

## **Destination: Belize**

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*As a part of the Student Affairs in Higher Education (SAHE) master's degree program at Colorado State University, the authors participated in a field experience course in Belize. This two-week course surveyed the primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational systems of Belize. In addition to an educational focus, an in-depth study of the culture, people, history, government, and the natural environment were critical components to this experience. This article offers observations of Belizean society and, in particular, its educational system. The authors convey how the influence of this experience impacts their philosophy of student affairs and education within the United States. In their conclusion, the authors hope to relay how a valuable field experience of this nature contributes to the positive development of a student affairs professional.*

The following paper is a compilation of the authors' experience during a study tour of Belize. In February 2000, the authors had the privilege of participating in HE 582, Education in Belize: A Study Tour. Under the instruction of Keith Miser and Cheryl Presley, eleven students toured Belize from the north to the south, studying the educational system within the country.

Prior to the actual tour, students participated in a seminar that highlighted the history and the culture of Belize. In addition, students were briefed on the educational system of Belize and had the opportunity to engage in a discussion of the current issues at the forefront of national dialogue in Belize.

The three texts, used to further the preparation for the study tour included: *Belize Handbook* by Chicki Mallan and Patti Lange, published by Moon Travel Handbooks in 1998; a compilation of articles prepared by the instructors; and *Inside Belize* by Tom Barry with Dylan Vernon, published by Resource Center Press in 1995.

The study tour consisted of visits to two elementary/secondary schools, Stann Creek Ecumenical High School in Dangriga and Maya Central Village School at

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the Maya Center Village. Participants also toured three Sixth Forum (equivalent to United States high schools) and Junior College educational facilities. They included Corozal Junior College in Corozal, Muffels Junior College/Sixth Forum in Orange Walk, and Belmopan Junior College in Belmopan. Finally, the students toured two higher education institutions, including The University College of Belize (the only four year institution in Belize) and The Belize College of Agriculture. In addition to the tours and studies of educational institutions, the participants had the privilege to speak to His Excellency Coville Young, the Governor General of Belize, on issues concerning the Ministry of Education.

Throughout the tour, participants used journals as a means to record their experiences. In addition, a question would be posed every night to the group in order to reflect upon the experiences of the tour. At each school, participants met with administrators, faculty, and students. Participants listened to lectures about the schools and the educational system. Belizean students presented cultural pieces, such as dances and songs. Participants asked questions in both public and one-on-one settings with administrators, faculty, and students.

In light of the opinions that are expressed, the authors recognize and acknowledge that there are limitations and biases based on their United States perspective and experiences in Belize. Therefore, the reflections presented are induced by emotions and observations that will warrant the use of the first person in order to express the true experience.

## **BACKGROUND**

The colors of Belize range from dark to light within lush valleys, thick rainforests, sugar cane fields, and dense hills of green. As far as the eye can see, Belize is full of unique treasures and a mixture of people, culture, languages, and shades of skin. A dark-skinned young woman dances in a colorful outfit of white, bright yellow, and outstanding blue. Her thick, distinct accent proudly declares, “Belize – many people, many cultures, that’s our Belize” (personal communication via monologue, February 9, 2000). This is the image from Belize that we take with us: the pride, the appreciation of culture, and the celebration of a myriad of ethnicities. “As the Creole saying goes, *All a we mek Belize* –we all make up Belize” (HE 582 Education in Belize: A Study Tour, 2000, p. 67).

In a foreign land, our United States-born lenses sought to analyze the culture, environment, politics, people, and above all, the educational system of Belize. Although an enriching experience, we question our right to scrutinize and

criticize a culture not of our own. Ethically, it would only be right if we were now willing to take the information, the emotions, the insights that we have gained through the Belize study tour and use them to better both American and Belizean society. We feel that inspiring students' experiences through our own is essential.

The study tour has served to demonstrate and reinforce one fact for us: humans all have a lot to learn from one other. Each individual's responsibility should be to be accepting, be conscious of personal biases, and work hard to *listen* to others with open eyes, ears, and hearts. Through these experiences, we have come to realize that, as student affairs professionals, we need to be culturally aware and willing to expand others' horizons, as well as our own.

We will convey how the influence of our experience impacts our philosophy of student affairs and education within the United States. A valuable field experience of this nature contributes to the positive development of student affairs professionals. In light of the recent destruction created by Hurricane Keith that has devastated Belize, we have come to realize the importance of connections and inter-cultural understanding. The relationships developed with the culture, the people, and the educational system in Belize have a lasting and profound effect on our student affairs philosophies.

#### **FIELD EXPERIENCE**

As Barnhart and Groth (1987) acknowledge, "international awareness and knowledge are important in the total being of an individual living in our contemporary times" (p. 78). A sense of international awareness for students is gained through study abroad experiences. As Kitty McCarthy, Assistant Director of Admissions at the University of Rochester stated, "students who have participated in a study abroad program seem to express broadened awareness of another culture and a greater acceptance of others" (cited in AIFS, 1987, p. 2). Goodwin and Nacht (1988) outlined the prospective outcomes of a study abroad experience: to become cultured citizens and broader intellectuals; globalizing or internationalizing the populations; to fulfill institutional missions;

to explore one's background or heritage; to gain fluency in a foreign language; to use the world as the laboratory; to enhance personal knowledge; to learn from others; and to improve cross-cultural relations. Increasingly, study abroad has been seen as a means to develop the necessary skills to compete in an interdependent, multicultural world.

The study tour in Belize played a significant role in how we shape our student affairs perspective. The opportunity to truly experience a student's life in

another country allowed us to become even more knowledgeable of what students around the globe experience. As participants, we observed how faculty and administrators react to students and how those reactions contrast with faculty and administrators in the United States. Societal and cultural values were interwoven more into education in Belize than they appear to be interwoven into education in the United States. By examining the cultural perspective of Belizean administrators, we were challenged to examine our own philosophies. Barrows, Clark, & Klein (1980) indicated that any student graduating from college today must realize that they are living in a world where people and institutions are increasingly interdependent. Study abroad experiences have allowed students to examine these realities from a different perspective than their own culture's perspective. A student's entire outlook on life may be changed as a result of the experiences encountered while participating in international education (Carsello & Greaser, 1976). We were able to benefit from this interchange of ideas and perspectives in both our personal and professional lives.

#### **OBSERVATIONS OF BELIZE**

Observations were an integral part of the study tour. The study tour consisted of a series of interpretations based upon the various people and places we visited, including schools, cultural centers, governmental figures, administrators, faculty, and students. We concentrated on obtaining an understanding of the individual situations, values, and experiences. By dialoguing with the larger study tour group, we placed those individual experiences into the larger context of education in Belize. Overall, through the observations of Belizean education and culture, the participants gained an immense understanding of Belize.

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#### **EDUCATION**

One of the most beneficial components of the study tour was having the opportunity to visit and explore several different educational institutions throughout the country. The educational system in Belize varies greatly from the educational system in the United States. Harrington and Leiva (1996) described the Belizean educational system as “an eclectic mix of internal traditions and external linkages, Belize defies easy categorization” (p. 10). The educational system in Belize changes and transforms continuously. Through conversations at each school, we learned the importance of education to Belizeans. Both the educators and the students expressed their desire to continue with their education, to improve upon the system, and to establish the importance of education within their lifestyles.

### **Educational Comparisons**

The differences between the Belizean educational system and the United States educational system were seen in its faculty, in its campuses, and in its values. Belizean faculty were qualified with similar educational backgrounds to their counterparts in the United States. Belizean academic faculty priorities lay in teaching rather than in research or service, which is dissimilar to United States' academic faculty. A focus on teaching, rather than on research, may benefit students in Belize because the faculty concentrate on their courses and their students. Students in Belize were asked to select their major or academic focus even before beginning their education. Fewer academic disciplines were offered and the most popular majors focused on practical career paths. The importance and significance of education depended on the nature of the school and the varied approaches to education. Each of the schools we visited varied in terms of their finances, populations of students, goals, and administrative styles. For example, many of the junior colleges catered to students in the area and thus had a student population, which mirrored the mixture of that area. Administratively, the Belize College of Agriculture had strict discipline policies because their students lived on campus, whereas the non-residential University College of Belize rarely dealt with student discipline. By virtue of each junior college's mission or focus (i.e. agriculture, liberal arts, professional trades, etc.), their educational goals differed, requiring a large range of decentralized programs.

### **Cultural Influence on Education**

Perhaps the most striking element of the Belizean educational system was the impact that culture has had on education. Belizean education is conveyed through a specific cultural context. Education is not the same all over the world. It is not taught, nor understood, in the same manner. Even teaching and learning occurring on the same topic but within different cultures will be taught and learned differently.

While on the study tour, a common theme was the shift from an English curriculum to a Caribbean curriculum. Being under English colonization, the British system heavily influenced the

structure and foundation of the educational system in Belize. As Belize examines its current needs, the system of education is no longer suitable for their young people. There are conscious efforts being made towards improving the educational system.

According to Harrington and Leiva (1996), “the historical grounding in British educational practice is reflected in a continuing emphasis on a system of external examinations as certification and selection devices...that disproportionately serve the minority of academically talented children and youth” (p. 10). Students in Belize are seeking practical degree programs as “the majority of Belizean students enroll in higher education programs designed not

to prepare them for A-Level [English/British standardized tests] examinations but to prepare them for jobs or for transfer either to the University College of Belize or to U.S. institutions for completion of their baccalaureate degrees” (p. 11). Belizean students are interested in the outcomes of their higher education.

### **Government Influence on Education**

The government’s control over the educational system is astounding. Finances are sparse in Belize, especially within the educational system; the government controls where the money is spent. The principal education administrators at the various institutions repeatedly explained to the participants that primary education is the emphasis in Belize. The government funds teachers’ salaries, and thus the operation of primary level schools. Currently, children are required by law to attend school up through the United States’ equivalent of the sixth grade. Recently, the government has made a commitment to invest 30 million dollars in higher education (P. Saqui, personal communication, February 9, 2000). Higher education administrators and faculty were excited about the prospect of a new educational facility titled, “The University of Belize.”

If a new government comes into power believing the priority for improving Belize is not in higher education, the money could be shifted to other needs. This is truly the definition of organizational instability. The government has control over access and opportunity to education, as well as other areas of society. Due to the large number of different ethnic groups living within the country, the majority ethnic group in the government has an advantage for their own people. The majority control of access, therefore, limits minority group access in education, government, and society in general.

### **Educational Improvement**

Compared to other educational systems within Central America, Belize’s educational system ranks highly; however, the system still has areas in need of improvement (Barry and Vernon, 1995). The areas for improvement are the shortage of qualified teachers, a lack of sufficient funding for adult and technical education, and a lack of bilingual education in a heavily influenced multilingual society (Barry and Vernon, 1995). The administrators and faculty have one goal: the betterment of their students as scholars and as functional citizens of the Belizean society. For example, Belize has begun to establish a four-year institution, “The University of Belize,” which will bring many of their existing schools under one administrative umbrella. The creation of this institution will benefit students and faculty alike and will provide the society with a focused value of education. They hope that more faculty will be interested in conducting research and in providing unique opportunities that allow their students to be involved in research and development. Growing campuses equipped with

numerous services for students will also improve college life and in turn, attract more Belizeans to take advantage of the educational opportunities.

## **CULTURE**

Human nature extends beyond culture, race, and ethnicity. This is perhaps the most fundamental lesson we learned on our study tour. The manner in which people relate to one another is what defines the human race. The culture and people of Belize are unique. They are excited, prideful, willing to share their culture, and beautiful on multifaceted levels. However, historical discrimination and the resulting Belizean nature has led to somewhat negative interactions among the various cultures of Belize. The people experience barriers due to their heritage, ethnicity, and/or culture. The social dilemmas were pronounced most clearly through the educational system.

We admire their respect and interest in preserving their land, environment, and resources. The customs, foods, dances, and traditions that are celebrated within each ethnic group characterize the intriguing culture of Belize. The Belizean culture has had a profound impact on our perceptions of Belize. “Despite the recent influence of American culture on young people, most Belizeans are still proud of their culture...Belize’s work environment is much more relaxed than in industrialized countries” (HE 582 Education in Belize: A Study Tour, 2000, p. 70).

### **Ethnicity**

Only native Belizeans can distinguish easily between the various ethnic groups. Creoles, Garifunas, Mayan, Mestizos, and Blacks encompass many of the ethnic groups in Belize. Observers from the United States would recognize them all as *blacks*. Despite the racial similarities, racism and discrimination run rampant. Mestizos dominate government; therefore, Mestizos have privilege to higher education. Higher education requires money, mostly in the form of scholarships. The social connections are rather clear because scholarships are granted by the government. As we visited the various schools, we noticed an abundance of cultural pride. However, as we carefully observed the dynamics between students, we noticed the culture represented at each particular school was the majority culture. Mention of Mayans was minimal and when school administrators were questioned about the “numbers” of different ethnic groups, they seemed to avoid the question and, perhaps, the racism that exists.

### **Language**

The mixture of languages has also helped to establish a unique culture. They have integrated all the languages within the culture, yet each defines a portion of

what it means to be Belizean. Although English is the official language, Spanish, Creole, English, and other native languages are heard in the streets, markets, government, and educational settings. The mix of people, origins, beliefs, and traditions are distinct, and each expresses a different history particular to Belize. Although each group of people is present in society, discrimination still exists. It exists on a different level than it does in the United States.

In the district of Corozal, the Belizeans spoke Spanish as their first language, English as their second, and Creole as their third. In the street, we heard many languages and dialects, but we did not hear English. Barry and Vernon (1995) suggest that, "English remains the language of business and politics, [but] Spanish is becoming more widely spoken...the Garifuna and several Mayan communities speak their own languages...[and] Creole is also being used more as a common language" (p. 71). The variety of languages spoken creates a unique atmosphere in Belize. The common languages of Creole and sometimes English provide the ability to feel connected to one another. Without at least one common language, Belize's culture and society would feel disconnected. Observing the differences in language, their expressiveness when they spoke Creole, and their embarrassment when they spoke English, was a remarkable element of the cultural learning experience.

#### **Belizeans**

The differences of people create an extraordinarily diverse society, culturally, ethnically, historically, and linguistically. It would be rare to find a Belizean who claimed to have originated from the native population of American Indians. This rare characteristic accounts for the incredible history of each ethnic or cultural group of people who all claim to be Belizean. At the beginning of the trip, we, as United States citizens, wondered what exactly it meant to be Belizean. Throughout our travels, we received several different answers. Each of the groups, including the Mayans, Whites/English, Creoles, Garifunas, Mestizos, West Indians, Mennonites, refugees from Latin America, and the Tawainese, have a history that ties them to Belize. "For most Belizeans the presence of so many different ethnic groups in their country is as much a national treasure as the Barrier Reef or Mayan ruins" (HE

582 Education in Belize: A Study Tour, 2000, p. 67). All their histories combine to form the diverse cultures that define Belize.

The myriad of people in Belizean society was intriguing and led to some fascinating group discussions throughout our journey. We truly felt that there was an understanding of the diversity existing in Belize. Although Belizeans struggle with their own diversity, we found their acceptance to be broader than the United States' connotation of multiculturalism. United States citizens have

an awareness that there are differences between people in the society, but they hardly address the issues nor do they truly accept their neighbors. Belizeans recognize, welcome, and attempt to understand the various cultures.

### **Discrimination**

Acceptance only reaches so far; discrimination is where Belizean culture is lacking. Augustine Flores and Pio Saqui discussed the idea that discrimination is evident in Belizean society (personal communications, February 10, 2000). They admitted honestly to the discrimination that exists because of the diversity in Belize. Both Flores and Saqui are very proud of their cultures and backgrounds as Garifuna and as Mayan, respectively. Their histories are extremely important to their culture. Each of their cultures is changing along with the rest of Belize. Both Flores and Saqui felt that culture is important to Belizeans and that no one group should lose sight of their own cultural practices. In other words, Flores felt that it was important for people to acknowledge the differences and those aspects that characterize Belizeans, without oppressing one another (personal communication, February 10, 2000).

Barry and Vernon (1995) also suggest that, “racial divisions certainly exist in Belize but are manifested more in racial stereotyping than in direct competition or overt strife” (p. 71). We found this to be accurate, but we were surprised to find that, even though stereotyping was present, it was based less on ignorance than is typically the case in the United States. Belizeans generally knew more about the histories and ethnicity’s of cultures other than their own more than citizens in the United States. Inequalities still exist among cultures, but general awareness and knowledge is greater among Belizeans than among residents in the United States. Hopefully, the future will bring more open conversations about how to end discrimination and how to appreciate fully the richness of diversity in Belize. Just as a Belizean politician describes “I think I see a new Belize where the Creole, the Mestizo, the Garifuna and the Maya, are not separated as I have listed them, but

united as Belizeans” (HE 582 Education in Belize: A Study Tour, 2000, p. 67).

### **APPLICATION**

By attempting to remove our United States-born lenses, we were able to internalize our impressions in order to understand Belize and what it means to be Belizean. We were frustrated that the United States appears to be the model for education and lifestyle, which is used all over the world, and Belize is no exception. It emulates the United States’ system. The United States’ media and cinema portray United States’ lifestyles, which greatly influences the Belizean way of life. We grapple with whether the United States’ model is the best

model. Does the United States decide which is the most beneficial form of education or lifestyle for Belizeans? Is the United States trying to have this affect on other countries? Or is it simply the perception of western culture that causes other cultures to change and adjust accordingly? Is the United States trying to build one culture? Would this one culture destroy the unique differences within Belize? However, focusing on the United States as a model may be detrimental to Belize. The United States' goal of diversity may differ from Belize's and, in fact, may need to cater to different needs.

As student affairs professionals at the beginnings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we realize how far the United States educational system has evolved. However, through its evolution, we realize it has lost simplicity, pride, and culture. Students do not latch onto education for education's sake, instead they connect with culture. Culture drives the desire to learn, to be able to give back to society, and to stimulate character and civility.

The way people in Belize are willing to learn about one another's culture is extremely valuable to note. They may not be in a position to politically break down the power structure (government/majority rule), but, as students and faculty, they are interested in accepting one another. This phenomenon characterized our perceptions of Belize in reference to our United States' perspective. The educational system of the United States may be in a better place to "accept" all students and, politically, the United States may be structured in a manner that does not "openly" discriminate based on status. However, the United States does not seem as well prepared to comprehensively appreciate one another to the extent we observed in Belize. We noticed that there exists a different set of inter-cultural challenges for Belize and the United States. In Belize, cross-cultural discrimination manifests itself through limited access for ethnic minority groups to higher education. In contrast, the manner in which Belizeans embrace one another's cultures forces us to recognize a critical disparity of cross-cultural communication in the United States. By recognizing this need for increased appreciation, we, as student affairs professionals, can introduce this concept to our students and encourage them to get to know their classmates and to try to understand others.

Sharing our experiences of Belize with our students may give them a new perspective. The overall theme, which we did not expect, became the fact that we were taken out of our normal paradigm and challenged without realizing the effect. It is extremely valuable to allow participants to actually see and experience another culture and perspective. Realizing that this is impossible to

do for every student, the United States' higher education system has the responsibility of creating an environment that will allow students of various

racess, backgrounds, cultures, languages, and religions to interact with each other.

## **CONCLUSION**

Education is an international phenomenon. It ranges from formal to informal, but always serves as a basic need for human development. After experiencing our studies in Belize, our United States' lenses have been transformed. Not only have we realized the strength of education in Belize, but we have, in turn, come to understand the strengths and weaknesses of education within the United States. Through the process of analyzing another cultures' educational system, we have been able to come to a deeper understanding of what motivates the educational philosophies in the United States. By recognizing these philosophies, which have now become a part of how we shape our student affairs practices, we have come to understand how limited they are. By integrating these new ideals, philosophies, and practices, we are able to challenge and broaden our ideas to understand education within the United States. By practicing this, we can make a conscious effort to enhance the college experiences for the students we serve.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank Keith and Ann Miser and Cheryl Presley for their commitment to making this study tour a success. In particular, we appreciate the opportunity to have an authentic cultural encounter with Belizean society. We would like to thank our classmates for an intellectually and socially stimulating experience. To Rosalie Cortell, we appreciate your behind-the-scenes organization of the trip. Glenn Deguzman, thanks for your enthusiasm and insight. Finally, to Pio and Jennie Saqui, many thanks for setting aside your valuable time to share your culture, humor, and navigating skills with us. Most of all, we would like to thank all the government officials, administrators, faculty, staff, students, and citizens of Belize for their willingness to enlighten us.

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