An open letter to parents of students studying off-campus:

Greetings from the Off-Campus Programs office! As the director of the Off-Campus Programs Office at Calvin, I want to take this opportunity to introduce myself and share a few suggestions for how you can support your son or daughter as they study off-campus this year.

As I think about all the adventures that await our students as they study off-campus, I get very excited. Although studying off-campus isn’t easy, it is rich and it provides a unique context for seeing how God is working in His world. I think this excitement (and also some apprehension) can be seen in one of my favorite quotes, which states: “*The most human thing we can do is comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.*”

To me, the power of this quote can be seen in two distinct ways. First, off-campus programs can push us all out of our comfort zones and help us stretch and grow. Research supports this statement, telling us that when we are in new environments, we are more open to learning. Through involvement in experiences that push us out of our comfort zone, we are forced to move into areas that often feel uncom-fortable and unfamiliar, where we have a mismatch between old ways of thinking and new information. Such situations can create a “groan zone” due to our own internal conflict, but as we seek to understand these feelings, we are able to integrate new knowledge or reshape existing perceptions. We are able to overcome our anxious feelings and self-doubt; we can move from the groan zone to the growth zone.

Second, off-campus experiences can create opportunities to see both the wonders and injustices of this world first-hand and walk alongside those who are suffering. Not by offering easy answers or quick solutions but by building relationships, listening, and sharing in the joys and pains of this world. For me, Jesus’ own ministry on earth is a reflection of this quote. Wasn’t he always pushing his disciples out of their comfort zone to follow him? To do things they never thought they could, to walk with and be a comfort to others by being in relationship with everyone, especially the poor and the outcast?

That’s why, as an educator, I get excited about our off-campus programs and the opportunities these programs provide our students (over 700 in a typical year) to grow. But as an administrator who feels responsible for our programs, I also get a bit nervous. I worry about our students’ safety. I want them to stay healthy. I want them to make new friends, to grow in their faith, and to grow into confident and caring young adults in a complicated and hurting world. Likewise, as a parent of two college students who have participated in off-campus programs, I also think about what parents can do to help their sons and daughters get the most out of their off-campus experiences. With this in mind, I would like to offer a few suggestions or reminders to us as parents for helping our sons and daughters have a great experience during interim or an off-campus semester program.

**Before your son or daughter leaves:**

* LOGISTICS: Talk with your student about the logistics of the program. Faculty leaders will often give students detailed information on the program related to the itinerary as well as costs and financial info. We hope that students are sharing this information, and we encourage you to talk with your son or daughter about what they know. There is also a wealth of information on the Off-Campus Programs web site (under resources).
* COMMUNICATION: Talk with your son or daughter about how—and how often—you are expecting to hear from them while they are off-campus. Advances in technology have made keeping connected easier than ever, but such technology also brings many challenges. Every moment spent using technology to connect with friends and family back home is time that takes away from living in the moment and experiencing new people and places. Plan ahead and be intentional about if/how you will connect while your son or daughter is away.
* ITINERARY: Make sure to get a copy of your son or daughter’s itinerary before they leave. If you need to contact your son or daughter while they are away, please feel free to contact Calvin’s off-campus programs office (616-526-6550 or 616-526-6225).

**While your son or daughter is away:**

* BE FLEXIBLE: When traveling internationally, things often change; as a result, faculty leaders and students need to be flexible to adapt to changing situations. At the same time, family and friends need to be flexible as well. Your son or daughter might not be able to contact at the exact time you set up, so you might not always hear from him or her as much as you like. Remember to give them some space and remember the old adage: *no news is good news*.
* BE SUPPORTIVE: Travel, especially international travel sounds glamorous, but it is hard. In all likelihood, your son or daughter will experience some hard times; yet hardships are often the times when we grow the most, so be supportive and recognize that some struggles are a part of the experience.
* EXPLORE RESOURCES: Learn a bit about the places where your son or daughter is going. Follow the group on their blog if they are doing regular blog posts. Check to see if the group’s plane is landed safely and on-time (use a computer app like FLIGHT TRACKER: http://www.flightview.com). Monitor world news. If you have a question or concern, feel free to contact us at the Off-Campus Programs Office (616- 526-6550 or 616-526-6225).
* IN CASE OF PROBLEMS: One of the goals of Calvin’s Off-Campus Programs Office is to facilitate the growth and development of students. We feel that one way to encourage this development is to relate to them directly as an adult. As a result, if your son or daughter shares a concern or if you have a concern, please encourage him or her to talk directly with their instructor or in cases where this feels uncomfortable, encourage him or her to contact the Off-Campus programs office directly.
* IN CASE OF EMERGENCIES: In the case of emergencies with the group, our office (Off-Campus Programs) will contact you immediately. In the event of lesser problems, off-campus instructors are directed to contact our office immediately so we can offer any support needed. This includes getting information to you in a timely way if your son or daughter is involved in any way. Likewise, if you have an emergency at home (e.g. sickness, death in the family, etc.), please let our office know immediately and we will work with you to contact the Calvin professor/instructor leading the group or to talk with your son or daughter as quickly as possible. In times of emergency, our goal is to be a resource to students, instructors, and families in whatever ways are needed.

**When your son or daughter returns:**

* LISTEN: Be willing to listen to your son or daughter’s experiences.
* BE PATIENT: Don’t be surprised if they are still processing their experiences and looking for answers to big questions.
* ASK GOOD QUESTIONS: Be curious about what they have seen and heard. Some good questions include:
* When did the group (collectively) laugh the hardest?
* What were one or two things you learned about yourself on your program?
* What are one or two things you learned about the people and place where you studied?
* What are two or three questions (if any) that you encountered that you and you or the group is still struggling with related to the overall experience?
* What are two or three lessons that you don’t want to forget?
* What are two or three important observations that you want to share with family and friends?
* How did the experience impact your faith? What did God teach you during the experience?

Although this list is far from exhaustive, we hope that you find it helpful. Again, we are excited for what lays ahead for your son or daughter. This excitement is grounded in our experience but also in our faith. Consider the following thought from a Calvin student studying in Honduras: “*I stand in awe of God’s providence and how he cares for us; my time in Honduras has also helped me to see that I want to recognize God not only in the big events of my life but also in the everyday, the normal, not the amazing. I was so blessed by the people God placed in my life during this trip and how he takes care of me in all things.”* God is always closer than we think, if we only take the time to look. So our hope for our students (and those who walk alongside them) is that they realize God is in the details and as we prepare and participate in experiences off-campus.

Lastly, please know that you are always welcome to call our office if you have concerns (or joys) and we will do our best to address them.

Blessings,

Don De Graaf, Director of Off-Campus Programs, Calvin College

P.S. For those of you who would like to know more about Calvin’s Safety protocols for students studying off-campus, I invite you to read the open letter to students about safety on Off-Campus Programs office website.