Dear Student:

Thank you for your interest in one of the upcoming Honduras Semester programs. The purpose of this letter is to give you an overview of the programs in Honduras as well as to share with you some of the unique challenges that accompany studying in Honduras.

Calvin’s semester programs in Honduras began in 1996, and since that time we have seen the power of these programs to provide students with life-changing experiences. As one student who has completed both the development and Spanish semesters in Honduras noted: I think both experiences really put the theme of justice on my heart and made me aware of a lot, so it’s still affecting my life today... It’s made me have a broader perspective on teaching Spanish that’s not just about learning the language, but it’s also about learning more about the cultures that speak Spanish and issues like immigration and social justice—trying to broaden my students’ horizons within the boundaries of a typical Spanish class.

In part, the success of both programs is related to the faculty who has led each semester over the years.

- **Development Semester:** Kurt and JoAnn VerBeek have directed this semester since its inception. The VerBeeks have lived and worked in Honduras for the better part of 25 years. Their expertise and local knowledge about development issues in Honduras is critical to the success of the semester program. In 1998, apart from their Calvin work, the VerBeeks started a nonprofit organization in Honduras, Asociación para una Sociedad mas Justa (ASJ) and a partner organization in the United States called Association for a More Just Society (AJS – www.ajs.us.org). ASJ is an Honduran organization “that seeks to be a group of brave Christians standing up to injustices and working to make Honduras’ laws and government work as they should, on behalf of the poor.”

- **Spanish Semester:** Various professors from Calvin’s Spanish Department have served as program directors with the assistance of Kurt and JoAnn Ver Beek.

While the Honduras programs have been positive, life-changing experiences for students, they also have come with specific challenges for the college and students in the area of safety. Honduras’ high homicide rate due to its role in cocaine trafficking has been widely reported over the last few years and has been a cause of concern for Calvin, students, and parents. Most recently in June 2014, the U.S. Secretary of State Department updated its travel warning for Honduras (originally posted in 2012). This warning can be found at http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings/honduras-travel-warning.html -- Many of the issues presented in this warning were first identified by Calvin during a security audit completed in 2011; as a result of this audit Calvin began addressing these concerns by initiating a number of changes in our program in the fall of 2011. To this point, these measures have been extremely successful in assuring the safety of our students. Many of these changes are discussed below.

It is also important to note that the State Department’s travel warning states that U.S. citizens do not appear to be targeted based on their nationality. Violence tends to be limited to the drug trafficking population, and North Americans are rarely targets of violent crime. In fact, experts report that criminals avoid targeting North Americans because of the increased attention it would bring them. Nevertheless, Calvin students have been victims of robbery in the past, prior to 2012. While no student has ever been physically harmed in the history of the program, we continue to look for ways to make the program as safe as possible.

As a part of this on-going safety process Calvin hired an outside security consultant in the spring of 2011 to complete a security audit of our Honduras programs. The completed audit found that Calvin’s programs had good safety protocols in place and the program was relatively safe. At that time the primary risk for Calvin students was the risk of armed robbery while walking around the capital city, Tegucigalpa. In response to the completed audit, Calvin made several major changes in the program beginning in the fall of 2011. These changes included moving student housing to Santa Lucia, a small
town outside of Tegucigalpa, and providing students vetted options for transportation to and from the university. In addition, Calvin expanded its safety orientations to facilitate student safety while in Honduras and hired a security consultant to advise students on independent travel and to provide support to students and faculty in whatever way is needed related to safety.

These additional safety protocols for the Honduras programs build on the multi-faceted approach that Calvin already has in place to promote student safety in all off-campus programs. These practices include the following: monitoring world events, sending experienced faculty leadership, training students on personal safety, providing additional travel insurance, registering all American students with the U.S. Embassy, partnering with local organizations, assuring contingency plans are in place when needed, and providing students with a variety of support services.

As of now, we are pleased to report that all the changes made have been highly effective in keeping students safe. Students in the last six semesters (Fall 2011, Spring 2012, Fall 2012, Spring 2013, and Fall of 2013, Spring 2014) have reported that they have enjoyed the tranquility and freedom of living in Santa Lucia and equally importantly, not one of the 85+ students has been a victim of any crime while in Honduras. As a follow-to the safety audit Calvin sent a team of Calvin faculty and staff to re-assess the health of both programs in the spring of 2012. The team assessed the overall student experience in Santa Lucia, reviewed the general safety situation in Honduras and learned more about the work of AJS as it related to the Calvin programs. Their report indicated that the overall health of both semesters was very good and that the move to Santa Lucia was a good one. They encouraged the continuation of the both programs as well as encouraged Calvin to continue to monitor the overall safety situation moving forward. In addition, several parents have visited the program over the last year, after one of these visits, a parent wrote: we were very impressed with the program and would like to assist in furthering the program in any way that we can.

With the State Department’s continued focus on Honduras we also continue to reassess our policies, in the spring of 2013 and 2014, our security consultant confirmed the continued good work of our directors related to security. In addition to our on-going evaluations, we also want to work with you to understand all the benefits and challenges to spending the semester in Honduras. As you consider making a decision to study off-campus, you might question why Calvin chooses to offer programs in countries like Honduras. The answer would be that as Christians we are called to serve a broken world. Programs like the Honduras semester provide unique opportunities for students to learn first-hand with thoughtful and experienced faculty not only about God’s beautiful world but also about its brokenness.

Although no one can guarantee the safety of participants or eliminate all risks from a study-abroad experience, Calvin College is committed to doing its utmost to provide secure environments in which students can live and learn. Our goal is to minimize risks and keep students and parents aware of special situations as they make decisions about studying off-campus. Likewise, we work hard to prepare students for the additional risks that may be present during their time off campus. As is true for all off-campus programs, students will be asked to commit to follow specific safety practices while in Honduras. When students make this commitment, they become partners in assuring the safety of all students and the overall program.

We hope you find this letter helpful. The decision to study abroad is an important one and we want to make sure you have complete information on which to make an informed decision. Our Honduras programs offer several unique opportunities for students to learn about God’s work in His world. If you decide to partner with Calvin in this endeavor, you will be changed. If you have additional questions or want to talk further about this opportunity, feel free to contact me directly.

Sincerely,
Don DeGraaf, Ph.D.
Director Off-Campus Programs (616-526-6225, ddegtraaf@calvin.edu)