

# **BA ANTHROPOLOGY IN U.P. AS A COMMODITY CHOICE**

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Economics is said to be the 'science of choice', stereotypically focused on the area of activity/behavior that emerges from interactions between entities offering things up for sale and the consumers choosing among the available options. The economic assumption is that such choices are to be based on 'self-interest' or the search for the most profitable exchange. Starting from this, this paper explores the 'market' for Anthropology as seen in the results of a 2004 survey by UP Mindanao, and in decision trees modeling the rationality in selecting their degree courses made by UP Diliman students who were taking up Economic Anthropology. (Both projects also conducted by students as pedagogical/educational exercises in social science and anthropology.)

## **Why take Anthropology?**

Although a 'marginalized' course, anthropology is expanding as both a course offering and degree program. Social Anthro/Cultural Anthro subjects are offered in many colleges and universities. The newest BA Anthropology course was established at the U.P. in Mindanao in 2004. In proposing and justifying the BA Anthropology degree for UP Mindanao, we talked about how the University of the Philippines is supposed to be 'above the market': the U.P. should offer a course even if it is not a popular course, but because it is relevant to the needs of Philippine society (or to local, i.e. Mindanao, issues in particular). However, the University of the Philippines, now with its new charter and facing less subsidies, also needs to raise its own funds and secure its niche. Even if UP is not supposed to be 'market-driven', or should be oriented to social needs, in order to institute the new degree program it had to be proven that there is a potential demand for BA Anthropology in Mindanao. And if so, what is its market?

This led to the conduct of the UP Mindanao BA Anthropology market survey. (This survey was incorporated into and conducted by the class in Social Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences that I taught in the first semester of AY 2003-04 in UP Mindanao.) In addition, finding out more

about Anthropology as a commodity and 'consumer choice' has also been occasioned through exercises by my students in Economic Anthropology (the students were enrolled in various undergraduate courses in the University of the Philippines, Diliman). These students were asked to draw up decision trees about how they chose their course in college and to reflect on the rationality of their own decision-making paths.

### **The Findings of the UP Mindanao BA Anthropology Market Survey<sup>1</sup>**

The UP Mindanao BA Anthropology market survey was conducted among 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year high school students from the top sections of 22 high schools in Davao City and the vicinity, from July-August 2003. The 648 total respondents came from 4 public and 5 private high schools in Davao City, and 6 public high schools and 7 private high schools from neighboring municipalities outside the city. Tuition fees in the public schools ranged from P0-P840 per year, and in the private schools P4,300-45,188.90 per year. Public high schools tended to have large total school populations (more than 819 students on average 4<sup>th</sup> year student population), while private high schools had only 185 on the average in the 4<sup>th</sup> year student population.

The school heads were asked to estimate how many of their graduates are likely to go on to college. On average, 50% of public high school graduates "are likely to go on to college", whereas for the private schools, it was 95%. Based on estimations by the school heads, only about 22% of students of the 4<sup>th</sup> year population in the public high schools would take the UP College Admissions Test (UPCAT), although there were 3 schools where 78%-100% of the students would be taking the UPCAT. Only 18% of students from the private high schools were expected to take the UPCAT. This immediately indicates that UP's market in Davao City and the vicinity is greater among public high schools.

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<sup>1</sup> The background of the survey was the UP Mindanao proposal to institute the BA Anthropology degree program and to abolish BA Social Sciences. Using marketing terminology, BA Social Sciences (Behavioural Sciences) (similar to the course offered in UP Manila) was felt to be not a good 'product' for UP Mindanao. Its graduates felt that with some units in Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology they could not confidently identify with any of the disciplines, they felt ill-equipped with sufficient skills to put to the employment opportunities available. The survey also advertised the new BA Anthropology course through a brochure, providing information on the program.

Top 15 3rd yr and top 15 4th year High School students answered the survey. Female respondents outnumbered the males 3:1. Their ages ranged from 13-22, the average age being 15. (Identification of the respondents was done by the school, usually by the Guidance Counsellor.) Nearly all of the respondents from public high schools said they were planning to take the UPCAT (258/301). First choice was UP Diliman (41%), and 2<sup>nd</sup> choice UP Mindanao (23%). The majority of the respondents that prefer UP Mindanao as first preference are from public high schools. 10 % of respondents have no other school in mind but U.P. Of these 65 respondents, 42 are from public schools. Most of the respondents have private colleges or universities in mind for college education. However more of the respondents from public high schools are interested in State Colleges and Universities.

Respondents answered the self-administered questionnaire after they had first read the brochure on *BA Anthropology at UP Mindanao*.<sup>2</sup> Eighty percent said they were already aware of Anthropology, having heard about it from teachers, TV and books. Majority agreed that “*This course will be relevant for Mindanao in particular*” and that, the course “*will give the student useful knowledge and skills*”, however most were neutral (neither agree nor disagree) about the following statements: “*Students that take up this course would easily find employment later on*”; “*This course would interest many of my classmates*;” and “*I may consider taking up this course.*”

The survey found that the “*first choice*” of degree program was Nursing (192 respondents or 19.6%), followed by Accounting (93 or 14.4%). Anthropology placed 15<sup>th</sup> (4 respondents or 0.6%). Twenty respondents (6.17%) cited Anthropology as either a first, second or third choice, of which 14 were from public high schools. Of these 20 respondents, 15 were male and only 5 female.

The respondents listed the following as “*Primary factors/very important considerations*” in choosing a course: *personal interest* - (89.4%), *possibility of finding employment after* - 577 (89.0%), *good facilities* - 541 (83.5%), *school is said to have high standards* - 537 (82.9%), *nice campus or environment* - 482 (74.4%), *likelihood of getting a high-paying job* - 460 (71.0%), *prestige of the university* - 319 (49.2%), *cost of tuition fees* - 280 (43.2%), *school's rating by PAASCU* - 269 (41.5%), *cost of living where the school is* - 236 (36.4%), *parent's wishes* - 186 (28.7%). There were no significant differences between respondents from public and private high

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<sup>2</sup> The respondents could ask questions about the BA Anthropology program from those conducting the survey. Most respondents took 20-30 minutes to answer the questionnaire.

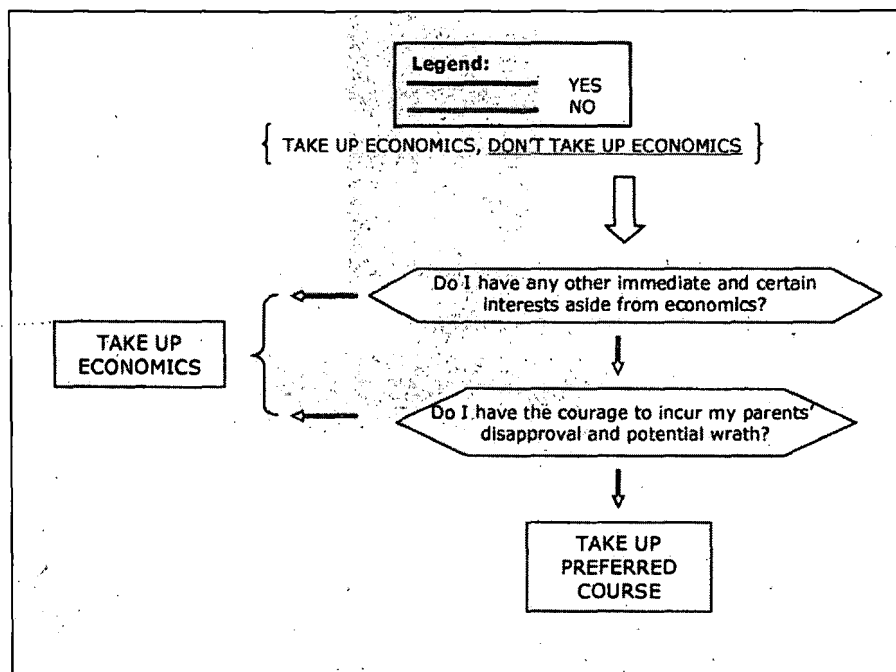
schools with regard to the factors to consider when choosing a course. Cost of living near the college or university was a primary consideration among respondents from high schools outside Davao City, but only a secondary one for respondents from Davao City high schools.

The survey seemed to indicate that there is a potential market for BA Anthropology, in UP Mindanao in particular, among students in public high schools, which coincides well with the reason for being of the University of the Philippines ('to serve the people').

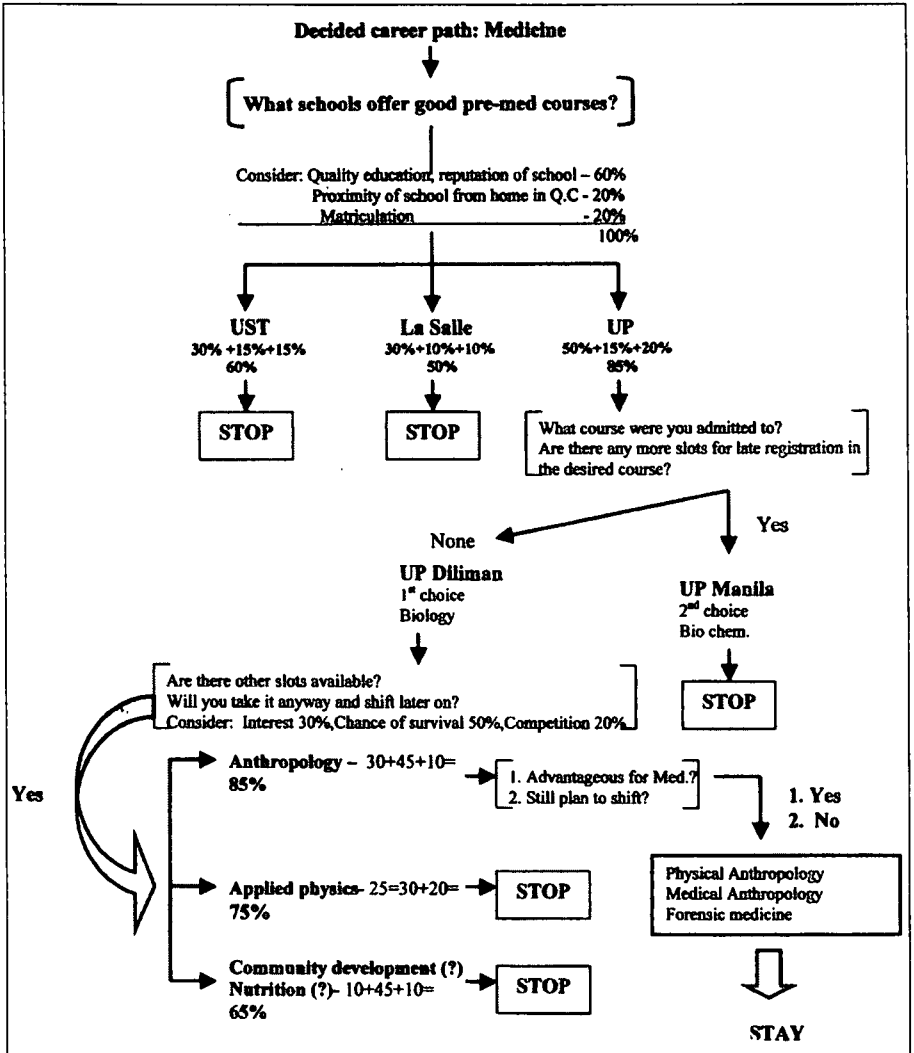
In order to get some insight into how potential students actually make the choice of taking up Anthropology we now turn to the decision-tree models of my students in UP Diliman.

### Deciding Anthropology: a closer look

The decision tree is a method for exploring the rationality behind decision-making by reducing the process to the smallest considerations, and ordering the preferences that inform the decision, in a linear fashion (see e.g. Gladwin 1989). Below is a sample simplified decision-tree model:



A more complicated model which illustrates the path of a student who ended up in Anthropology “by chance” and decided to stay follows:



The students (sophomores, juniors or seniors of various majors that were enrolled in my classes in Economic Anthropology over the years 2004-7, and diagrammed their decision trees as part of either an exam or a reflection paper) noted that their decision trees represented the decision in a manner

more linear and precise and 'clinical' than making the decision actually felt like. One wrote of the "long weeks I spent agonizing over my decision", another estimated that it took roughly 2-3 weeks to decide on how to fill out the UPCAT application. For some, the transaction costs were low, e.g. the high school automatically processed the filing of application for admissions to UP. (And the cost of applying to Ateneo, UST and other alternative schools were high.) For some, ending up in Anthropology was a matter of chance (having not made it to a quota course). There were students for whom any course would do as long as it was UP. For others it was about where their friends were:

"I really had no trouble deciding on what course to take in college for I somehow let my friends decide that for me. I wanted to be where they were, hence, Business Administration. However, when I unfortunately failed to pass the quota in BA, I was forced to find another college. Now this was the decision that I should have made a long time ago, a decision to choose what I really wanted... I really should have given much thought to what course I should take since my future depends on it... But I like to think of myself as flexible and I could excel in anything I choose."

Making the choice for many involved a quest for greater self-knowledge. ("What do I want to be?") Some asked themselves if they had the aptitude for particular courses and conducted an inventory of personal strengths and weaknesses. "In Anthropology, you don't have to deal with Math subjects, which I'm just not good at." Some searched for more information before making the decision. For many this included considering possible competition for their preferences and so they strategized in the selection of their first choice of course (in the UPCAT application).

"I searched for a course that was not quota, easy to pass and related to or pre-med course. I thought BA Anthropology was the best choice. So I put it in my UPCAT application as my first choice. And besides, UP Diliman is my best choice of campus."

A second step in many decision trees was to weigh personal preferences against the practical constraints (e.g. "Will my parents pay for this?"), some termed this the "economics" criteria.

"Back in high school I already had a fascination for Anthropology and I gave myself a proper introduction through reading on what I would be expecting from the discipline. In

addition, I was in touch enough with the needs and goals of my family to be able to route my decisions while keeping in mind that I could not afford to waste neither money nor time. Thus, by knowing my limitations I was able to clear my head."  
 [student who chose Anthropology]

Given hindsight, there were some who expressed regret at having originally chosen as they did:

"Honestly speaking, I don't know what I really want. Let me put it this way. I want to become a doctor, but since my parents can no longer send me to med. school, I regret I am taking Anthropology. I should have taken the risk of taking Nursing so that I could go abroad and earn money. After that I can send myself in any med. school I want."

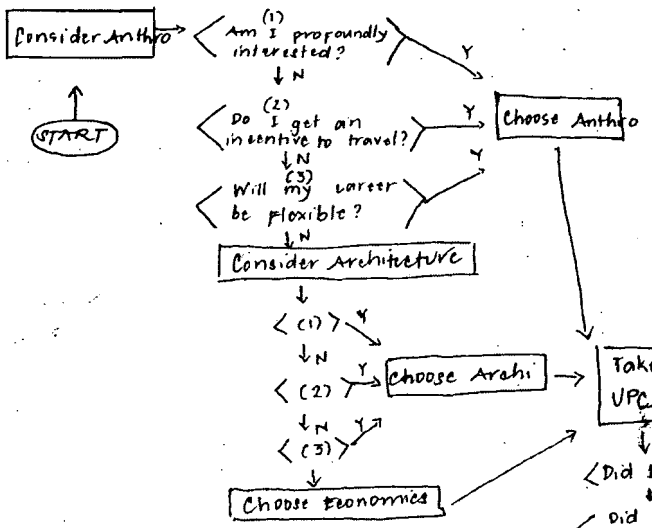
For most, choosing a course was closely bound up with the choice of school

"I had complete freedom in choosing my course; however, going into the possibility that I may have passed the UPCAT yet failed to make it to any of my three course choices the restraints already set in. Surely, I will still push through with the decision to enroll in a last-resort course at UP instead of registering myself at Ateneo... Obviously I will not trade cheap, quality education for expensive, quality education."

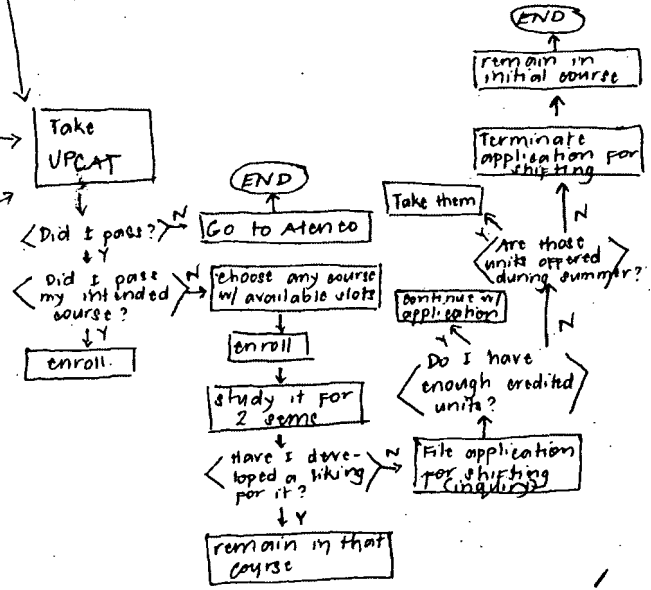
"Anthropology against Nursing. Anthropology won because I passed it and the pull force of the school "UP Diliman" was very strong. I couldn't deny the fact that it would give prestige to myself."

"Upon getting the results of the UPCAT, I learned that I had been admitted to anthropology. But I thought twice of enrolling in UP (with anthropology as my course) because in the other university I applied in, I got admitted into biology and medical technology. I considered enrolling there instead for their expertise on medical courses. And besides, the courses I got there were "really" pre-med courses. But then again, UP was something. I considered my reasons for not taking bio in UP and then looked at the factor of job hiring: who would have the most probability to be hired, a UP graduate or a graduate of the other university? The answer was clear and with tips from my relatives and some older friends, I finally decided on taking anthropology in UP."

### PRE-UPCAT DECISIONS



### POST-UPCAT DECISIONS





As seen in the diagram in the preceding page, some of the decision trees extended to the students considering further decisions about shifting to another course from their initial courses, including deciding to stay.

The choice of school for some was also closely related to the social environment and the nature of the student population.

"From visiting UP I realized that I like the atmosphere and the people in UP. Ateneo was a whole different story altogether. I liked the course I got into but questions like: would I be comfortable here? or would I make friends here or should I change my identity just to fit in in this school? kept bothering me."

"In the decision tree, notice that the courses may lead to law or are pre-law courses (except for microbiology). These courses have long been set in my mind out of both practicality and interest... I am more inclined toward social sciences than hard sciences. The decision tree also shows that I have only 2 schools, namely UP and UST, as choices. The reason for this is that I considered the cost of enrolling in schools like Ateneo, La Salle and UA&P... Another important factor was the kind of environment the school had to offer. Private schools tend to overshelter their students or tend to have a homogenous culture. In UP and UST, there are people to meet from many walks of life."

Having narrowed down to some choices, an important consideration in making the decision in many of the models was personal interest or 'passion': whether they could see themselves in the course "for the long haul" ("Will I be happy doing this?", "Is my passion enough to sustain me through this course?"). "Being passionate brings out excellence, and it's practical because you're sure you won't change courses after 1, 2, or 3 years". This also extended to the future after graduation. The students dream of employment and opportunities that would be personally satisfying:

"I had no inkling whatsoever about how much an Anthropology graduate would make in the employment pool, such that the criteria that I used to justify my choice all stemmed from my desire for personal growth and breadth of experience."

"I think that my criteria for choosing my course were all rational in the sense that I would *still* be addressing my wants,

however untranslatable to money they may seem. But it did occur to me that in asking myself if I were "profoundly interested" in the discipline I would be going into (meaning my desire to maintain my scholastic enthusiasm must be met), I will also be blanketing monetary benefits. Almost surely, a liking for my course will increase my stake at higher grades and graduation honors, which in turn increases the possibility of easy employment afterwards."

"Soon, when I have known that I did not get a slot in B.A.A., I already knew that Anthropology would be my course and I told myself that I won't shift to any other course because that was the course that I passed in UPCAT. Second, Anthropology really interests me because of its fieldwork, its holistic approach to human diversity and culture, etc. Third, it would make my college life enjoyable because our focus of study is humans. Fourth, it would satisfy or fulfill my hunger for adventure. Fifth, there is a wide arena of job opportunities that awaits me after graduation. As long as there are humans, we have work. That's it."

## Conclusions

Although not the most popular course, BA Anthropology is a viable choice for potential UP students. The apparent 'market' for BA Anthropology (in Mindanao, as of 2004) was in fact the ideal UP student—a scholar from a public school.

Choosing a degree program is a choice centered around the self, it is about the formation of coherent personal identity, and involves the sense of the future and one's survival. It ideally requires some information: about the content of the course, about what it could lead to, about available options, and self-knowledge. The choices are constrained by costs, including opportunity costs and transaction costs, by family/parent's expectations, by competition, by class prospects and political economy. The 'education market' is one where young people compete to gain entry into educational establishments that give best 'quality' of education for money. (While institutions of learning also compete to attract the best students.)

Universities are 'branded products', the 'Tatak U.P.' is for many something like 'Oxbridge' in the UK. Education is also seen as self-investment, a form of capital ('educational capital' in the words of

Bourdieu). Regardless of degree, the mere credentials of one's university are perceived to confer prestige and employability/ability to find a job. 'Education', that is, the array of degree programs and schools on offer to potential incoming students, comprises a peculiar sort of merchandise. Not a tangible thing, but a specific set of knowledge and skills to be learned bound up with particular experiences, trials, and new acquaintances, 'education' also encompasses an extended rite of passage. It is a transformative process that one would subject several years of one's life to as 'preparation for the future'.

When choosing among schools and degree offerings, young people are making *life choices*. New high school graduates (perhaps for the first time in their existence) seriously think on what to do with 'the rest of my life', and of fitting into the grander scheme of things: family, friends, self and society. They began by asking themselves— "What do I value?", "What things do I enjoy doing?", "What can I do well?", "What do I want to 'be'/'make of myself'?" The students' decision trees have revealed how BA Anthropology (in UP Diliman), while not always the first choice, fits in with their 'rational' criteria. In sum, the criteria emergent from the decision trees are: 'personal preferences and aptitude', 'economics', 'passion', 'opportunity', and one student also listed 'noble obligation'—that one must 'give back' to one's country. 'Sustainable passion' turns out to be an important concern, which is the reason why a student may feel that the choice has turned out to be 'wrong'; college students then consider 'shifting' to different courses in line with their perception of potential 'career paths' and achievable interests.

## References

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