Anthropology in Action: NAU Students Research Systems of Medicine and Health Inequality in Flagstaff
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This semester, a group of NAU undergraduate and graduate students teamed up with the Poore Medical Clinic to perform applied anthropological research. Dr. Lisa Hardy, Assistant Professor of anthropology, teaches a blended ANT 480/580 medical anthropology course, bringing together students of diverse academic backgrounds to critically examine systems of medicine and health. The primary class project involved a research partnership with the Poore Clinic, a non-profit organization that provides completely free healthcare to the uninsured individuals of Flagstaff and Coconino County. Under the direction of Dr. Hardy, Eric Walden, Executive Director of the Poore Clinic, and Dr. Peter Weiser, President of the Clinic’s Board of Directors, the class created three distinct research foci: the medical providers, the donors, and the patients of the Poore Clinic.

One group of students interviewed volunteer health providers at the Clinic to gauge volunteer satisfaction and motivations for volunteering at the Poore Clinic. Students intend to use this information for recruitment purposes and to ensure providers enjoy donating their time. Despite preconceived explanations students constructed for why the Clinic has trouble recruiting new providers, the students discovered that with flexible scheduling times, an absence of insurance paperwork, and a short volunteer sign-up process, volunteering at the Poore Clinic is astonishingly easy. The students recommended that the Poore Clinic educate potential volunteers on the ease of participation in order to recruit needed medical providers. In addition, this group identified a desire among participating providers to “give back” to their communities. They found that people who volunteer at the Poore Clinic embody a strong sense of community and naturally charitable inclinations.

The second student group sought to identify the giving communities of Flagstaff and understand common motivators for charitable giving. Through semi-structured interviews with current donors and a web-based survey, the students gathered information from over 80 participants. They uncovered several motivators, but a common theme of supporting community and positive missions seems to be the driving force behind charitable giving. Additionally, concerns from donors about how recipient organizations spent money and allocated funds highlighted a need for transparency with regards to an organization’s fiscal management. Ultimately, the students hope their research will be used as a pilot study for the Poore Clinic to expand their donor base and inflow of charitable contributions.

The third student group focused on the patients of the Poore Clinic. Currently, the Clinic does not keep records beyond basic patient profiles. By recording data on the life challenges of patients the staff at the Clinic may be able to detect health and health inequity trends in Flagstaff and Coconino County. An understanding of these trends could lead to better care, increased awareness, and a database from which the Clinic and other groups could advocate for changing housing and community conditions in the area.

Taken together, the students hope that the Poore Clinic can use the outcomes and recommendations as a foundation from which to expand the reach of the mission to serve people in northern Arizona who need medical care. The project also provided invaluable hands-on community action research for the students and increased their awareness of the systems of health in their community.

For more information, visit http://pooremedicalclinic.org/.