What do you think is the added value of service-learning?

“What [students] have said is that, number one, it makes it meaningful and relevant. Their learning suddenly becomes real. Two, I think it mirrors the workplace—at least the work that we do. It’s very, very real. They talk about the different stress involved in, for example, creating a final project that’s going to be used in Belizean classrooms [compared to] doing something that by the next week you’ve forgotten about. So it really imitates the way that we collaborate, lead, engage, and work in the community. It’s a bit, at times, like I’m a supervisor and I’m giving them guidance. When you get out of the box of the classroom and into an immersive setting [students] behave differently around one another. What I witnessed this time in particular was that I saw the Cornell veneer slide off them like a coat. They became both more mature and more child-like. They were just joyous, which brings me to the next point—and these are points they’ve raised. I asked them in class to give me three big things, three big power points that came out of this course. One of the students said that service-learning can be joyous; that it’s fun. I think that sometimes people have an image of service as being this thing where you’re dragging yourself through the mud and working and doing this stuff for people. But what they learn is that in working together, with one another, with people, it’s pure joy. It’s so much fun. Learning is so enjoyable. That’s been something this class has talked a lot about.

The other thing that’s different is, yes, initially it can be more stressful in a way—the unknown—but then they end up stretching themselves beyond anything they thought they were capable of.”

Can you talk about the importance of reflection in service-learning?

“Reflection is a natural part of our learning. The reflection-action balance is an important part of who we are. Often our educational system is not set up to support that and in our ‘too-busy’ culture—a culture in which people are beginning to use words like ‘hurry sickness’ and ‘living in the age of distraction,’ it becomes even more important. Reflection is an opportunity to step back and think: “What am I learning? How do I make sense of it? How does it compare to other stuff I know? What might I do differently next time?” John Dewey, noted educational visionary, said, “We don’t even learn just from experience. We learn from reflecting on it.” Further, 50 years of brain development have shown us that the mind doesn’t just exist in our head and isn’t just involved with thinking. It’s multiple processes throughout the body, including our feelings. So why not tap all of that so that students get the most out of their learning?”