiment is largely one that is subconscious, as modern anthropologists make an effort to be inclusive and accepting. However, the field is heavily antireligion for its practitioners, especially anti-Christianity, because of its majority outside of the field, antievolution history, and infamous ties to colonialism/racism. In my undergraduate coursework, I suppressed my religious affiliation for

fear it made me incapable of being a good anthropologist and scientist. I felt that other religions were more accepted because they were not tied to the racial origins of the field or opposed evolution; however, being atheist was still preferred. I think anthropology has a lot of reflection to do about how it treats all religions in the field, but we must still remember to include Christianity in that conversation despite its perceived majority outside of the field.”—Anonymous

SEX, SEXISM, AND HARASSMENT

The increasing number of women within forensic anthropology has been well documented, with a thorough discussion presented by Pilloud and Passalacqua (2022). However, women are less likely than men to win awards and fill leadership roles, despite making up a larger percentage of membership within the Anthropology Section of the AAFS (Pilloud and Passalacqua 2022). It should be noted, however, that the current four primary leadership roles within the Anthropology Section of the AAFS (i.e., chair, secretary, program chair, and program co-chair) are held by women. There is a great deal of work to be done, though, in recruiting, retaining, and promoting individuals not identifying within this gender binary in forensic anthropology to further push the boundaries of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. Additionally, while there are many avenues to increasing gender and sex parity within the AAFS and the Anthropology Section, one of the ways in which this change can occur is by recognizing the harassment and discrimination faced by members at the annual meeting. As reported in Tallman and Bird (2022), at least 24 percent of respondents from a 2018 Anthropology Section survey reported experiencing discrimination, with at least 42 percent reported having witnessed discriminating events. The culture of the AAFS annual meeting reflects one that encourages discrimination and harassment; for example, the AAFS D&I Statement was not adopted until the February 2020 annual meeting, and there was no antiharassment policy within the organization until February 2022. This lack of commitment to ensuring an equitable and inclusive environment from the AAFS represents a significant barrier to expanding gender diversity.

Testimonials

“For the first three AAFS meetings I attended as a senior in my undergraduate and the beginning of my graduate programs, I was sexually harassed by older male colleagues. It felt like a huge warning sign to get out of this field initially, but after years of encountering this at the annual meeting, it became a point to overcome and a victory to make it to the end of the meeting without having my appearance commented on and males actually looking at my face during conversations.”—Anonymous

“I spent almost seventeen years in an environment where I witnessed and experienced sexual harassment more times than I can count. Women were paid less, subjected to blatantly different standards, kept

from choice assignments, hired at 1/10 the rate of men, tokenized in management, and sexually assaulted. I was propositioned, groped on multiple occasions, forcibly kissed, called names, gossiped about, and subjected to a wide array of inappropriate language and behavior. I filed numerous complaints and was subjected to disciplinary action as a result, while the perpetrators received promotions and raises. Privately, some colleagues supported me, but the damage was done, and I've all but left the field as a result."—Anonymous

"At the AAFS meetings about a decade ago, I was so excited to meet one of the senior members of our field. The conversation started out normal enough—what kinds of things are you working on, etcetera—and devolved into some of the most blatant verbal sexual harassment I have ever experienced. Further, he was bold enough to engage in said harassment in the presence of his wife, which tells you something about his mindset—he had done this before and had never suffered a meaningful consequence. I was shocked and stunned and didn't know what to do. I confided in some colleagues about it and they also didn't know what any recourse might be. AAFS did not have any sort of reporting function, and even if they had, I'm not sure I would have used it given his stature in the field and my position at the time as early career outside of an academic job. If it happened today, I wouldn't hesitate; but it illustrates the precarious position such incidents put people in who want the person to be punished yet don't want to be ostracized or not believed. And even today, I see that position as precarious—despite the Me Too movement, I don't want this incident attached to my colleagues' knowledge of my career—which is why I'm choosing to not report my name here."—Anonymous

"Near the end of my undergraduate career, I found out that one of my most trusted mentors in my anthropology program was a sexual predator. Upon reflection of my time working with him, I realized I had been essentially groomed by this individual for a period of months during an international field school in a remote location. I was often alone with this individual and experienced many inappropriate encounters and conversations for a mentor–student relationship. As a woman, I was socialized to be accommodating to men and authority figures and this male academic, whom I had trusted, took advantage of that. I was also new to academia and had not been told what was appropriate for a mentor–student relationship. I often dismissed the interactions that made me uncomfortable, and when I did exhibit discomfort, he made me feel guilty for assuming he had anything other than good intentions. This individual was not caught by my department until after the field school had ended and received zero legal ramifications for all of the people he harassed. Years later, he still haunts me, and I have continued to experience anxiety over the chance of running into him. Academic institutions need to hold abusive people accountable."—Elizabeth Hannigan

"During my third year of graduate school, I presented a poster at AAFS and was very excited when a well-known anthropologist came to speak to me about my work. He gave a cursory glance at the poster, then started asking me about a tattoo on my arm and if I had any more,

noting suggestively that he'd love to see the rest of them sometime. I naively thought I could redirect the conversation to my research, but he lost interest and walked away after I would not engage in flirtation. During the same poster session, a person from another section handed me a card inviting me to an 'exclusive party' and commented suggestively about my appearance and clothing, even telling me he had a shoe fetish. I entered that poster session feeling proud of myself for being able to present my research in a professional setting, and left feeling embarrassed, confused, and deflated. My mentors at my home institution were encouraging, but I was not prepared for the culture of the meetings that clearly still needs to change."—Anonymous

VETERAN STATUS

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the GI Bill), the first bill to be passed that provided education benefits for US service members, led to over eight million veterans receiving higher education (Syracuse University 2021). The current version, the Post-9/11 GI Bill, provides the most benefits compared to any previous bill. In general, veterans who can take advantage of these offerings receive full tuition and living stipends for thirty-six months. Additionally, forensic anthropology is vital in the identification of fallen service members via the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, and the field has benefitted for decades by developing methodologies based on POW/MIA individuals. Why, then, are there so few veteran forensic anthropologists? A career in forensic anthropology requires an advanced degree, which takes several years to earn. Veterans begin on a shorter timeline than their traditional academic peers. While nonmilitary students of the same age (roughly twenty-four to twenty-nine years) are moving toward advanced degrees (Holian and Adam 2020), veterans are just beginning. Unfortunately, by the time they complete undergraduate studies, their military benefits run out, and as nontraditional students, veterans often have family responsibilities, life outside of academia, and work obligations. Therefore, the type of degree pursued is limited to fields, such as business, that will financially support veterans and provide an easier path toward retirement. Additionally, veterans start in academia with other invisible barriers (e.g., PTSD and mental health issues) and visible barriers as a result of their military service, which also influences program selection. They have to think about the physical and mental requirements of the career and institutional accommodations. Further, these barriers have been stigmatized and can expose veterans to further harm via ability-based microaggressions (see also "Disability and Ableism"). These stigmas often overlap with other stereotypes placed on veterans and their perceived politics. The field of anthropology is more liberal and, unfortunately, this can lead to people feeling unwelcome if they have dissimilar political views compared to those who are more liberal, and they may feel ostracized because of negative assumptions associated with the military. In summary, time is of the essence and not on the side of the veteran. While managing time constraints, they face and must navigate stigmas and stereotypes associated with mental health, disabilities, negative military perceptions, and politics, which are further compounded by

gender, sexual orientation, indigeneity, race, ethnicity, and religious prejudices.

Testimonial

“Until I began working in the field, I had not thought much about my veteran status in relation to forensic anthropology or anthropology as a whole. I knew there weren’t many veterans and always wondered why, but I didn’t think much past that. As a multiethnic, multiracial individual who identifies as Black, the daughter of an immigrant, as someone who continues to struggle with language learning, and as an individual who grew up in a disadvantaged household, I was aware of barriers very early on. As the descendant of several veterans throughout the generations and the daughter of two Marines, I understood they fought for a country that did not love them despite their sacrifices. I recognized the barriers I would face within that space, but nothing could prepare me for the experiences I would have as an anthropologist who happens to be a veteran. Much like my racial identity being misidentified because of my skin color, my veteran status also places me in unwanted and uncomfortable situations because of people’s assumptions. I often hear prejudices towards the military and ill-informed comments about PTSD and military-based depression only to have people get defensive or apologize for not ‘knowing’ I am a veteran and for not ‘knowing’ my disabilities. These events sometimes end with being told that I am the exception or that I am not ‘really’ insert identity here. In a field which prides itself in identifying the unknown and being a voice for the voiceless, internally, it is exhausting to be a practicing scientist or a student pursuing a career in a discipline that continues to see us as a number and as an object to study.”—Sydney S. Garcia

CONCLUSION

At a time when forensic anthropology’s impact on society is being interrogated (e.g., Adams and Pilloud 2021; Bethard and DiGangi 2020; Clemmons 2022; DiGangi and Bethard 2021; Go, Yuki, and Chu 2021; Tallman and Bird 2022; Tallman, Kincer, and Plemons 2022; Tallman, Parr, and Winburn 2021; Winburn, Jennings, et al. 2022), practitioners from systematically excluded groups and those with diverse lived experiences are critical for the field’s ongoing relevance. However, it is clear from the barriers and testimonials presented here that numerous and often-hidden challenges exist for individuals from historically excluded groups. It is important to note that many who provided personal testimonials here chose to remain anonymous, which further demonstrates the field’s fraught interpersonal power dynamics. Also of note, bullying did not explicitly emerge as a challenge to success. While it is unlikely for bullying behavior to be entirely absent from the field, its exclusion here may be rooted in trauma and, hence, avoided. Bullying can occur at any career stage (early schooling to late career) and can come from colleagues, students, mentors, and peers. As such, bullying can be pervasive throughout one’s career and difficult to identify and

quantify. Indeed, bullying has the potential to undergird many barriers highlighted here.

Many of the barriers discussed herein are firmly entrenched and re-created in professional organizations, such as the AAFS, and in academic settings. The role of professional organizations cannot be overstated. As this piece attests, the AAFS looms large in the field of forensic anthropology, as its vision is to “promote justice for all” and its mission statement claims that the AAFS “is a multidisciplinary membership community that provides collaborative research, quality education, and recognized leadership to advance forensic science and to inform its application to the law.”^{vi} Accordingly, students and professionals are strongly encouraged or expected to be members, yet the organization does not serve the needs of an increasingly diverse membership (Tallman 2020; Tallman and Bird 2022; Winburn et al. 2021). However, professional organizations and the academy are made up of individuals who should feel empowered to change the organizational culture. Therefore, we see these critiques of forensic anthropology generally and the AAFS specifically as opportunities for individual and collective action to improve the acceptance and safety of systematically excluded individuals who are vital for improving the field. Such change first requires that individuals within the forensic anthropology community understand the myriad challenges faced by those of us who have not been centered in the field and make a commitment to substantive change. While the intersecting barriers presented here may in many ways seem insurmountable, we contend that reasonable, tangible solutions are available to improve the diversity, equity, inclusivity, and safety of the members of our discipline.

One area of improvement is in better supporting our diverse students and younger practitioners who have largely been left to “sink or swim.” This can be accomplished, in part, through the development and implementation of a formalized mentorship program within forensic anthropology that matches mentors and mentees through self-identified demographics and/or research interests. While the AAFS Anthropology Section’s D&I Committee instituted such a mentorship program, it was dissolved when the D&I Committee was disbanded by the AAFS BoD in 2020 (Tallman 2020). A successful example is the Out in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (oSTEM) Mentorship Program, wherein participants complete an in-depth survey on what is important to them regarding mentorship, and LGBTQ+ self-identity is prioritized in matching.ⁱⁱ Additionally, the oSTEM Mentorship Program allows individuals to sign up as both mentors and mentees, thereby demonstrating that receiving mentorship does not cease when one becomes a mentor. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that individuals may have multiple mentors (Winburn, Tallman, et al. 2022), and academic advisors should be cognizant that their ability to successfully mentor their advisees may be limited, particularly if they are not demographically matched. Relatedly, mentors and advisors within forensic anthropology should seek out training in interacting with a diverse range of students. This could be part of a formalized mentorship program and/or through professional organizations.

To further improve support, we suggest that grant-writing workshops be developed to demystify the research-proposal process both

within the academy and in professional organizations. While critical for first-generation college students in gaining cultural capital, such workshops have the potential to increase funding and publication opportunities for all members of our community, which are vital for positions in academia or STEM. Moreover, professors should make a commitment to actively include undergraduate and graduate students in grant writing, research (development, data collection, analysis, and reporting), publications, peer reviews, and presentations, as these experiences are expected of graduates, yet the skills needed to gain these experiences are rarely intentionally taught. The current model that expects students in forensic anthropology to initiate these experiences on their own—that is, through passive advising—benefits only those who are privileged and neglects systematically excluded individuals who are faced with numerous structural barriers to achieve the same level of success.

Concerning education and training, professors need to understand the inequities and barriers faced by marginalized individuals in order to better serve the complex needs of their increasingly diverse and socially conscious students and classrooms. This requires the acknowledgment that many students have competing obligations that are equal to or more important than coursework, such as parenting, work, family care, and health challenges. As such, meritocratic admission and assessment processes need to be reassessed, as such processes favor privileged, nonmarginalized students. For example, holistic admissions practices for graduate school that factor in the challenges faced by the applicants in relation to their successes allows for more inclusive student bodies. Additionally, meritocratic measures such as the GRE, SAT/ACT, or other standardized tests should be eliminated, while GPA should be contextualized and assessed in relation to personal and structural challenges. Relatedly, educational programs and professors should be flexible to allow for diverse ways of learning and thinking. Adherence to meritocratic rigidity supports the problematic status quo and ultimately excludes those who face structural obstacles.

Specific to professional organizations and particularly the AAFS, we recommend that diversity and implicit-bias training be required for elected leadership. Such training helps people to gain competency in the many issues that contribute to exclusion, and these should be renewed regularly. To further support marginalized individuals, the AAFS should provide pronoun ribbons to all annual meeting attendees to demonstrate that gender is not binary and should not be assumed (these were denied when requested by the AAFS Diversity Outreach Committee in 2020). Additionally, the AAFS should develop and adopt a Code of Ethics and Conduct authored by a diversely populated committee and voted on by membership, much like the American Association of Biological Anthropologists (AABA).ⁱⁱⁱ Most importantly, the code of conduct should highlight how one reports incidents of harassment or discrimination, the investigative process, and ramifications for those found guilty of harassment. Additionally, the AAFS should require annual meeting attendees to read and acknowledge the code of conduct and the consequences of engaging in unethical behavior. Relatedly, it behooves the AAFS to provide a hotline at the annual meeting for attendees to report instances of code of conduct violations,

much like the AABA, to ensure the meeting is a safe place for all attendees. Simply having an antiharassment policy is not enough. Further, to support those with parenting responsibilities, it is recommended that the AAFS provide childcare for attendees, similar to other professional organizations. The continued refusal of the AAFS to provide childcare during the annual meetings, along with the requirement that all conference attendees be at least eighteen years old, excludes those with parenting responsibilities from participation and advancement in the AAFS, which requires regular conference attendance. Lastly, to increase the inclusion and involvement of students and early-career professionals, the AAFS and its journal, the *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, could develop dedicated early-career positions with the BoD and the editorial team.

Professional organizations including the AAFS should create safe and welcoming spaces for marginalized individuals through topical conversational forums based on identity and the associated barriers. Such forums would allow for those from systematically excluded groups to voice their concerns and, with representatives from leadership present, for the organization to actively listen. As this piece importantly indicates, our perspectives are not currently being heard. It is also important that these perspectives be acknowledged and affirmed within academia throughout one's education and beyond. A reimagining of success and excellence is needed to accommodate diverse paths and ways of being within the discipline: not everyone will want to become tenure-track professors, diplomates of the ABFA, grant-earning researchers, or purely (and falsely) objective and unbiased scientific "experts." The discipline has the potential—and need—to accommodate other diverse experiences, interests, and goals; yet, at present, we cater to the privileged majority who often desire the stations accorded through the status quo.

Inclusivity is an ongoing action, and while many of these barriers to entry and success are insidious and structural in nature—and thereby slow to change—they start with individuals. Therefore, professionals and those in positions of power have significant potential to effect change through individual commitments to do better and with intentional action. For many, this will require interrogating how their own perspectives and behaviors perpetuate inequities and barriers to success through their ignorance of the challenges faced by marginalized individuals. For professional organizations, this will further require significant shifts in organizational culture and purposeful restructuring. We hope that this piece assists in making individual and collective changes that break down barriers for systematically excluded individuals.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank all those who contributed valuable personal testimonials. Additionally, we would like to thank Elizabeth Chin and Adam Van Arsdale for supporting this piece and its inclusion in the Vital Topics Forum.

ORCID

Sean D. Tallman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0940-279X>

Rebecca L. George  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3901-1677>

Sydney S. Garcia  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5264-5124>
 Matthew C. Go  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7246-2875>
 Jesse R. Goliath  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8078-7450>
 Marin A. Pilloud  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1704-3707>

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ <https://www.aafs.org/about-us>.
ⁱⁱ <https://www.ostem.org/page/mentorship-program>.
ⁱⁱⁱ <https://physanth.org/about/position-statements/aapa-code-conduct/>.

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How to cite this article: Tallman, Sean D., Rebecca L. George, A. Ja'net Baide, Fatimah A. Bouderdaben, Alba E. Craig, Sydney S. Garcia, Matthew C. Go, Jesse R. Goliath, Elizabeth Miller, and Marin A. Pilloud. 2022. "Barriers to Entry And success in Forensic Anthropology." *American Anthropologist*. 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13752>