

Four-week cultural field school among Kekchi Maya in Belize, June 5-July 2, 2006. This program has been in existence for 9 years. Study a variety of issues including ecology, psychology, political economy, education, and tourism while living in a small village. 3- or 6-credit curriculum in "Ethnographic Writing" and/or "The Anthropology of Developing Nations." Course includes language training and close mentoring in addition to wonderful weekend excursions on the coral reef and in the rainforest. Price including airfare, in-country travel, room, 2 meals per day, entry and exit fees is \$2,476. Tuition is extra. For a preview, go to

<http://www.valdosta.edu/cip/BelizeAnthropologySociologyFieldSchool.shtml>

**Contact Dr. Matthew Richard,
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mjrichar@valdosta.edu Applications must include a 500-word proposal and a letter of recommendation from the applicant's home institution**

Student Experiences

Christen Bales:

I really could write a book about how the program has affected my life and my character. I had no idea what I was getting myself into the day I saw the yellow flyer hanging from a sea of wanted roommate adds and used books for sale in the University Center. As many other students, I was encapsulated in the American culture...but wanted to see the rainforest. Amongst other somewhat selfish reasons, I signed up for the Belize field school.

While in Belize, I felt as though my eyes were open for the first time. The diversity and poverty blasted me in the face as my feet touched ground in this third world country. And I knew the rainforest vacation that I had expected was no more. While in Belize, I shadowed a psychiatric nurse. During this time, Mrs. Aviola and I conducted home visits. During these visits, we counseled victims of domestic violence, mothers who had lost their children to illness (of which were treatable in America), and schizophrenics. During these visits, I learned the impact of culture and environment on the manifestation and presentation of mental illness. And that my tools and knowledge that I had gained from the university in the southern region of Georgia was almost useless when applied to the Mayan, Garifuna population. During this trip, I developed a compassion for mankind while strengthening my passion for psychology. I am currently pursuing a master's degree in Clinical Psychology and use my Belize experience to educate others in my program on the importance of being a culturally sensitive therapist. There are many plans in my near future, all of which have been impacted by the Belize experience. As of now I have two plans. The first is to join the Peace Corp and live in a third world country for 2 years. My other alternative is to work for the military as a licensed mental health practitioner. Here I would be contracted out to countries that have experienced natural disasters, as a crisis counselor. Both are plans that I would have never placed myself in prior to going to Belize. I have realized the vastness of the world, and that life is too short to stay culturally encapsulated.

Shelly Tarkenton-Yankovsky:

I attended the study abroad program to Belize in the summer of 1999 – this was the very first time the program was offered. I traveled with 11 other students and two professors. We arrived first in Belize City and stayed there for a few days. For three and a half weeks we stayed a few days in several cities: Caye Caulker, Dangriga, San Ignacio, Flores and Tikal Guatemala, and finally back to Belize City.

As an undergraduate anthropology student the opportunity to study abroad made perfect sense. The trip was just long enough to allow me to experience new ways of life and new ways of doing things. Most importantly however, it allowed me to 'get my feet wet' doing fieldwork – something I had previously only read about.

As part of my class assignment I gathered interviews from people in addition to doing lots of observation. I was even lucky enough to do participant observation – for example, at the hotel we stayed at in Caye Caulker I helped clean hotel rooms with Maria – a local whom I befriended.

As a result of my time in Belize I was able to do a presentation at VSU entitled "Making Sense of the Exotic", additionally I wrote a paper entitled "Manufacturing Citizens: National Language Policy in Belize". I presented this paper at the Southern Anthropological Association in March 2000 and won the student paper competition. This paper was published in their journal the "Southern Anthropologist" - my first publication!

I cannot imagine what my academic future would have looked like had I not had this experience as an undergraduate. Currently, I have just received my Master's Degree in Applied Anthropology and will continue to pursue anthropology. I believe my success was made in part because of the strong foundation that studying abroad gave me and I highly recommend it to others.

Mirabai Oyao:

Studying abroad in Belize was an experience that I doubt I'll forget. I remember hearing Dr. Richards talk about this amazing place and the exceptional people who lived there. I was so inspired by what he had described that I called my mother on my walk back to my dorm and told her I was going to go to Belize that summer even though I didn't know how I was going to pay for it. I couldn't wait to experience the adventure he had so vividly place in my mind. So sure enough, a couple months and a minority scholarship later I was flying with five other students to meet the reality that is Belize.

The program in Belize is an amazing program that offers students a taste of the world and valuable hands on anthropological experience. Punta Gorda alone is home to several different ethnic groups whose vitality exceeds the poverty they endure. Aspiring anthropologists and students studying other disciplines seem to find their niche in a place like Punta Gorda. Be it music, medicinal plants, linguistics, psychology, education etc. students can satisfy their interests with relative ease because the people there are so eager to assist. Being an Ethnographic Field school, each student was expected to produce ethnography from the area. Research was to be conducted during the week and reflected upon in post-dinner classes. My own experience of this process was founded in the love I have for children and for language. So naturally I gravitated towards the school system. I spent some weeks observing the Standard VI and Kindergarten classrooms at Punta Gorda Methodist School. The first day I entered the classrooms many faces of various shades welcomed me. Later I identified these children as being Mestizo, Garinigu, Creole, Maya and East Indian. From this vivacious bunch I was able to accumulate a smorgasbord of qualitative data. I focused in on how these children had formed their own ethnic and national identity and how they had come to regard each other in terms of

ethnicity. Through the children's written and oral responses it became clear that attitudes and identities had been forged in school which attempted to unify, and divide by the very nature of ethnic tensions evident in Belizean culture. I focused on semantics. Understanding the meaning that they tie to words or labels they dubbed each other with gave me great insight into the meaning systems they possessed. The whole process of creating the ethnography was the most rewarding experience I have had in my college career. The raw experience I had with those children was very valuable to my own growth as a person. It was important for me to engage with them and to demonstrate effective communication and also be an astute listener. Putting yourself out there in pursuit of knowledge is really invigorating. When I look back on it, and I surely understood it at the time, I see that my passion for people was truly realized in Belize.

The "extracurricular" experiences I had over there were also really cool. It was great to be able to hike through the jungles, jump off a..... ledge into a water hole, sleep on the beach at the cayes, snorkel with colorful fish, eat mangoes right off the trees (on my daily mile-long walks in and out of town), Dance with the Maya women in Laguna and get my hair braided in Livingston, Guatemala just to mention a few highlights. I often consult these photos that I have from the trip when I'm surrounded by the San Francisco fog to remind myself of the feeling of absolute autonomy I had there- free of any obligation other than self realization. The study abroad program is unique because of its perfect location for "getting one's feet wet" and relatively small group size. The professor, Dr. Richards, has a lot of experience down there and really lets students discover whatever it is I think we go down there to find.

Upon return, I was fortunate enough to be able to present my ethnography at the Southern Anthropological Societies Annual Conference in the spring of 2004. I also presented it in a lecture series along with the documentary our group made on "What the Maya Want" at Valdosta State University and Then at the Undergraduate Symposium??? Fill in the blank here Mateo! these opportunities that stemmed from that summer challenged me but were fruitful in that I can look back on the whole experience and feel like I completed the process.

From Mandy Hancock:

I participated in the Belize Field School this past summer, 2005. It was honestly one of the best experiences of my life. Although I am still learning the techniques of ethnography, I got a real taste of what it is like to work in the field, gathering data. I met amazing people and had the opportunity to participate in a culture very unlike my own. That was the most enlightening aspect of the trip. I was also able to experience the natural earth in ways I'd never even imagined and in so doing, overcame a few fears.

Overall, this field school focuses on challenging physical and intellectual limitations by exposing students to aspects of this world difficult or even impossible to experience in our own culture and on our own soil. It enlightens students and allows them to gain a new perspective which allows them to view our world through a more global lens. Personally, it has taught me to be more active in obtaining information about the world that exists outside our borders, as well as thinking more critically about the information received within.

It is my opinion that Dr. Matthew Richard is the best suited professor with which to embark on this journey. He has a passion for anthropology and seems to enjoy observing students experience everything this trip has to offer. I have plans to return to Belize as his assistant to broaden my experience and follow up on the project I initiated on the first trip, which explores cultural models of change in a Maya village. I feel that this paper has potential to be presented and possibly published. I am honored that I have the opportunity to return.