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## Professors Broaden Education in Belize

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# Professors broaden education in Belize

By DANA ALBRECHT

Lizards scuttled around her feet and bats flew about her head as the librarian cleaned and organized about 17,000 library books in the sweltering heat.

While battling mosquitoes and gnats with repellent, an English teacher struggled to teach five students composition.

On her way to class, another teacher stepped gingerly over a dead boa constrictor lying across the road. Thinking it was an alligator, she looked around anxiously for its mate.

For three Western professors in Belize (formerly British Honduras), a small Central American country nestled between Mexico, Guatemala and the Caribbean Sea, these were typical experiences.

They were working with other professors from Ferris State College of Michigan and Murray State Uni-



versity to establish Belize's first four-year college.

The president of the college, Dr. Colville Young, is scheduled to arrive at Western tomorrow.

The Western professors agreed

that the inconveniences were minor when compared with the project's goal.

"For Belizeans to have their own college will be fantastic" so they don't need to get degrees from other countries, said Dr. Reta Hicks, a teacher education professor.

Hicks, librarian Peggy Wright and Robert Wurster, an associate professor of English, each spent a semester in Belize.

Hicks said the project is "extremely useful for Western faculty because they get a multicultural viewpoint of another country firsthand."

"I'd do it all over again tomorrow," Wright said.

During her stay from January to June 1985, she reorganized three libraries: a drug-education library for a rehabilitation/education center,

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# Belize students hungry to learn

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a library for a teacher training college and a library for a home for the mentally and physically disabled.

The first book she picked up in one library had a hornets' nest in it, another had a hole bored straight through — "it must have been a healthy book worm," she said. Others were caked with dirt.

The library was more "a room of books than a library," Wright said. "The books were in no order and in bad shape."

In one of the libraries, she color-coded, cataloged, cleaned and waxed about 15,000 to 17,000 books.

She also gave library instruction to students "who had never been taught to use the library."

Wright will be returning to Belize in January to serve as a consultant for the new four-year college's library. She has already drawn plans for its shelves and bookcases, talked with prisoners from a local jail who will make them, made a list of books needed and helped hire the librarian.

Many of the books Wright took to Belize on her first trip were donated by professors in the history and the

teacher education departments at Western. "Anything we sent," Wright said, "they (students) were hungry to learn."

Language isn't much of a barrier. The official language of Belize is English, but there are four native languages, including Spanish and Creole.

Hicks, Western's first professor in the program, went to Belize when the project began in January 1985 and stayed until June 1985. "It was one of the most memorable experiences in my life," she said.

Her job consisted of explaining teaching techniques to secondary education majors, teaching English as a second language and developing a language arts curriculum.

The only textbooks available for her students were copies reserved in the teachers college's library. The classroom had only a chalkboard and a healthy supply of mosquito coils, burned to produce insect-killing fumes.

Wurster, who was in Belize last fall semester, said he feels the project has great potential. "I think we are going to make a mark there and a

very positive contribution," he said.

He taught English composition, conversation, literature and book-keeping to five students from Panama.

"It was frustrating because they were at different levels," Wurster said, "but they wanted to learn as much as they could as fast as they could."

Books and supplies were minimal. Wurster photocopied textbook chapters for his students and created his own worksheets.

"The biggest problem was getting rid of the bugs," Wurster said, laughing, "but the students were delightful."

All three professors said Belize was a tropical paradise with its lush rain forests, exotic animals and beautiful islands.

But helping a country to expand its educational system was the most satisfying part of their trips.

"Being in a country that's developing helped me grow so much," Wurster said. "It made me re-evaluate my sense of values."