

Andrew Heiskell Awards for Innovation in International Education

2005-2006 Nomination

Heiskell Award Category: Study Abroad

Name of Institution: Valdosta State University

Name of Program: Belize Summer Field School

Nomination Submitted by:

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Program Website (if applicable):

http://www.valdosta.edu/soc/study_abroad_in_belize.htm

Summary of Program (50-100 words):

The Belize Summer Field School is designed to introduce U.S. students to the realities of developing countries in a "real life" environment. Over the course of four weeks among Kekchi Maya farmers, our students are exposed to a previously-unknown simplicity of life, new customs, and relations. This challenge has an unexpectedly strong impact on both the professional and on cultural growth and maturation of the students involved. During its nine years of development, the program has evolved from a departmental major field program in ethnography into a diverse, cross-disciplinary program where students from a wide variety of majors study in a complex team environment.

The Valdosta State University Belize Summer Field School is a four-week cultural immersion program that plunges a small group of dedicated students into the life of the Kekchi Maya. Students live and learn alongside these native peoples and are given an opportunity to learn about and apply anthropological research methods, and develop the writing skills needed for the practice of cultural anthropology in a way that would not be possible in the traditional classroom.

Program participants live in the village of Blue Creek (population: 150) during the week and take weekend side trips to places of interest elsewhere in the country. Each side trip is designed to familiarize students with issues of the larger global political economy: migration, ethnicity, ecology, tourism as a development strategy, IMF policy, and the operation of non-governmental organizations. Students take two courses, Ethnographic Writing and The Anthropology of Developing Nations, each designed to provide a highly hands-on learning experience. The program director, Dr. Matthew Richard, conducts both courses; each consists on five one-hour lectures per week, individualized teacher-student sessions, peer review sessions, and a writing project tailored to each student's research interests.

Field work is a crucial part of anthropological study, and the Belize Summer Field School encourages students to do ethnographic work in a variety of areas. In past years, participants have studied folk tales and music, ethnicity, fishermen, schizophrenia, the Maya domestic cycle, modernization, ethnobotany, the role of women, Belizean political parties, inter-ethnic marriages, expatriates, and cacao farmers, to name a few. In 2003, students wrote, produced, and edited a short film entitled "What the Maya Want," and five students presented it before the Southern Anthropological Society at its annual meeting later that year. Film-making is now a regular part of the program.

Students are asked to do some bibliographic work before the program begins so that they can arrive in Belize with a strong foundation upon which to build their ethnographic work. Dr. Richard has a wide variety of contacts in Belize, and he works diligently to match students with key informants who can help them elucidate the specific issues in which they have an interest. Students are encouraged to become better investigators and social scientists; Dr. Richard examines their questionnaires and their data and urges them to think about various methodological and theoretical issues. Students apply these newly honed skills in a variety of ways; in 2005, for example, a participant investigated the cultural continuities between Indian Hindus and the East Indian population of the small village of Forest Home. She wanted to know how much of the original Hindi culture still remained among the descendants of those Indian Hindus

who came to Belize as indentured servants over one hundred years ago, so Dr. Richard arranged a home stay for her with a family. The student was so successful in her fieldwork that she will present a paper on that topic at the Southern Anthropological Society next spring. Participants frequently participate in conferences as a result of their experience in Belize; past participants have also published papers or submitted their work to student ethnographic competitions.

The program utilizes frequent guest lecturers to speak to students on a variety of interesting and relevant topics. Past lecturers have included one of the world's foremost tropical botanists, archaeologists, Peace Corps volunteers, and Maya Human Rights campaigners; students have heard lectures on the environmental health of the Gulf of Honduras and schizophrenia among the poor; they have discussed alternative models for development, such as ecotourism; they have also seen musical performances by one of the last of the great Paranda musicians in all of Central America, Paul Nabor.

One of the central priorities of the Belize Summer Field School is to have participants use this experience as a stepping stone to professional development. Many of the students have received Georgia Board of Regents Scholarships of \$500 or \$250 as a reward for their excellent scholarship at Valdosta State University; others have written wonderful ethnographies that they have presented at either the Valdosta State University Council on Undergraduate Research, or at the aforementioned Southern Anthropological Society. Two of those conference participants have won undergraduate ethnography awards, and one had her paper published in the journal, *Southern Anthropologist*. It is not at all unusual, then, for students to add five or six lines to their resumes as a result of going to Belize. They need no longer be embarrassed that their resumes list unrelated activities and a diploma, like those of most of their peers, because they now stand out.

In addition to an invaluable academic experience, the Belize Summer Field School gives participants a life-changing glimpse into a culture completely removed from their own. Most Americans are accustomed to somewhat extravagant lifestyles replete with personal luxuries: personal living space and private cars; personal music and entertainment on demand via personal computers; personalized taste in clothing and in various consumer products. Individuality is perhaps the most prominent characteristic of identity-construction in American society, and it is the first thing participants surrender in Belize: they ride crowded buses (for which they sometimes wait hours), and they sleep two or three people to a room; their dining room table seats twelve, and they travel to most places on foot or by bicycle; the shops they patronize have but a small selection of products, as do the restaurants; they get truly dirty and take cold showers; they sometimes have to deal with noxious plants and jellyfish, even the occasional tarantula. As a result, students learn a lot about natural resources and their use.

Many previous students have altered their lives and goals in a way that they attribute directly to their time in Belize. Several have joined the Peace Corps and Americorps; others have pursued graduate studies in anthropology and/or psychology. In Belize, students reframe their ideas about ecology and man's place in it; while political ecology can be described in textbooks, the Belize Summer Field School participants' firsthand experience puts the lesson across in a deeply personal way that is unlikely to be forgotten.