

Duke University Talent Identification Program in Belize

Written by: Mischa-von-Derek Aikman (age 15)



Students (standing) and some staff (front row) who participated in the 2009 Duke TIP program in Dangriga, Belize.

Duke University (North Carolina), in conjunction with Dr. Arlie Petters's Research Institute (Dangriga, Belize), facilitated the Talent Identification Program (TIP) for the first time here in Belize. Interestingly enough, this year was the first that the student intake was selected not only from the United States, but as well, from Belize and the United Kingdom.

I am grateful that I was one of the four students selected from Belize and awarded a scholarship to attend the program. The purpose of the program is for the students to develop leadership skills in the field of business and also to learn of the host country's culture. The TIP spanned over a period of two weeks in beautiful Dangriga and the experience gained was life changing.

I must say that as the program progressed, it consistently exceeded my greatest expectations! The academic aspect of the TIP was very unconventional in that it defied the traditional classroom setting that most of the pupils were anticipating. It was much more interactive and enlightening than the normal "class per usual" to which we were accustomed. It allowed for each individual to perform at their utmost potential and to motivate their peers to do the same.

The core of the TIP was the challenge presented to us by our Instructors to look critically at three sectors in Belize.

The relatively new and controversial development of our oil deposits was assigned to one group. Students had to research and interview relevant authorities and put together a company to engage in the exploration and extraction of oil with maximum

environmental protection to Belize and with a fair return to the Government and people of Belize. The very sensitive issue of industry corruption was also addressed.

Another group of students was tasked with Eco Tourism development and they chose the development of “Why Not Island” in Dangriga, as a Tourist Village. Students immersed themselves in the community and were most impressive with their final product for a comprehensive Tourism developmental plan for the entire district.

The third group of students was tasked with exploring Marketing Technology. They chose to set up a company to repair and assemble computers in Belize. This too resulted in a very detailed undertaking proving that this can be a very viable project in Belize, with 90% of the work force being provided by High School students.

The unique projects assigned to each group allowed for each student, both native and foreign, to learn an immense quantity of information about Belize’s politics, its economy, and most importantly, the pace it keeps with globalization. It was quite impressive to see the very detailed and professional presentations that each team showcased at the end of the two weeks. It really made the spectators aware of how much time and effort everyone invested in such a short period of time. Present for the closing ceremonies and delivering the key note address was the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, The Hon. Wilfred Elrington.

Being the leaders of tomorrow, it is important that we learn to depend on each others’ strengths and work in harmony toward a common goal. Programs like the TIP provide the opportunity for global networking. Whilst some may not appreciate the importance that this two week program heralds, I see the many long-term benefits that it generates for the future. Whenever I think of how effective fifteen strangers from across the globe were able to work collectively in a matter of two weeks, I am awestruck when I attempt to predict what leaders from across several nations can accomplish when working together.

I consider myself extremely blessed to have been a part of this program. The powerful bonds that were created have given me a new hope for what a future in Belize can be like, if we learn to assimilate our varying leadership skills and expertise in the interest of our national development. Even at the age of fifteen, I am able to discern that most often in Belize, leadership potential is harnessed and utilized within the confines of political, social, economic, educational and even religious bias. This, I believe, continues to deprive Belize of the richest of leadership potentials, stunting our growth and development always to levels and standards below what we “could have”, because the very best leadership skills are not harvested.

The TIP program is a model testimony as to what applied leadership talent, free of racial, political, social, economic, religious, ethnic, and gender discrimination, can produce, among young people. The TIP experience has challenged me to infuse this formula for national success into the greater Belizean society.

On behalf of my other three Belizean scholarship winners, I would like to extend deepest gratitude to Duke University, Belizean, Dr. Arlie Petters of Duke, and the Petters Research Institute in Belize. Together, you have proven to be a catalytic engine for the promotion of human development that will impact nation building around the world. We wish Dr. Petters continued success in his selfless work for Belize.