

# PITZER COLLEGE COSTA RICA SEMESTER PROGRAM

## Core Course: Costa Rica Studies Sample Syllabus

### Introduction:

The Costa Rica Studies Course (the core course for the program) is divided in two parts. During the first five weeks of the program (when students are engaged in intensive language study at ICADS), students participate in a class offered by ICADS and entitled, *Latin American Perspectives on Justice and Sustainable Development*. Students meet everyday for class while at ICADS for an intensive introduction to the region and topics. This course offers a series of guest speakers, readings and study trips designed to provide a broad overview of Costa Rica, including its history, politics, culture, environment and important current issues. Included here is a one-week study trip to the provinces of Limon and Guanacaste to provide students with knowledge of other parts of Costa Rica.

The second section of the course, conducted while students are at the Firestone Center in Baru, is designed to facilitate deeper more thoughtful interactions with host families and community members and the intercultural learning that goes hand and hand with that. This part of the course consists of community service, host family stays, and a series of writing assignments known as the **field book**, which ask students to integrate personal experience, with readings and lectures, and important topics and issues. Because this kind of learning through cultural immersion goes hand in hand with Spanish language proficiency, students will take weekly Spanish classes while at The Firestone Center.

### Student Learning Outcomes for the Firestone Section of the Core Course

- Participate fully in the host culture and community while engaged in an ongoing process of culture learning that informs your interactions with members of the host culture.
- Develop the capacity to explore and learn about a new community and acquire local knowledge employing such methods as participant observation, active listening, structured interviewing, field note writing, and structured reflection.
- Integrate your personal experience and acquisition of local knowledge and perspectives with readings and lectures to more deeply understand core course topics and ideas.
- Demonstrate the ability to observe host culture behavior without interpreting or judging based on one's own culture.
- Develop the capacity to recognize and understand the relationship between one's cultural values and one's behavior, and engage in a process of "frame shifting" whereby you move from seeing an event or issue through your own cultural lens to seeing it from a Costa Rican perspective.
- Demonstrate an ability to analyze issues from multiple perspectives within the host culture (check the tendency to make overgeneralizations about the culture based on one person's or one group's perspective.)
- Demonstrate an ability to reflect on the character and identity of individuals as emerging out of their group history, life experiences and present day circumstances, and when appropriate, an awareness of the historical, social, and economic conditions that have led to inequalities among various groups in the host country.
- Engage in social work or community service in ways that respect local community members, their culture and their local knowledge.
- Demonstrate significant reflection and learning from a community service experience by integrating the particulars of that experience within broader issues and processes.

## Course Components

### Weekly Community Service Project:

Community engagement is very important to the Pitzer College Costa Rica program. Firestone Center is committed to be part of the local community and our staff is fully engaged in community projects such as: working with the Baru Elementary School in maintenance projects and with the Educational Board of the school; working with local park rangers surveying turtles; and other activities within the Baru community.

There will be a variety of community service projects within the communities around the FCRE. Students will engage in activities at:

- The Baru and/or the Domical Elementary Schools.

- The community of Baru.

- Work with park rangers surveying turtles and/or

- Work with the Tourist Police in beach clean ups.

### Host Family Stay

While in the Firestone Center, students will be living with a local host family in the towns of Platanillo or Tinamastes. Host family stays are very important because interactions with the family helps students immerse in the local culture. Students are expected to fully engage in host family activities and daily living.

### The Fieldbook.

#### Introduction:

An important component of the Firestone component of the Costa Rica Studies course is the Fieldbook. The Fieldbook is not a personal journal; it is a series of structured writing assignments, which are submitted throughout the semester for assessment and grading. The Fieldbook recognizes that writing is one of the deepest and most precise measures of experience and an activity that both generates and reflects learning.

Field book assignments asks the student to engage in a process of integrated learning. This is the heart of our educational model on the program: the connection you make between learning from personal experience in the culture, for which language study, host family relationships and affective knowing play very important roles, and learning through classroom lectures and readings and structured lab and fieldwork, which is largely cognitive. In this type of connected or integrated learning, your observations, conversations, and experiences, as well as feelings and intuitions, are given equal importance to more traditional forms of classroom learning such as lectures and readings. You are encouraged to combine the two in a process of constructing your own meaning around an issue or a topic. This can be a difficult exercise if you have been conditioned to think that the only valid form of knowing is contained in books, scholarly articles and lecture notes; but for those of you who approach this with an open mind, it can also be a very empowering educational experience.

The field book assignments, then, will ask you to make non-judgmental observations, combine personal experience (especially interviews with Costa Ricans) with material from readings and lectures, and to consider ideas and issues from both your own (US) perspective and the local (Costa Rican) perspective to arrive at an integrated understanding of important issues and ideas.

The three Field Book assignments below were carefully selected to get at different intercultural learning outcomes.

## Field Book Assignment No. 1: Contemporary Issues

### **Introduction and Learning Outcomes:**

This assignment asks you to explore and analyze an important issue introduced in the core course from multiple perspectives within the host culture to get at the following learning outcomes:

- Integrate your personal experience and acquisition of local knowledge and perspectives with readings and lectures to more deeply understand core course topics and ideas.
- Develop the capacity to explore and learn about a new community and acquire local knowledge employing such methods as participant observation, active listening, structured interviewing, field note writing, and structured reflection.
- Demonstrate an ability to analyze issues from multiple perspectives within the host culture (check the tendency to make overgeneralizations about the culture based on one person's or one group's perspective.)

**Assignment Prompt:** Pick one issue of interest that was covered in the Core Course, either by a guest speaker or in a reading or both. Choose an issue that is a bit controversial, that is, an issue where different people may have different perspectives. Use your notes from the guest speaker or from the article (both would be best) as a starting point to explore the subject through detailed conversations and interviews with Costa Ricans. The guest speaker's presentation and/or reading will provide background information and a point of reference, but for this assignment your main focus should be on the conversations and discussions generated by the issue – i.e. while the guest speaker's presentation and/or article will serve as a launching pad. Your focus should be on an exploration of the issue through the eyes and experiences of the people you interview. Whom you speak with will depend upon your topic: for some issues you will want to speak primarily with your host family and people in your neighborhood; other topics will require discussions with people in town, an NGO worker, a language teacher, someone at Firestone, or perhaps a person at your community service site. Whatever your topic, speak with several different people (at least four) from a variety of backgrounds to get their perspectives and opinions on the issue. You may wish to include other sources (e.g. newspaper articles) to complement the information gathered from your discussions and interviews, but again, your focus should be on the people you choose to interview.

Please note: After reading your article or looking over your notes from a guest speaker, you may find it useful to make a list of vocabulary and questions that will be important and useful for your interviews. If possible, try to work with your Spanish teacher at ICADS and/or Marisol Barrantes to learn new vocabulary and practice asking questions appropriate to your topic

### **For your paper:**

- Begin with a summary of the issue as a whole, drawing from the guest speaker's presentation and/or an appropriate reading.
- Provide a detailed account of your interviews and conversations, making sure to include Costa Rican's own views on the issue.
- Compare material from guest speaker or readings with the perspectives and opinions represented in your interviews.
- Conclude with your own analysis and assessment of the issue.
- Make sure you footnote all your sources, including guest speakers, readings, and people you interview. Check with your program directors to see if confidentiality is an issue when you do your write-up.

## Field Book Assignment No. 2: Critical Encounters: Cross-Cultural Perspectives

*When you have submitted to looking about you discreetly and to observing with as little prejudice as possible, then you are in the proper state of mind to walk about... and learn from what you see.*

-- Philip Glazebrook, Journey to Kars

**Introduction and Learning Outcomes:** This assignment asks you to describe an incident or issue that you have found challenging from both your own (US) and a local (Costa Rican) perspective with the following learning outcomes in mind:

- Demonstrate the ability to observe host culture behavior without interpreting or judging based on one's own culture.
- Develop the capacity to recognize and understand the relationship between one's cultural values and behavior and engage in a process of "frame shifting" whereby you move from seeing an event or issue through your own cultural lens to seeing it from a Costa Rican perspective.
- Integrate your personal experience and acquisition of local knowledge and perspectives with readings and lectures to more deeply understand core course topics and ideas.

One of the most important (and difficult) intercultural skills to learn on a study abroad program or anytime one is attempting to participate deeply in another culture, is the art of observing, without judging or interpreting. There is a huge distinction between an observation or pure description (e.g. the corners of his mouth were turned downward) and a judgment or interpretation (he was displeased at what I said). However, as I'm sure we have all experienced, in an unfamiliar culture such as Costa Rica, it is often deeply difficult to separate the two. Our unconscious assumptions from our own culture can make us think we are merely describing facts when we are actually drawing incorrect, culture-distorted inferences.

The observable facts (she would not make much eye contact with me) are often consistent with more than one possible interpretation or inference (she was lying vs. she was embarrassed, vs. in her culture sustained eye contact with someone who is older is rude.) This is especially true in situations that involve intense emotions: e.g. hurt or anger at a seemingly rude action or statement, embarrassment and confusion about having apparently upset someone without having intended to do so, frustration at the way someone in your host family or internship site is treated.

Learning to observe without judging seems simple on the surface, but it may be one of the most difficult skills for the culture learner to acquire. It composes a key strategy for developing cross-cultural competence:

- Learn to observe and describe without judging or interpreting.
- Attribute meaning to behavior you observe very cautiously, and when you do...
- Make sure you do so from the host culture perspective, not your own. This will take time and early on, it may mean asking lots of questions of program staff and your host family, and as well as letting go of the need to perfectly understand the meaning of all that you observe.

**Assignment Prompt:** This exercise, if done thoughtfully, should help us practice the art of judging without interpreting, improve the *accuracy* and the *usefulness* of our inferences about emotional situations, and allow us to practice the art of *frame shifting* from our own cultural perspective to that of the host culture.

**Step 1. Recognize and choose a critical incident or issue.** Choose an emotional event or issue from your social experiences in Costa Rica. This would ideally be a cross-cultural experience: an encounter that was especially important or challenging for you and that would lend itself to exploration from the perspectives of both your own culture and that of Costa Rican culture. You may wish to consider a single incident, or explore your on-going efforts to come to terms with a particularly challenging issue or aspect of the culture or society. You might write about your adjustments to life in a new family, your language learning experience,

confrontations with class, racial or gender differences, or a particularly provocative or challenging conversation or encounter.

**Step 2: Write out an objective, 3<sup>rd</sup> person description of the event or issue.** It can be helpful to first write out an objective (inference-free) description of our own and other people's behavior, and then only later to try to figure out what was really going on. If you are using one incident for this assignment, step 2 can be quite easy (see example below). You will want to write out the exact sequence of *observable* behaviors and *verbatim* words, **using the "third person" for all participants including yourself** (as if you were an observer even of your own behavior).

If you are writing about an ongoing issue or aspect of Costa Rican culture that has challenged you on a personal level, as opposed to one single incident. You may use either a 3<sup>rd</sup> or a 2<sup>nd</sup> person narrative to describe several specific incidents that you have seen, experienced or heard that have resulted in this particular issue becoming important and challenging to you. You will want to describe (without judging or attributing meaning ) specific behavior you have observed or conversations you have heard, rather than drawing from lecture or reading material to simply describe the issue in abstract terms.

In both cases, for step 2 take care to use non-judgmental terms (e.g. write, "He stood close and gestured a lot while talking," rather than, "He got angry at me." )

**Step 3: Describe your initial reactions.** Express your feelings, thoughts, initial interpretations and inferences. Convey the intensity and complexity of the encounter from your own perspective. At this stage do not be afraid to interpret and judge through your own cultural lens.

**Step 4: Explore from the host culture perspective.** Interculturalists often define culture as the shared values, beliefs and assumptions (often hidden below the surface) of a group of people that inform typical, every day behavior. An analogy that is often used is that of an onion: the outer layer of the onion represents behavior that is easily observed, the inner, hidden layers of the onion represent the values, beliefs and assumptions that are hidden away but that inform and shape the behavior. The job of a culture learner is to peel away the outer layers of the onion to better understand and appreciate the aspects of Costa Rican culture that shape the way Costa Ricans see the world and often behave. This process sometimes is referred to as *Frame Shifting*. What behavior patterns have you observed that may indicate or point to some of these hidden values and beliefs that may give you insights into the host culture's perspective on the event or issue you have chosen to write about? Talk with a number of Costa Ricans (at least four from different backgrounds) to see how they perceive the incident or issue. What cultural values and beliefs are informing their perceptions?

**Step 5: Further Reflection and Analysis.** Step back and reflect on the incident or issue once more. Discuss the differences between your immediate, automatic inferences and interpretations and the inferences and understandings that you formulated after deeper reflection and consideration of the Costa Rican perspective. What differences in cultural values may be at play? Consider how much of your experience may be traced to broader US or Costa Rican cultural trends and perspectives, and how much of your experience is rooted in your particular personal and social background or that of the Costa Ricans involved. Has this exercise helped you to reinterpret or change your perception of the incident or issue? As a result of this focused reflection, have you critically examined your own behavior, or grown to better understand and accept the behavior of members of the host culture? Finally, reflect on your attempt to reconcile the differing cross-cultural perspectives of the encounter. What kinds of difficulties do you face in trying to write about this encounter from all points of view and in explaining them honestly and objectively?

Here is an excellent example of this process taken from The Whole World Guide to Culture Learning by J Daniel Hess:

**Step 1: Recognize the Critical Incident or Issue.** *One morning in downtown San Jose, I became conscious of how angry I felt. I realized I was angry because my day had gotten off to a bad start when I was pulled over by a traffic cop, who scolded me for kindly stopping my car to let two old men walk across the street.*

**Step 2: Objective Description. (Written in Third Person.)** *Daniel jumped into his jeep and set off for Central San Jose with fourteen chores neatly listed on an index card in his shirt pocket. As he came past Calderon Guardia Hospital, he noticed two men –certainly older than seventy- with hospital gowns on, standing by the curb, wanting to cross the street from the hospital to the row of doctor’s offices on the other side of the street. The other drivers continued to drive past, prohibiting the two feeble men from crossing. Daniel stopped his car right in the middle of the two lanes so that no careless driver could get by and hit the men, and then motioned for them to cross. They hobbled across to the accompaniment of many horns. Once they were on the other side, Daniel resumed ... only to be whistled to the curb by a traffic cop who scolded him for what he did.*

**Step 3: Describe your Initial Reactions (feelings, thoughts, initial interpretations and inferences).** *I was furious that the cop had pulled me over. In my opinion I had clearly done a generous, even gallant deed in helping the two elderly men to cross the street in the face of the onslaught of Costa Rican drivers who refused to stop. The horns from the cars behind me who were forced to stop just reinforced my notion of how rude the drivers are in San Jose. Then, my initial reaction when the cop pulled me over was frustration, anger and disgust: here we had another typical Latin American policeman, probably a corrupt, bribe-taking cop, who was supporting the dangerous habits of Latin American drivers out of greed.*

**Step 4: Explore from the host culture perspective. Peel back the layers of the onion.** *Given my anger and frustration (so much so that I couldn’t get any of my 14 chores done) I realized I had a critical incident on my hands and that it would be best to deal with it rather than let my anger simmer away. I decided to gather more information and try to unpack it from the perspective of Costa Rican Culture and that of the policeman. So I drove back to the hospital, parking near the same cop who was still out on the street. I walked over to him and introduced myself – “the person you pulled over this morning” –and when he looked surprised, I pointed out my car. Oh, yes, he recognized me but gazed at me without expression. Why, I asked him, did he pull me over? I was puzzled by his action. I thought I was doing a kindness. Now I returned because I wanted to learn, so as not to repeat this offense. His face relaxed and he touched me on the arm. “Mister ..you see... this is a hospital and those are doctor’s offices and this hospital complex is located here in Barrio Aranjuez...its streets, you can notice, are very narrow... we have traffic problems, many impossible traffic jams. But mister, there is only one street leading into the Barrio, and on that street come the ambulances from Cartago, from Tres Rios, from Guadalupe, Moravia and Coronado. If the traffic is stalled, the ambulances can’t get through. So I am stationed here to keep the traffic moving. As for patients needing to go to the doctors’ offices, they are clearly instructed to come to this corner, and I help them across. Mister, can you understand?”*

**Step 5: Further Reflection and Analysis.** *I was dumbstruck by both the manner of the police man and his facts. He was not the scolding traffic officer, but a personable Costa Rican, filled with goodwill and no small amount of charm. I thanked him, and as I walked away, I began to recall the judgments I had earlier made: Latin drivers, my own superiority, police stupidity and corruption. As I thought of my set of interpretations, I recognized how completely I was absorbed in my own cultural cocoon, my own day’s agenda, and my own righteousness. The anger that I had earlier felt now changed into an altogether different feeling, embarrassment and chagrin, although as I drove downtown again, I was rather pleased that I had the courage to talk with the police officer and further my own culture learning.*

## Field Book Assignment No. 3: Life History Analysis of a Host Family Member

**Introduction and Learning Outcomes:** This assignment asks you to go in depth with one Costa Rican, in order to realize the following learning outcomes:

- Demonstrate an ability to reflect on the character and identity of individuals as emerging out of their group history, life experiences and present day circumstances, and when appropriate, an awareness of the historical, social, and economic conditions that have led to inequalities among various groups in the host country.
- Integrate your personal experience and acquisition of local knowledge and perspectives with readings and lectures to more deeply understand core course topics and ideas.

**Assignment Prompt:** The Life History Analysis is essentially an oral history of someone's life that is discussed in relation to major concepts covered in the core course readings and lectures. We encourage you to pick a person from your host family with whom you have developed a meaningful relationship and would like to get to know on an even deeper level.

When you are talking to the person who is giving the life history, have ideas and concepts from the core course lectures and readings in mind but **do not to ask "leading" questions in an interview format**. Rather, ask non-leading questions such as: "Tell me about your life" or "Tell me about your childhood...your family...your days at school...changes in your city, your home community, the birth of your children, your marriage, your major illnesses, etc. You may want to focus on one or more particular issues/themes such as race, gender roles, education, health, employment opportunities, parent-child roles, or economic life, or take a more free-flowing approach that touches on a number of important issues. However you decide to approach it, it is important that you allow the person you are working with to decide which events are important and noteworthy, rather than you deciding for them in the way you ask your questions. You may want to have several sessions with this person. In fact, writing up your notes after your first interview may generate other questions or lines of thought you might wish to pursue in a later discussion, or, the person may focus in on one part of their life during the first session and then take you to a whole different place in the next meeting.

Try to understand not only the major events of the person's life, but also how the events conform to, or contrast with, cultural/historic themes and important issues you have learned about throughout the program. In other words, do not merely provide a chronological narration of the person's life; rather, explicitly integrate the key events from their life with concepts from the lectures and readings you have been exposed to this semester.

### **Reading resources:**

A variety of reading material is available to the student that can be used to help in the writing of the field book assignments. Books are available at the Firestone Center library and the local newspapers can be accessed by internet.

Getting Along in Spanish, Ana C. Jarvis (Chandler-Gilbert Community College) 3rd Edition.

Spanish for Communication, Francisco Mena-Ayllon, University of California, Riverside. Lexington. MA. 4th edition.

La Nacion, Costa Rican newspaper. [www.nacion.com](http://www.nacion.com)

The Ticos, Culture and Social Change in Costa Rica, Mavis Hiltunen Biesanz, Richard Biesanz and Karen Zubris Biesanz.

In Focus Costa Rica: A Guide to the People, Politics, and Culture, Tjabel Daling, Interlink Books, New York, 2002.

The Tico Times, Costa Rican newspaper in English. [www.ticotimes.net](http://www.ticotimes.net)

**Assessment:**

Participation: 30% (10% for Course participation - 10% for host family participation -10% Community Service participation).

Students are expected to participate in all course activities and daily living with the host family. Host families are regularly asked to report on the student's involvement and participation with the family.

Community service participation will be assessed based on active participation and engagement with the staff and participants of the activity.

Culture learning: (10%)

A commitment to learn about Costa Rican culture and your ability to reflect that learning in your Field book assignments, interactions with program staff, host families, and the community at large.

Field book prompts: 60% (Each field book is 20%)

Field books are graded based on the learning outcomes given for each prompt.