



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Legacy of the ethnographic field school in Belize

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**Abstract**

The Ethnographic Field School in Belize has been training American undergraduate students and Belizean interns in basic ethnographic research methods since 2013. During this time, in collaboration with university study abroad offices and Belizean governmental and non-governmental agencies and organizations, the field school has conducted community-based ethnographic research on several community development issues (e.g., sugar cane farming, child labor, education, and health). Students gain skills in ethnographic methods as well as personal growth. The community within which we conduct our research benefits through our findings being shared with agencies and organizations that develop development policies and programs. The long-term legacy of the field school includes the development of student participants' ability to adopt a culturally relativistic lens and skills to apply to future study and careers, as well as our partners using our findings for their community development projects.

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2013, I have led eight, month-long, ethnographic field school seasons in northern Belize. This field school is organized by the Center for Applied Anthropology (CfAA)<sup>1</sup> at Northern Kentucky University (NKU) with the assistance of NKU's Office of Education Abroad<sup>2</sup> and the Cooperative Center for Study Abroad (CCSA).<sup>3</sup> The goals of the field school are twofold. The first goal is to train undergraduate students in basic ethnographic field methods within an English-speaking non-Western location as part of a community-based applied anthropology research project. The second goal is for the field school's activities to benefit the local community by supplying ethnographic field methods training to Belizean interns and applying anthropological research findings to our community partners. After the field school, we present preliminary findings at scholarly meetings (e.g., Society for Applied Anthropology) and pre-

pare a report to be delivered to our community partners at the beginning of the following field season.

In preparation for conducting ethnographic interviews, we first have two 2-hour orientation meetings before departure. During these orientations, we speak about travel, packing, and readings on research ethics and methods. After arrival to the field, the first week's activities include ethnographic interview methods training, community partner meetings (i.e., Belize Sugar Cane Farmer's Association [BSCFA],<sup>4</sup> National Institute of Culture and History [NICH],<sup>5</sup> Progressive Sugar Cane Producer's Association [PSCPA],<sup>6</sup> Sugar Industry Research and Development Institute [SIRDI],<sup>7</sup> and Village Councils), and practice assignments (e.g., looking, listening, and interviewing exercises). This "ethnographic boot camp" is an intense introduction to ethnographic methods and the partnerships we form with local organizations in applied research.

The 2nd through 4th weeks are filled with daily interviews within sugarcane farming communities, door to door in pairs with a research assistant making initial introductions. We focus our interviews on issues of concern to our community partners and members: household economy, agricultural knowledge, medical concerns, and so forth. These issues are a result of the prior year's interviews (e.g., we always ask informants what questions we should ask when we return, and one or two of the most common concerns are added to the next year's interviews) and our community partner suggestions based upon projects that they are currently working on (e.g., providing workshops in the community on safe handling of pesticides and herbicides). All students follow the same interview guide, except for advanced students, who may also complete their own research project. I design the interview guide based on our prior research findings and suggestions from community members and partners. Students keep a journal, write field notes, and write a service-learning reflection at the end of the field school.

## Student benefits

All but two of the participants in the field school have been undergraduate students. About three-fifths of the students have come from my institution (NKU), while one-fifth are from other CCSA member institutions<sup>8</sup> and the last fifth is from non-CCSA institutions. The only prerequisite for the course is that they have had at least one introductory anthropology course, but many students have had much more coursework in anthropology. Most, but not all, are anthropology majors who plan on pursuing graduate studies in applied anthropology or related fields (e.g., public health and urban studies).

The students gain several skills during and after the field school. Students learn ethnographic interview methods (e.g., ethnosemantic interviewing, pile-sorting, and social networks) and preliminary qualitative data analysis (e.g., field notes and interview notes). In addition to participating in regular field school activities, two students completed research projects that resulted in their publication in a regional peer-reviewed journal (Murrell & Hume, 2018; Zach & Hume, 2014). After the field school, the students assist in creating a report that is published by the CfAA and presented to our community partners during the next field season (Hume et al., 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022). Students also participate in the presentation of our findings at regional and national scholarly conferences (Bricking et al., 2014; Fox, 2017; Haupt et al., 2019; Kienzle & Hume, 2015; Locke & Thaxton, 2015; Ragland, 2016; Yoon et al., 2015; Zach, 2013; Zigelmier et al., 2017).

## Community benefits

The communities where we conduct interviews (villages surrounding Orange Walk Town, Belize) benefit from our activities as we collect and disseminate information about their

experiences and recommendations to agencies and organizations creating community development policies and programs. Our reports (Hume et al., 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022) include information about child labor, sugar cane farming knowledge, education barriers, alcohol and drug abuse, health concerns, traditional medicine, and other topics of community concern. We have not formally collected data on the effects of our research reports on our community partner's education and development projects. However, we have seen how our community partners have changed their perspectives on what drives their programs. For example, while Fair Trade prohibits child labor in the sugar cane industry, the farmers' associations recognize that individual families must make choices about their children's involvement based upon more than an external prohibition but the family's economic needs. Therefore, the associations are working with individual families who have economic hardships to find a way to keep their children from being forced into prohibited labor practices.

In addition to the local community benefits, several Belizean student interns have joined the field school for part or the entire season. Those interns had access to the same materials, training, and experiences as the field school students. As a result, they both give the American students insights into Belizean culture and gain insights about American culture through those same students. The interns earn a certificate of participation, but more so an experience they can leverage for further education or career opportunities. At least two of the prior interns have pursued graduate study in the United States, one of whom has found employment within the Belizean government working on cultural conservation issues. Others have used the skills that they developed during the field school to find employment in customer service, tourism, and education.

## Legacy

The legacy of this field school is part of long-term trends in development research. Field schools are recognized for their experiential learning approach (in the sense of Kolb, 1984), which aligns with participatory methods championed by development scholars. Chambers' (1994) work on participatory rural appraisal, for example, emphasizes the importance of local knowledge and community involvement in driving effective development initiatives—an ethos that this field school embraces. The principle that local, rather than purely external “scientific,” knowledge can lead to more successful development outcomes (e.g., Sillitoe et al., 2005, 12–15) has been foundational to the field school's research methods. By immersing students in real-world settings, this field school cultivates a form of learning that prioritizes collaboration with local stakeholders, shying away from the more extractive, outsider-driven research models.

One of my primary goals as an educator and applied anthropologist is to encourage others to adopt a culturally relativistic lens when evaluating sociocultural issues. In teaching introductory and advanced anthropology courses in person and online, I introduce students to non-Western cultures and focus on the similarities between ours and other cultures rather than othering cultures. During ethnographic fieldwork, students experience firsthand how people in different societies organize their lives, allowing them to appreciate cultural diversity beyond reading and watching movies about them. Rather than learning through theory alone, students engage directly in the everyday practices, beliefs, and norms of the community they are studying, encouraging them to question and reflect on their cultural assumptions. Students observe and are encouraged to think critically about the cultural practices they participate in and internalize a cultural relativistic view through reflection. Finally, through mentorship by faculty, peer mentorship with other students, and mentorship by local interns, students have their ethnocentric views challenged and their culturally relativistic lens polished. Both during the field school and afterward, I have observed how students and interns adopt

a more culturally relativistic view of other cultures and sub/micro-cultures within their own society.

This field school's approach aligns with critical pedagogy approaches, particularly Paulo Freire's emphasis on education as a tool for empowerment through reflection. Freire asserts that learning is an "act of knowing," where learners must take on the role of creative subjects from the outset. It is not about memorizing and repeating but rather critically reflecting on the learning process itself (Freire, 2020, 50). In this context, activities like interviewing serve as platforms for mutual learning, where students and community members engage in dialogue, blending academic insights with lived, practical experiences. Through written reflections, students begin to develop deeper understandings that "go beneath surface meaning, first impressions... to uncover the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences" (Shor, 1992, 129). Ethnographic field schools, such as this one, foster educational experiences where learning extends beyond the classroom, encouraging students to critically reflect on their experiences within the cultural and social contexts in which they are immersed.

At the end of the field school, students write a reflection responding to prompts about their field experience, academic enhancement, civic learning, and personal growth. Students recognize the importance of their field school experience towards their academic goals and the impact that their work has and will have on the local community. As for personal growth, they report how their pre-field school anxiety about traveling abroad, living among strangers, and concerns about their health transformed through experiencing culture shock into being comfortable with their place within the field school team and the local community. Accepting their position within the community allowed them to arrive at a more culturally relativistic view of the local community's issues (e.g., poverty and food insecurity). Finally, students reported that their skills in interviewing and working in groups had significantly increased.

The long-term legacy of the ethnographic field school in Belize on students has been two-fold. First, students develop perspectives and skills they use during their studies and careers. Students who pursued graduate study found that their field school experience allowed them to understand applied development research and practice better. They had real-world experience to ground their theoretical training. As for careers, they were able to explain how anthropology can be applied in real-world settings and then work as part of a team in a workplace doing just that. Second, students gain skills in acquiring a culturally relative outlook on others, allowing them to become active members of their community's development.

## CONCLUSION

Field experiences like the ethnographic field school in Belize can provide students and community members opportunities to learn new skills, explore personal growth, and assist with local development. This immersive experience is more impactful than in-class, on-campus courses for students and community members. While the short-term effects of field experiences can be measured in course assessments and feedback from community partners, the long-term impacts are more difficult to measure with students as we lose contact with them over time. Nevertheless, the community members see and appreciate the long-term community effects of applied projects. Therefore, the direct impacts on students and communities should continue to be the focus of field experiences in anthropology.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nku.edu/academics/artsci/about/centers/cfaa.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://inside.nku.edu/education-abroad.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://ccsa.cc/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://bscfa1959.wixsite.com/bscfa>

<sup>5</sup> <http://nichbelize.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.progressivesugar.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.sirdi.bz/>

<sup>8</sup> For a full list of CCSA member institutions, see <http://ccsa.cc/members/>.

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