

Cheryl Fok

Summer 2019

Report on Anthropology Student Research Grant

I used the funds I received to attend a bioarchaeology field school in Kampsville, IL. The 6-week program provides food and accommodation and is hosted every summer by Arizona State University, offering tracks in field archaeology and osteology. I focused on human osteology, and despite having no prior experience with anatomy (the course has no prerequisites) I found the course material very accessible. The osteology course involved learning how to identify bone fragments using features, and how to analyze skeletal characteristics in order to construct a biological profile for an individual by applying different methods and tests. The course was very labour-intensive—we worked up to 10 hours a day, and this work involved studying bones, writing labs, taking quizzes, and preparing presentations. The program also included weekly lectures by a range of professors and occasional field trips to archaeological sites such as Cahokia.

I was motivated to take this course because I hoped it would supplement my anthropology experience at Reed. Reed does not offer courses in biological or physical anthropology, but I believe that there is value in bringing together biological and social/cultural anthropology, despite the growing divide between the two. As evolutionary anthropology was what first stimulated my interest in anthropology, I wanted to be able to approach anthropology from a biological as well as a social or cultural perspective, and, if possible, incorporate both into my future thesis. This course helped me understand the ways in which biological anthropology can be used to inform the social; for example, paleopathology and other skeletal characteristics can point to migration and kinship patterns of historical populations, and offer insight into the behaviour of individuals in life. While the program was very much focused on the accurate construction of a biological profile—the foundation of any social or cultural inferences—it also emphasized the different ways a biological profile could be applied. What I most appreciated in this course was the wealth of resources it provided for personal exploration; for me, what was most helpful was the opportunity to read the many available books, talk to TAs about their experiences, and discuss research with instructors. Jane Buikstra, the leading instructor and the one who pioneered the field of bioarchaeology, was great to work with and always emphasized the interdisciplinary nature of the course and its value. Overall, while I did gain some skills in osteology and archaeology from this course, what I found most valuable was the space it offered for academic exploration.