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Mary Fran T. Malone

University of New Hampshire, mary.malone@unh.edu

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Mary Fran T Malone, Assistant Professor of Political Science, COLA,
travels to Costa Rica



Mary Fran T. Malone

Assistant Professor of Political Science - College of Liberal Arts

Professor Malone traveled to Costa Rica this past summer to explore study abroad opportunities for UNH students. She was also able to conduct research for a book she is writing on crime in Central America.



Professor Mary Malone with her daughter

With the help of a CIE grant, in July of 2010 I traveled to San José, Costa Rica. My goal was to investigate a series of study abroad opportunities for students, as well as conduct research on Costa Ricans' reactions to the Central American crime crisis. On both accounts, the trip was an absolutely wonderful opportunity. During my two weeks in Costa Rica, I was able to identify several great opportunities for students to study abroad, as well as advance my own research on crime in Costa Rica.

I was particularly impressed with the study abroad programs offered through the International Center for Development Studies (ICDS). While in the United States, I had heard many positive things about ICDS and had been impressed with the work of its director, Jorge Nowalski. When I traveled to see the programs in person, "impressed" was an understatement. ICDS explained to me that their programs were designed to be "more than study abroad." ICDS aims to provide students with opportunities that are complementary to their studies, such as volunteer work and independent research. They also provide housing with Costa Rican families, which deepens students' cultural experiences in Costa Rica, as well as ensures that they do have ample opportunities to improve their Spanish.

ICDS's program for students in medical professions best illustrates this holistic approach to studying abroad. In this six week program, students from the United States come to Costa Rica to learn Spanish, with an emphasis on medical terminology. In addition to classroom learning, students learn onsite at a local medical clinic, where they can enrich their Spanish by observing interactions between patients and hospital staff. In the classroom, students also learn about the

Costa Rican healthcare system, which is frequently touted as the best in the Western Hemisphere. Given the current healthcare reform bills in the United States, this topic is most certainly timely. Finally, students may do volunteer work in medical settings to gain firsthand practical experience. This program is truly excellent, and would be a true asset to any student studying in the various medical professions in the United States.

ICDS has a series of other programs that are designed to teach important practical skills to students in liberal arts, business, and legal professions. In addition to these summer and spring study abroad sessions, I also worked with ICDS faculty to design a UNH program for the January term. With ICDS's expert assistance, I created a course titled "The Politics of Costa Rica," currently being reviewed by CIE. This course would be taught onsite in Costa Rica, and would mix traditional classroom learning with field trips that showcase many important aspects of Costa Rican democracy: the human rights ombudsman office, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, a local medical clinic (a result of state and private sector collaboration), and a state-run ecological preserve and research facility. I visited these various sites, and think they would be excellent complements to students' classroom learning. In addition to this four credit UNH course, students would also enroll in a three credit Spanish language class at the nearby Universidad Latina. Again, classroom learning would be combined with field trips, such as a trip to a local artisan community and theater. On weekends, students will have the opportunity to visit some other locations that have made Costa Rica famous, such as the volcanoes that surround San José. During this January term, students would live with Costa Rican families. Thus, this course aims to teach students about Costa Rica's exceptional political development, as well as familiarize them with the Spanish language and Costa Rican culture.

In addition to these preparations for the January term, I was also able to conduct my own research. Currently, I am working on a book project that examines the problem of crime in Central America, and citizens' reactions to it. In Central America, crime has reached epidemic proportions. Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have some of the highest murder rates in the world – typically more than eight times higher than in the United States. Costa Rica has been an important exception to this regional trend, as its crime rate is similar to that of the United States. Costa Ricans are not mollified by this similarity to the United States, however, as many are angry that there is more crime today than in the past. This frustration is evident in the amount of private security measures taken. Costa Ricans have purchased alarms and gates in record numbers, and have hired private security guards to watch their streets and homes. To an outsider like me, such measures seem to be an over-reaction. Why are Costa Ricans so fearful, when they are comparatively so safe? To answer this question, I met with a series of officials who directed me to some excellent data and documents. This investigation identified three important points to explain why Costa Ricans express such high levels of fear of crime. First, the Costa Rican justice system has not been able to



Plaza de Justice

handle recent crime increases – they have the capacity to manage the crime rates typical of the past (when crime rates were at levels typical in European countries), but not of the present (when crime is on par with that of the United States). Second, Costa Ricans are accustomed to higher standards. When they judge the present status quo, they are not consoled that their country is the safest in the region. Rather, they judge the status quo in light of the past, when crime was much lower. Finally, some of the very measures Costa Ricans take to protect themselves end up increasing feelings of insecurity. For example, when Costa Ricans buy more locks, move to guarded communities, and string up barbed wire, this ultimately creates the impression that there is much to fear. Survey data reveals that when people see the cumulative effect of all these private security measures on a daily basis, they register more fear of crime. These findings are very interesting, and serve as an important framework for my upcoming book on crime in Central America.

I would like to conclude by thanking CIE for its assistance. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to learn about Costa Rica first hand, and my goal now is to pass along this enriched understanding to my students.



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Hood House • 89 Main Street • Durham, NH 03824 • Ph 603-862-2398 • Fax 603-862-0169
Thompson Hall • 105 Main Street • Durham, NH 03824 • Ph 603-862-1288 • Fax 603-862-0844

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