

A Powerful Homecoming: Dr. Scoop Opened the 2026 International Social Work Research Conference in Belize

The **2026 International Social Work Research Conference** brought more than 100 scholars, practitioners, educators, and social work professionals from the United States and beyond to the Grand Resort & Residences in Belize City for an important international conversation around the theme **“Rewriting Colonial Narratives for Mental Health Empowerment.”** At the center of the opening was Shirlene “Dr. Scoop” Coopwood, whose keynote created a deeply personal and thought-provoking beginning to the conference.

A Homecoming:

For Dr. Scoop, the occasion was much more than another professional speaking engagement; it was a homecoming. As a native Belizean, she drew upon her own life journey to help attendees examine culture, racism, societal influences, and the forces that can either hinder or advance future progress. Her presentation connected personal experience with the larger conference challenge of reconsidering inherited narratives and imagining healthier, more empowered communities.

The homecoming became especially meaningful when Dr. Scoop reconnected with several former students she taught during the early years of her career in Belize. Their reflections reminded everyone that an educator's impact can extend across decades. Former student Shanda Canique described her as “driven by passion, grounded in purpose,” while Cherene Rivero expressed gratitude for Dr. Scoop’s guidance, support, and belief in her potential at the beginning of her social work journey.

Conference Impact:

The conference itself reflected a strong combination of **scholarship, leadership, culture, and community**. University of Belize President **Dr. Vincent Palacio** opened the gathering by emphasizing its significance, while **Minister Thea Garcia-Ramirez**, Minister of Human Development, Family Support, and Gender Affairs, delivered a special address. Academic leaders Dr. Angela Flowers-Jones, Dr. Kendra Flores-Carter, and Sherry Gibbs also contributed remarks to the conference program.

Participants were also invited to experience Belize beyond the conference room. During a Day 2 **Cultural & Culinary Immersion**, attendees traveled to Palmento Grove, Kalipuna Island, in Hopkins Village, where they explored Garifuna heritage and traditions through hands-on activities involving cultural artifacts, herbs, spices, cooking, and healing practices. The experience reinforced one of the conference’s most important messages: understanding people and their well-being requires understanding of the histories, traditions, and cultural environments that shape their lives.

The gathering concluded with a keynote from **Judith M. Alpuche**, who challenged participants to remember their purpose and responsibility as care providers internationally. The conference also drew more sponsors and friends of the profession, demonstrating growing support for conversations about mental health, social work, and community transformation.

Reflection and Recognition:

For Dr. Scoop, however, one issue stood above the rest: caring not only for those experiencing mental-health challenges, but also for the professionals carrying the responsibility of providing that care. She reflected that the conference was especially meaningful because of the widespread need to focus on mental health **and on the mental health of care providers themselves**. Returning home to Belize and sharing that message among longtime friends made the occasion even more significant.

The conference culminated in another memorable moment when **Dr. Scoop received an award recognizing her distinguished service to the field and to conference attendees** (pictured below). The recognition captured what the gathering represented: the convergence of a Belizean homecoming, a lifetime of teaching and service, an international professional community, and an urgent call to rethink how culture, history, and mental health intersect.

More Than a Keynote: A Full-Circle Moment

The 2026 International Social Work Research Conference was not simply an opportunity for Dr. Scoop to speak about transformation. **It became evidence of transformation itself**. Former students returned as professionals. International colleagues gathered around a shared mission. Belizean culture became part of the learning experience, not merely its backdrop. And a daughter of Belize returned home to help open an international conversation about rewriting narratives, strengthening mental-health care, and imagining what future progress can become.

Dr. Scoop came home to share a message, but the conference also revealed the enduring reach of the life, relationships, and professionals she helped shape along the way.

“The effects of colonization didn’t end with independence. They continue to impact the way people think, feel, what we say, and what we do, which directly impacts our mental health.” – Dr. Shirlene Coopwood



Congratulations to Dr. Scoop!

Visit the [Gallery section of our website](#) to see pictures and video clips from the 2026 conference!