



Costa Rican students examine maps as part of their English-intensive summer camp held on the UGA Costa Rica campus.

## Service-learning in Costa Rica

**Professor brings group to teach English-intensive summer camp for schoolchildren.**

**F**or Paula Mellom, starting a study abroad service-learning program in Costa Rica for UGA students wasn't just an opportunity to travel abroad—it was a chance to return to her former home and show students how languages shape our culture, thinking and teaching.

Mellom, associate director of the College of Education's Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education, first traveled to Costa Rica as a Rotary Fellow in the mid-90s. She then stayed and taught everyone from younger schoolchildren to graduate students in an English language program at CATIE, a graduate school and research center for agriculture and natural resources management in Turrialba. Mellom met her husband in Costa Rica and, along with her family, holds dual citizenship in the U.S. and Costa Rica.

Several years after returning to the U.S. to pursue her Ph.D. in linguistics, the opportunity to return to Costa Rica with UGA students fell right into her lap. At the time, the UGA Costa Rica campus was new and under development and Judy Shaw, then the associate provost for international



Paula Mellom (right) leads an activity with Costa Rican children on the UGA Costa Rica campus.

education, approached a linguistics professor—who happened to be Mellom’s professor—about starting an English-language teaching program. He quickly recognized that Mellom was uniquely qualified to lead such a program.

Each summer since 2006, Mellom has led a group of students—from a variety of majors, not just education—who teach during an English-intensive summer camp to schoolchildren during their two-week summer break from school. This goal of this program, language and culture service-learning, is for UGA students to gain a better understanding of how to teach English to non-native speakers, and how the differences in languages present unique challenges to teachers of non-native English speakers.

“We work with the local schools and ask them what they want us to teach the kids, using the Costa Rican national curriculum for science,” Mellom said. “Our students are forced to learn about other ways of conceptualizing knowledge. The students have to think not just, ‘How do I teach this in English?’ but also ‘What do I teach?’”

“A couple years ago, we did a program on mapping and geography,” said Mellom. “So we started looking at how we’d do that. Even young schoolchildren in Costa Rica already know their cardinal directions and are aware of distances — this is a different skill set than most American kids have ... And it makes for really rich, wonderful conversations about how language impacts the way we view the world, and how that impacts how we talk about what we teach.”

Ashley Deas (B.S. 2010), a fifth-grade teacher in Gwinnett County Public Schools, participated in the 2010 summer study abroad program. Her experience left a lasting impression on her and how she works with students who do not have English as their first language.

“I think now I can understand how my [non-native English speaking] students feel being in a mostly English-language environment,” said Deas. “I let them use their home language if they need to... to help them succeed in the class. That was something that was instilled in me in that program. I can better empathize with my students because of that.

“I often hear other teachers, especially in the younger grades, make the comment that ‘these kids don’t know anything.’ But they really just don’t understand what the teachers are saying. I feel like those assumptions were cleared up [while on my program] and I try to get other people to understand that, too.”

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— Paula Mellom

Gaining a new perspective on languages is just one part of any study



Standing, left to right, Paula Mellom, program leader, and students Ashley Deas, Andrea Bass Phillips and Christina Morris teach elementary-age schoolchildren attending an English-intensive summer camp on the UGA Costa Rica campus.

abroad experience. Michael Ariail, (a 2011 graduate who receives his masters in 2015), is a Spanish teacher at Cartersville High School. He went on the program as an undergraduate in 2010 and has worked since 2011 as Mellom's teaching assistant. "Ah-ha moments happen all the time in Costa Rica," he said. "They can take many different forms, but they are always moments of growth. Different people have different ways that they see the world, and study abroad forces you to come up against different ways of doing things."

A large part of the educational mission of UGA Costa Rica is focused on sustainability. Mellom sees opportunity within that mission to develop an apprenticeship system to create sustainable study abroad programs—programs that can continue with minimal disruption even if the initial faculty member who created the program is no longer running it.

This year, Mellom is training Lou Tolosa-Casadont, a clinical assistant professor at COE, to lead the students through the courses that Mellom has spent the last nine summers planning and running. For study abroad courses, it's not as easy as teaching a new leader the course syllabus and explaining how to run a few community excursions.

"You need those relationships—people who know the country and the people—so it's walking a fine line to bring someone new into the program," Mellom said. "How do you ensure that the students get what they need, and also are sensitive to the needs of the host country? How do we develop a pathway to apprenticing new faculty on programs, so they can get what they need to run one well, but also you are maintaining the integrity of the program?"

Other areas of future growth include partnerships to bring teacher continuing education to Costa Rica, and Mellom also hopes to bring U.S. public school teachers to the Costa Rica campus to collaborate with UGA students. Mellom sees the potential for study abroad courses to positively impact both the students who travel and the country that hosts them.

"We are guests in other people's homes, and are ambassadors for our families, our school and our country," said Mellom. "The people who are in Costa Rica are going to have to live with whatever we leave them with, for good or ill. I want my students to realize that their actions have impact. ... We have developed a real strong, trusting relationship in the community in which the university is situated. This is a small, tight-knit community, so for those folks to want to have you back, to welcome you into their homes—that's a big deal."

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