

**Cover Sheet :: Sabbatical Proposal**

**Raymond Meredith, Associate Professor of Humanities**

Revised Nov. 19, 2012

**Length of Service:** 14 years full time (began Fall 1998)

**Previous Sabbatical:** None

**Last Sabbatical:** None

**Requested Workload:** Full semester, no load

**Statement of Understanding**

By accepting a sabbatical leave from Parkland College I am making a commitment to work for a one year term immediately following the completion of the sabbatical.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Department Chair: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# **Sabbatical Proposal**

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Revised Nov. 19, 2012

## **Present Responsibilities**

- Teacher and Adviser, SPA 101 through 104
- Teacher, ESL Composition and English Grammar
- Technical Administration, SPA Assessment Program
- Faculty Adviser, Secular Student Alliance at Parkland College
- Contract Negotiation Committee, PAE

## **Proposal Summary**

I am applying for sabbatical leave to move to and study in Costa Rica during the spring of 2014 and possibly most of that summer. This sabbatical leave is of both a personal and a professional nature. I will be moving to Costa Rica with my children and spouse, where I will experience day to day family life, take courses toward a master's degree in Latin American Studies, and improve my understanding of the Spanish language and of one of the cultures in which it is spoken.

## **Sabbatical Proposal**

My passion for language and language learning was sparked at an early age. As a young child I first realized the maternal side of my family was not using the same words for things that everyone else in my life seemed to use. German-speaking immigrants, my mother's parents lived with us and cared for me for the first few years of my life and exposed me to their particular dialect of German.

Later, in high school, I had the opportunity to study another language, Spanish, this time in the classroom. Luckily the demographics of my hometown, Kankakee, IL, permitted me to use Spanish to interact with classmates and others in my community. Although I have always maintained an interest in my mother's German-language culture, the day-to-day access to Spanish-speaking culture that I have enjoyed since adolescence inspired me to study Spanish as an undergraduate. A semester in Guadalajara, Mexico, taught me as much about Spanish, the language, as it did about Mexico and its culture. Later, when I decided to get a master's degree in the teaching of English as a second language, I planned to seek work in a Spanish-speaking country or with Spanish-speaking populations in the United States. Of course, life happened and Parkland gave me a chance at what has been and continues to be a personally and

professionally fulfilling career in teaching English as a second language. I got another chance at an unanticipated personal and professional opportunity after qualifying to teach introductory and intermediate Spanish classes by taking graduate courses at the U of I. Since then, I have had many wonderful experiences with Spanish and the many people who speak, or are learning to speak, any of the varieties of *el castellano*, but, until recently, only a few experiences with life and how it is lived in the lands where it is spoken.

One of those rare and delightful experiences came about through Parkland-related travel, resulting in my current interest in moving to Costa Rica for several months. During a Parkland Ag Business trip to Costa Rica in 2008, I discovered, along with my spouse, a place where we wanted to bring our children. Subsequent family travel to the country (four trips totalling approximately 40 days) have convinced us of Costa Rica's nationwide commitment to human development and wise stewardship of its natural resources, two values of importance to me as a parent and a citizen. Through a longer sojourn, we hope to give our children experience in and appreciation of another language and its culture.

Since that first trip, we have been fortunate to make the acquaintance of a few *ticos* and *ticas* (the demonym by which Costa Ricans typically refer to themselves), and we have traveled on our own to a few regions, giving us an incipient sense of where we might want to live. One of the people we met our first time in Costa Rica, Dr. Henry Soto Murillo, is a retired professor from the University of Costa Rica and the owner of a private Spanish language institute that receives students from some of the United States' largest universities, including the University of Illinois. In our conversations, Dr. Soto Murillo has assured us he can easily arrange both home stays and language lessons for our family. We also know a couple recently transplanted from Champaign to Costa Rica's central valley, we have stayed with them in a home they share with their extended family, and through them we have seen relatively typical Costa Ricans' daily lives over a short period of time. These friendships and others have given us confidence in our abilities to be minimally offensive to the general citizenry while navigating daily life.

Living day to day in Costa Rica, I expect to take part in professionally and personally enriching activities. For example, a number of language acquisition and pedagogy conferences take place throughout the year in Central America. Depending on travel costs and resources, I would also consider conferences in South America. In my research of possible events related to Spanish or English teaching and Latin American Studies, I found that the National Council of Teachers of English has a Costa Rican chapter ([www.nctecostarica.org](http://www.nctecostarica.org) □ Their 2013 conference is in January), and the University of Costa

Rica continually offers conferences, seminars, and colloquia throughout the school year ([www.ucr.ac.cr](http://www.ucr.ac.cr)), many of which would be relevant to language teaching and learning or Latin American Studies.

I will also offer web-based collaboration activities to my fellow Spanish teaching faculty. Commonplace technologies such as Skype, Google+ Hangouts, or many smartphones' and tablets' built-in audio and video conferencing, together with Costa Rica's widespread (for Central America), dependable, and fast Internet service should prove adequate to the task. (Source - World Bank: [data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2))

I am also looking forward to volunteering at my children's school and elsewhere. It is relatively easy to find institutions and organizations seeking volunteers in Costa Rica. Apparently legitimate websites such as [idealists.org](http://idealists.org) and [GoAbroad.com](http://GoAbroad.com) list dozens of volunteer opportunities, many of which are short term and some of which may allow my entire family to volunteer together.

As part of my professional development, sabbatical would help me improve the breadth, quality, and relevance of a course I have just begun to teach: HUM 106, Latin American Cultures and Civilizations. In our discussion of my professional development plan during my last faculty review, Dr. Barnard and I agreed coursework and classroom experience in teaching HUM 106 would be a productive approach to increasing the types of courses I can teach. Thus, in the fall of 2011, I was permitted to audit the U of I's LAST 170 course, Intro to Latin American Studies. Taught by a graduate student in the School of Music, Mr. Eduardo Herrera, the course refreshed a lot of what I sometimes only vaguely remembered from the sequence of Latin American Studies classes I took as an undergraduate. I have since been admitted to a master's degree program through the U of I's Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, and I am getting experience with HUM 106 at Parkland by teaching one-fifth of a section this semester with a more experienced instructor, Mr. George Uricoechea.

In Costa Rica, my student status at the U of I will allow me to further my MA studies. My adviser, Dr. Angelina Cotler, assures me I can receive graduate credit from a Costa Rican institution through the U of I's study abroad programs or directly from the U of I by arrangement with cooperating faculty. Once I know whether I have sabbatical leave, I will arrange to take one or two classes requiring Spanish-language proficiency as part of my time in Central America.

I of course recognize that the MA coursework and team teaching are great ways to pursue my professional development alongside my full-time faculty duties, and I will

keep making progress toward both goals independent of sabbatical leave. However, I am certain sabbatical leave abroad represents a categorically different opportunity for three principal reasons:

- I will make progress in a Spanish-speaking institution toward a master's degree in Latin American Studies at the University of Illinois.
- I will improve my ability to help students connect culture and language in the Spanish program and HUM 106 courses by sharing my experiences.
- I will develop as a person through extended contact with Costa Rican culture and language in a variety of roles: parent, student, volunteer, associate professor.

Shifting our family's life in space, language, and culture is a new and exciting experience for the four of us. It presents multiple and complementary chances for personal and professional development, all of which are likely to improve my effectiveness as faculty more deeply and more quickly than the local efforts in which I am already engaging.

Raymond D. Meredith

Sabbatical Report

October 19, 2015

In reflecting on my sabbatical, I have taken much longer than expected, in my own estimation but also in accordance with sabbatical committee guidelines. I thank all committee members, past and present, for their forbearance and I apologize for the delay. It is my hope that the intervening time has allowed me the depth of consideration that will result in a succinct, yet informative, report. In fact, in the interest of brevity, readers are respectfully requested to refer to the attached sabbatical proposal for the pre-departure goals and rationales that did, or did not, withstand contact with the reality of moving one's family to a peaceful Central American country for seven months running from January 3rd until August 5th, 2014.

The capsule summary of my sabbatical in Costa Rica during and after the Spring 2014 semester is "fortuitous indulgence." My good fortune started with selecting, sight unseen, the little town of Sitio de Mata, to live in with my wife, fellow Parkland College professor Heidi Leuszler, and our two children. There, we spoiled ourselves with a completely different pace of life, collection of sights, and set of relationship with our neighbors.

Though in my application I had expressed a desire to attend academic conferences in the region, day to day life in Sitio de Mata ended up providing so many opportunities to learn that it made more sense to immerse myself in the community around me. For example, my wife and I were welcomed into the local equivalent of a parent-teacher association ("Patronato," in Spanish), and we volunteered for all of the fund-raisers and other related tasks with our fellow members. I was also presented with opportunities to tutor my neighbors in English, some on a recurring basis, others more incidentally, and every occasion contributed to filling in the many

gaps in my knowledge of the different society that we had chosen to live in, from the local to the national and international levels.

Of course, having a lot of time to spend in our little town, and in the nearby town of Turrialba, was in large part on our transportation situation. After renting a car for our first week in the country, with rare exceptions we regularly relied on public transportation for shopping, medical needs, and education whenever we traveled. As an example, for all foods but basics such as sugar, milk and eggs, one adult needed to spend four or more hours going into the nearest center of commerce, Turrialba. There, one of us would have hours to shop before the next bus back.

It was not only the difference in transportation options that led me to devote almost all of my time to the immediate region in which we lived. School schedules, and later a strike, also played a big part in how we spent our time. For example, while one parent was doing the shopping referred to earlier, the other parent dropped off and/or picked up our children from the local elementary school. Each day, the beginning and ending time of classes could vary from the day before, and between our two children. Leaving one parent to do this for days at a time to attend a conference didn't just seem impractical, it also seemed as if it would take away from a more meaningful overall experience.

Choosing to live day to day like most of our neighbors, who depended on the same buses and whose children followed the same schedule, put us in a lot of regular contact with our neighbors and where we grew to know individual Costa Ricans, and I don't think any conference presentation could have given me such personally meaningful experiences..

While a large portion of our time, especially the first six months, was spent in and around Sitio de Mata, we also had opportunities to travel. In some cases we traveled on our own as a family. On others, we had the chance to share Costa Rica with friends and family who visited

during our sabbatical. In addition to travel within Costa Rica, from the southern Caribbean coast to the northern Pacific coast, we also travelled within Central America. Our first trip out of the country was to Nicaragua, where we spent three days in the colonial era city of Granada, on Lake Nicaragua. Our second trip, lasting nearly two weeks during a month-long strike by K-16 teachers, was to Panama's northern Caribbean coast. Within Costa Rica, we visited the Caribbean coast on three occasions, experiencing the distinct Afro-Caribbean, oftentimes English-speaking, culture within the overall nation. Another of our first-time visits was to the Lake Arenal region, including the foot of the Arenal volcano and its thermal baths as well as the dairy region on the opposite side of the lake around the city of Tilarán.

All of those places, and all of the sights and events at each one, would not have been nearly as meaningful without the people we visited again and the people we met for the first time because of this sabbatical.

During our trip to the dairy region of Costa Rica, we located and visited Costa Ricans we had met before. One was a former Parkland student we had met through another Parkland professor, Don Bergfield. A Costa Rican native, "Juanpa," as he is known to friends, attended Parkland for a year several years ago, then moved back to Costa Rica and started his own dairy. Another was Henry and Teresa Soto Murillo; Henry was our guide the first time we visited Costa Rica as part of a Parkland trip, and he has always been of great help with all matters Costa Rica related. Another former Parkland student, now co-owner of an apiary as well as the country's first meadery, invited us to accompany her family to a weekend at a national brewing festival in which they displayed their products. All of these relationships very much added to the depth and variety of our overall sabbatical experience.

A member of the Board of Trustees, after my joint presentation of my sabbatical with Heidi, commented by e-mail that Heidi's and my undertaking was exactly what a sabbatical is



supposed to be. For quite a while, when I looked back at my sabbatical I found it hard to square that comment with the unreached goals in my original proposal. Now, though, I have come to both see and believe that my sabbatical was far richer experientially, and more personally meaningful, than I could ever have guessed at exactly because I was unable to anticipate almost everything about how things would turn out.