

COMD Coogs in Belize: Final Results, Big Grins

The theme for this year's trip to Belize is **smiles**. You can see the smiles in these photos of the UH student participants as they engaged in the activities and events. I'll review some smile makers.

Our undergraduate and graduate students smiled away as they completed clinical work including **66 speech and language screenings**, **69 hearing screenings** (4 were adults from the community), and **9 complete communication evaluations** (4 were planned, the others identified on-site). We returned to one school *for the third year in a row*. Our set up and procedure looked much smoother this year. The Belizean preschools are small, just one or two rooms, so we worked both outside and inside. Part of our trip is learning flexibility. Undergraduate students learned how to recognize when a child spoke Belizean Kriol just fine and didn't think that was a language disorder. Our graduate students were really on the spot. They were called in to do full evaluations with zero preparation time. This is the type of clinical thinking can only be learned with "boots on the ground". Of course, there were *fantastic clinical educators* all around to help with questions and decisions. Our COMD Coogs came back with different experiences and memories that will shape their futures.



We received a huge smile, and even bigger THANK YOU, when we delivered a **table-full of school supplies** for 5 special education classrooms in the cities of San Ignacio and Belmopan. Back in Houston COMD faculty, staff, students, and friends of COMD made donations from wish lists of what the classrooms needed. We all carried a little bit in our luggage to make a big pile. This generosity was a way for those who were not going on the trip to still have an impact. *THANK YOU to everyone who supported us.* (PS, look close at this table. It's jam packed!) These donations are going to real teachers who are thrilled. You can see one getting her box of supplies right after we left.



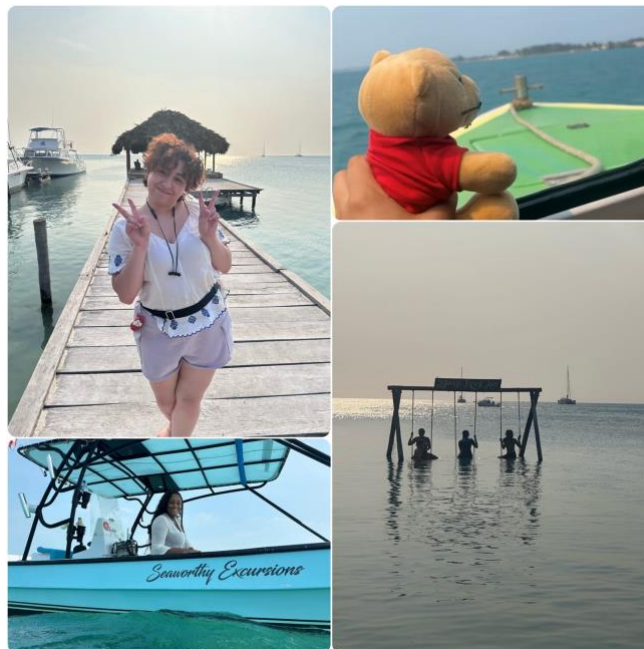
At our last night's dinner, I got to tell the students how Learning Abroad "worked" for them. This group of 16 students were all smiles but more than a bit nervous as we landed in a very different looking airport in a really different looking country. They worked together, supported each other, and **formed new friendships that are solid and strong**. They ended up being all smiles and not even a little bit nervous. *They learned a LOT abroad.*



Everyone smiled during the cultural and fun parts of the trip as well. They smiled through temperatures over 100 degrees every day. They even smiled while making an unplanned $\frac{1}{4}$ mile, uphill trek in the sun of the afternoon after our bus's electric system fried due to the heat. Students smiled as they explored ancient Mayan ruins, made chocolate in a traditional fashion, wandered the produce market, saw a toucan, met local people, and tried new foods.



The last leg of the trip took us to Caye Caulker Island, about an hour's boat ride from the coast. With no requirements, the students were free to relax and explore. (Shout out to the graduate students, though. They did have to finish writing and editing the evaluation reports, but they did it poolside.) Caye Caulker offered swimming, snorkeling, sea creature encounters, and karaoke. There was a lot to smile about.



This trip was exactly what it was supposed to be. It was a step out of your comfort zone experience for our students. It was a practical application of classroom information. It was service learning. It was a chance to meet others and be part of something bigger than yourself. And, bonus, it was smooth the entire time. No panic phone calls, no last-minute (big) problems. I hope that the smiles help you feel that it was all worth the time and effort.

Cheers to COMD Coogs in Belize! On behalf of Byron, Dionne, Kenyetta, thank you for your support. -Michelle

