Dear Student:

Thank you for your interest in one of our 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.

- **Justice Semester:** Kurt Ver Beek and JoAnn Van Engen have directed this semester since its inception. Kurt and Jo Ann 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, they 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](http://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 Jo Ann.

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 the drug trade has been widely reported over the last few years and has been a cause of concern for Calvin, students, and parents. Most recently in March, 2015, 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](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. These measures have been extremely successful in assuring the safety of our students.

One of the major changes was to move 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.

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.
Our security consultant continues to monitor the safety situation in Honduras and submits an annual report. Over the last several years these reports have highlighted that the overall security situation in Honduras is improving, as evidenced by the decreasing numbers of homicides in Honduras each year. Specifically in our Calvin semester programs students have reported that they have enjoyed the tranquility and freedom of living in Santa Lucia and equally important, not one of the 110+ students have been a victim of a crime while in Honduras. From all indications the overall health of both semester is very good. Moving forward, we will continue to monitor the overall safety situation and make changes as needed. We will also continue to listen to our students who continue to report that the Honduras semester is an excellent learning experience and they feel safe during the program. This has been reiterated by parents who have visited, as one parent noted we were very impressed with the program and would like to assist in furthering the program in any way that we can.

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.

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. This is the purpose of this letter. 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,

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