

# **“Get Out There, Learn Something New”: Impact of a Short Term Domestic Academic Sojourn on Social Work Students**

**SIMON P. FUNGE**

James Madison University

**KELLY FOUST**

Western Kentucky University

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to understand the impact of a US-based two-week domestic academic study away program on undergraduate social work students' understanding of the scope of social work practice, identity as professional social workers, and professional interests in the field. Nine participants were interviewed two years following the program. Data from the semi-structured interviews, journals completed on the program, and reflection papers completed immediately following the program were analyzed. Findings indicated that this applied learning experience had a transformational impact on their understanding of themselves, their cultural competence, and their subsequent social work practice.

## **Introduction**

Immersion in a different culture can positively impact students’ understanding about themselves and others (Das & Anand, 2014; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Gerstenblatt & Gilbert, 2014; Hutchison & Rea, 2011; Pariola-Smith & Goke-Pariola, 2006; Roholt & Fisher, 2013). To this end, well-designed study abroad and domestic “academic sojourns” offer students the opportunity for immersion wherein they are able to gain practical cultural knowledge, experience, and awareness of global issues (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Brown, 2009; Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015; Moorhead et al., 2014; Sherman, 2016).

For the profession of social work, effective practice with diverse clients requires continuous learning about the self in relation to – and in service of – others (CSWE, 2022; NASW, 2020). Social workers are expected to understand how human identity and experiences are formed or shaped by various dimensions of diversity and consequences of difference (NASW, 2020). These professionals engage diversity and difference in practice at the individual, group, and community levels with people who embody multiple intersections of identity related to their socioeconomic class, culture, ethnicity and race, immigration status, and religion. In service of this, social work education programs have included academic sojourns (variously known as study abroad and study away programs) to provide applied learning opportunities for students to enhance their competency interacting with diverse others (Mapp & Rice, 2019; Zhu, et al., 2023). However, very few studies have explored the impact of short-term domestic academic sojourns. Further, of six studies found on short-term domestic academic sojourns in the US and US territories, only three involved social work students (see Bolea, 2012; Cordero & Rodrigues, 2009; Dubus, 2014). This study sought to add to this small body of literature.

How can – and in what ways can – short-term experiences like these positively affect participants’ sense of themselves and professional interests? This exploratory study investigated the impact of a short-term domestic academic sojourn or “study away” program on undergraduate social work students who traveled from a largely rural southeastern state for a two-week applied learning experience encountering the culture and professional practice community in metropolitan Los Angeles, CA.

## **Review of Literature**

Differentiated by distance and duration, study abroad experiences can be long- or short-term (Lane et al., 2017). Whereas, long-term study abroad experiences can last up to a full academic year (Study Abroad, 2019), shorter-term study abroad experiences can be as short as one to two weeks. The latter are very popular, accounting for 59% of all US students’ study abroad experiences (Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015). They are usually more affordable and accessible to students who are unable to commit a whole academic year or semester away due to time commitments like education, employment, or family

obligations (Moorhead et al., 2014). When planned well, these programs can be just as effective in developing cultural and global awareness and self-efficacy as long-term study abroad programs (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2019; Core, 2017; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Sobania, 2015).

Similar in duration to short-term study abroad programs, study away experiences typically last from one to several weeks - often over spring break or during a winter or summer term - and also offer a more affordable and accessible experience. However, students travel within their country of origin (Lane et al., 2017).

For US-based students, a well-planned, well-facilitated domestic study away program in the US can match the learning outcomes of an international study abroad program (Sobania, 2015). Whether studying immigration and social inequality in the borderlands of Arizona (see Lanson & Merlin, 2015), African culture in the eastern coastal wetlands (Benton, 2015), or environmental design, sustainable living, and global citizenship on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota (Pyatt et al., 2015; Burleson, 2015), the US provides numerous cultural immersion opportunities.

### ***Benefits of Studying Abroad or Away***

Study abroad programs increase cultural and global awareness, fostering participants' self-confidence, self-esteem, self-control, self-direction, and self-efficacy as they adapt to new situations outside their comfort zone (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Bolea, 2012; Brown, 2009; Das & Anand, 2014; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Hutchison & Rea, 2011; Pariola-Smith & Goke-Pariola, 2006; Schvaneveldt & Spencer, 2016; Smith et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2018; Sobania, 2015; Zhu et al., 2023).

In effect, placing students in new environments exposes them to different cultures and different ways of thinking, positively impacting their intercultural awareness and knowledge (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2019; Czerwionka et al., 2015; Gearing et al., 2020). Importantly, studying abroad has a greater impact on multicultural competency than just traveling abroad (Kim, 2015). In other words, structured encounters and learning in a new environment are key. Further, short-term study abroad programs have demonstrated a positive impact on social work student participants' intercultural understanding and perspectives (Moorhead, et al., 2022). As a professional discipline that prioritizes graduates' ability to work effectively with diverse populations, such experiences present a unique and enriching opportunity to support social work students' learning in this area.

### ***Study Abroad and Away for Social Work Education***

Self-awareness and reflection are key strategies social workers employ when working with their clients (NASW 2020). Further, developing the capacity to acknowledge others “as experts of their own lived experiences” is a practice behavior social work students are taught (CSWE, 2022). In service of developing cultural competence (an ongoing and continually evolving process) study abroad experiences offer undergraduate and graduate social work students the opportunity to enhance their understanding of themselves in a global context (McPherson, et al., 2022), develop and practice social work values, expand their global awareness, develop social work skills, and enhance their ability to support diverse client systems (Brown, 2009; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015; Gearing et al, 2020; Kim, 2015; Mapp, 2012).

For instance, social work students enhanced their sense of professional identity and increased their commitment to social justice – a core value of the social work profession – as the result of their participation on a short-term international study abroad program to India (Moorhead et al., 2014). Similar outcomes were also found for short-term domestic programs. As a result of their experience on a 10-day cross-cultural immersion to a Lakota Indian Reservation, students reported greater cultural empathy and understanding (Bolea, 2012). In another example, social work students who traveled to New Orleans from Boston to rebuild a domestic violence shelter following Hurricane Katrina deepened their commitment to civic leadership and social justice in the process (Dubus, 2014). In effect, these types of cultural immersion experiences enrich social work students’ cultural awareness as they transition from learning and reading in the classroom to practicing the concept (Thibeault, 2019).

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

This qualitative study sought to determine the extent to which a short-term domestic academic sojourn focused on learning about social welfare programs in another region of the country impacts social work students’ learning. More specifically, the following research questions drove the investigation: (1) To what extent did the Study Away LA program affect participants’ understanding of the scope of social work practice? (2) To what extent did the Study Away LA program impact participants’ sense of identity as professional social workers? And (3) To what extent did the Study Away LA program influence participants’ professional interests and activities in social work practice?

### **Methods**

#### ***Procedures***

In May of 2018, ten students from an accredited undergraduate social work program at a mid sized public university in a largely rural southeastern state participated in a short-term (2-week), faculty-led academic sojourn to the metropolitan Los Angeles area. Nine [ $n = 9$ ] of the students were in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program and the tenth [ $n = 1$ ] was a Sociology student). All participants enrolled in Study Away LA as an elective course.

The 15-day “Study Away LA” program focused on providing participants with the opportunity to (1) identify the unique roles of social workers and other helping professionals in the Los Angeles/Long Beach area; (2) display self-awareness regarding one’s own social identity(ies) through contact with diverse and vulnerable populations; (3) evaluate the concerns/challenges and services available to vulnerable populations; and (4) analyze the social, economic, and environmental justice issues that affect individuals, families, groups, and communities in Los Angeles/Long Beach related to those affecting client systems in their home communities and as applicable to their eventual social work practice and the unique history and culture of the Los Angeles metropolitan area and the innovative social services provided to its residents.

Program participants toured innovative social service organizations that focused on social, economic, and environmental justice issues. The students interacted with consumers and providers from a variety of social services including those focusing on child welfare, mental health, services to people experiencing homelessness, former gang-involved and previously incarcerated men and women, older adults, veterans, the LGBTQIA community, and other vulnerable populations. Several agencies provided training and students participated in a neighborhood service-learning project. In addition, program participants had the opportunity to visit unique historical and cultural landmarks (e.g., the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Santa Monica Pier, Griffith Park Observatory, Watts Towers, the Queen Mary, and Catalina Island).

Two meetings were held prior to the sojourn to introduce participants to the faculty leaders, each other, and orient them to the program (e.g., flight details, laundry, food, what to bring), the syllabus and courses assignments, behavioral expectations, and program safety and emergency-preparedness. Significantly, the opportunity to build relationships and process expectations and feelings about the anticipated experience was included. For instance, the visit to a center serving the LGBTQIA population was discussed and participants were encouraged to contact one of the faculty leaders to share any concerns or reservations they might have about their participation.

Prior to the trip, participants selected from a set of pre-determined social welfare topics, e.g., gang involvement and interventions, homelessness, refugees, to focus them on a relevant social welfare issue or population they would encounter during the program. Their first assignment was to complete a paper pertinent to a site they would visit. For example, the participant who selected Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles, was prompted to explore the history, demographic characteristics and trends, and innovative services provided to Skid Row residents and discuss the role of social workers.

While on the sojourn, each participant delivered an onsite presentation based on their social welfare topic paper and posted a summary of this information to social media to document their experience. In addition, the participants kept travel journals to reflect on their perceptions, insights and general experience gained from agency visits and training. Entries were

expected to be informational but also analytical reflecting their feelings, thoughts, discussions, and observations. In the final prompts, participants were asked to reflect on what the program taught them, how they had changed as a result of their participation on the trip, what experience(s) held their attention both personally and professionally relevant to their social work practice, and lessons they believed applicable to practicing social work in their home communities.

A final post-trip reflection paper completed several weeks following their return home, asked participants to summarize their experience and learning in three areas: 1) a critical analysis of a social, economic, or environmental justice issue and intervention highlighted while in Los Angeles/Long Beach as related to the same or similar issue affecting client systems in their home region and the role social workers and other helping professionals can and should play in addressing the issue; 2) a critical reflection on the self-awareness the participant gained about their own social identity(ies) through encounters with the diverse and vulnerable populations; and 3) and identification and description of ways the student anticipated using the lessons learned to future professional practice.

### ***Sample***

Each of the nine social work students who participated in the Study Away LA program agreed to participate in the study. All identified as female, six identified as white, and three identified as persons of color including one who identified as Latinx, and two who identified as bi-racial (one self-identified as Native American and white, and the other as Black/African American and white.) All the subjects had earned the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree, and at the time of the interviews, two had completed their Master of Social Work (MSW) and two were enrolled in a graduate social work program and a student affair's program respectively. Eight of the nine participants were employed in various professional social work positions including as a case manager, a therapist, in long term healthcare and rehabilitation, probation in and parole, and prevention education for vulnerable populations. One participant was unemployed at the time of the interview.

### ***Data Collection***

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the research questions. In addition to basic demographic information, the guide included questions about participants' program experience, the impact of the program on their sense of professional social work identity, and their current social work practice. Although the interview guide was used to sequence and direct questioning, flexibility allowed for inquiry of other related topics. This allowed for the co-author to probe deeper into topics or areas of interest that surfaced during the interview.

Interviews were scheduled and conducted via the media platform, Zoom, over a six-week period by the second author. At the time of the study, she was an MSW graduate research assistant who was unknown to the participants. Verbal

consent was obtained by each participant at the beginning of the video recording.

On average, the interviews lasted 31 minutes with a range of 24 minutes to 43 minutes. The Zoom video recordings and automatically generated transcripts were reviewed for accuracy. Inaccurate interpretations of participants' responses in the transcriptions were corrected as needed. Participants' names and names of agency staff were redacted from the transcripts for purposes of confidentiality. Names of agencies and landmarks visited were not redacted to highlight the relevance of specific sites should other programs choose to replicate all or part of the experience.

Each participant's completed travel journal and final post-trip reflection paper as described above were also gathered as additional data sources for purposes of data analysis. The names of agencies and landmarks visited in these documents were also not redacted.

### ***Data Analysis***

A content analysis of the interview transcriptions was conducted to distinguish the impact Study Away LA program had on participants. Grounded theory, which pursues the meaning people give to certain events, provided the basis of an initial analysis, enabling the authors to make meaning of the respondents' commentary and identify themes that emerged from their interviews and written reflections (Yegidis et al., 2018). The authors used combined data from all sources into a final thematic data analysis (Royce et al., 2016). In addition to the interview transcripts, participants' journals and post-trip reflection papers were also analyzed to enhance the credibility of the findings (Yegidis et al., 2018). The goal of this triangulation was to corroborate the researchers' interpretations of the data and to reduce biasing findings from one source over another (Royce et al, 2016).

The researchers initially worked independently, then met to debrief comparing, refining, and consolidating data into two overarching themes related to the impact on participants' cultural competence and their identity as a social worker. Given the first author's direct involvement with participants while on this program, preconceptions and potential biases were particularly considered in the analysis and interpretation of the findings in order to enhance credibility and ensure trustworthiness. To foster transparency, an audit trail included a record of initial and subsequent decisions throughout the process of developing and implementing the research study including data gathering decisions and analyses to aid in establishing the dependability of the research.

### **Findings**

The Study Away LA program exposed participants to a wide range of social workers employed at a variety of agencies. Through their participation, they were able to witness the application of concepts and practices learned in the classroom - reporting that they enjoyed the "hands-on" experiential learning the

program offered. As one student commented, the program "helped develop my knowledge and understanding" about a variety of social service agencies while another remarked in her post-trip reflection, the experience was a meaningful way "for a social worker to get to see social work in action and experience it hands on" adding in her interview that, "I was able to see in person what I had read about in books". For many, the two-week program was a transformative part of their social work education impacting their cultural competence and identity as a social worker. (Unless otherwise noted, exemplar quotes were drawn from the interviews.)

### ***Impact on Cultural Competence***

Visiting a community away from their home communities gave these students the opportunity to learn about new and different cultures they had previously been unfamiliar with or had little exposure. It "forced ...[us] out of [our] comfort zone" as one participant wrote in her reflection paper. For another, the Los Angeles area "literally had a mix of everything like different cultures ... It was absolutely amazing!"

### ***Increased Cultural Humility***

Some participants reported coming home more culturally competent. One participant stated in her reflection paper, "I learned a new way of thinking", when referring to the people she met, and the social and economic justice issues encountered on the program. As one participant said of the trip, "It was ... kind of like a waking up moment for me ... [and] made me more open and understanding to my personal biases. It helped open my eyes to see what I was biased against," adding that the experience "helped me work towards actively overcoming those [biases]." Another participant who became very interested in working with ex-offenders as a result of her research and visit to Homeboy Industries, the largest gang intervention and rehabilitation program in the world, reflected the Study Away LA program helped her "humanize clients [and] reduce stigma" in her current practice as a probation and parole officer, and affirmed her belief that "people deserve second chances." For a third participant, her encounters with people experiencing homelessness and service providers working to help them highlighted for her, "Just because I might not be able to step in their shoes, doesn't mean I can't walk along beside them." The same participant reflected in her journal, "Living in the world is not easy and it is easy to hit the bottom when you feel like there is no one to encourage you to reach the top; I want to be that encouragement system." During the program, Study Away LA participants visited a center that served the LGBTQIA community where they received a basic cultural competency training geared toward social workers. The training focused on working with individuals who identify as LGBTQIA and explored the importance of honoring clients' self-identity. As one participant wrote in her journal, "As future social workers we need to meet clients where they are", adding, "It is so important to address clients how they address themselves and their gender pronouns."



Participants also had the opportunity to learn and adopt other culturally appropriate language. On a visit to Skid Row, the social work guide educated them that “people who experience homelessness” was a more appropriate descriptor that centers the individual rather than their circumstance. This led to greater understanding and empathy as revealed by a participant who admitted to “biases about people who are substance abusers” prior to Study Away LA; but after a half-day visit with police officers and mental health workers who partnered to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness in Long Beach, she explained she had come to understand that “addiction really is a disease” and she gained a “better understanding of the cycle of addiction.” (At the time of the interview, she had since earned her MSW and worked as a therapist supporting people with substance use disorders.) Similarly, another participant reflected in her paper, “it wasn’t just one thing that leads to homelessness but an interconnected web of social issues and broken systems that leave vulnerable populations unprotected.”

### ***Deepened Commitment to Professional Core Values***

Connected to these insights, participants deepened their appreciation for the central importance of social justice and human rights to their cultural competency after visiting the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance. At the museum they heard from a holocaust survivor and attended a talk and met a former white supremacist. At the beginning of the self-guided tour of the museum, students encountered two doors. One student reflected on this experience in post-trip paper:

We were first asked to pick a door to go through. They were labeled ‘Unprejudiced’ and ‘Prejudiced.’ As I stood in front of the door, I decided I would go through the ‘Unprejudiced’ door because I would like to think of myself as someone who does not judge others [who] are different from myself. Little did I know; the ‘Unprejudiced’ door was locked so no one could go through it because everyone is prejudiced even if they are not completely aware of it.

Participants linked this experience with their commitment to social work’s core values. In her journal the same participant reflected, “As a future social worker, it is my responsibility to fight for social justice for people, so this kind of thing does not happen in the future.” Another wrote in her journal the experience, “Provided us opportunities to self-examine our own prejudices and racism in the world. But most importantly it emphasized the need to speak out when we witness injustices.” Complementary of this but related to her greater understanding about the factors that contribute to people experiencing homelessness, another participant noted during her interview, “It’s going to take

the entire community in some capacity to see true change, because just one person alone isn't enough to fight any fight at all."

Two days after their visit to the museum, the group took part in an LGBTQIA inclusive, interfaith ceremony followed by one of the largest pride parades in the US. Unplanned, the students were invited to join an advocacy group marching in the parade. In a post-parade journal entry, one participant was deeply and unexpectedly moved by the experience, writing that she saw herself as "a warrior and a social worker ready to take on the world." In fact, this same participant reported finding the courage to later participate in a local Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) protest in her home community directly connecting her participation to her experience marching in the pride parade while on the program.

This sense of urgency and collective responsibility to address social injustice was reflected in other participants' commentary as one participant wrote in her post-trip reflection, "If as social workers we are helping this community find their voice and fight for their rights, we have succeeded."

### ***Impact on Identity as a Social Worker***

The social welfare programs participants visited and the professional social workers they met gave participants the opportunity to not only learn about innovative interventions designed to address the needs of vulnerable populations at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, but also gave them insights about their future identity as professional social workers.

### ***Expanded Understanding of and Commitment to the Profession***

Participants reported they had not initially realized the breadth and scope of what social workers can do. In fact, several had previously accepted the view that social work practice was primarily limited to "child and family services" and "child welfare"; however, the program highlighted a broader range of possibilities. For instance, one participant described a visit to a comprehensive healthy aging program as a "light bulb moment," while another reported that visiting a gang rehabilitation program helped her see the scope of practice "in a different light."

Taken together, the participants agreed the experience "solidified ... that hope and ... want for a better community" and clarified their career choice in social work. As one participant who went on to earn her MSW and work with older adults reported, "[I was] able to find clarity and figure out what I wanted to do [as a social worker]." Another participant who was in an MSW program and working at a private foster agency at the time of the interview, said she "felt more confident that I was on the right career path." In her reflection paper, another participant wrote the program "reaffirmed the [social work] path of course I wanted to complete."

### ***Increased Professional Self-Efficacy***

Further, the Study Away LA program helped the participants see themselves

in the role of professional social worker. In her post trip reflection paper, a participant said after visiting a coalition meeting of service providers in Skid Row:

It was nice to see and hear real questions and problems faced and addressed by people who could one day be me. They all were advocates speaking on the behalf of their clients and fighting for what they needed. As a future social worker this allowed insight into what goes on in their lives and what they do with their jobs.

Reflecting on the impact of the program, another participant wrote in her post-trip reflection paper, “by being a social worker, I truly am going to change someone’s life for the better.”

Participants discussed the benefits of meeting and talking with a variety of professional social workers and clients. One recognized that for her, “talking to everybody that worked at the social service agencies just reaffirmed . . . I have the confidence to do [social work], and I know I can do this.” Similarly, another claimed that she “got braver” and as a result of these interactions she learned to “relax around clients.” Another participant who worked in probation and parole at the time of the interview said the Study Away LA program, “allowed me to realize my passion and where I wanted to take my social work . . . [and] that I want[ed] to help incarcerated men, women, and juveniles.”

Not only did the trip confirm the participants’ desire to be social workers and helped them focus on their target population, some committed to using the innovative ideas learned on the program to make change in their own community. As one participant wrote in her journal, she wanted to “take the progressive innovations from LA back to [her home state]” while another reported she had replicated elements of a program model for aging adults she learned about to create an independent living program for older adults in her current position.

### **Discussion**

Consistent with the literature on study abroad and away programs, and as evidenced by students’ reflections, the Study Away LA program increased participants’ cultural competency (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2019; Core, 2017; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Sobania, 2015) and humility (Zhu et al., 2023). Traveling to an unfamiliar region in the US shifted the participants’ way of thinking and feeling, resulting in a transformative learning experience (Das & Anand, 2014; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Gerstenblatt & Gilbert, 2014; Hutchison & Rea, 2011; Pariola-Smith & Goke-Pariola, 2006; Roholt & Fisher, 2013). In effect, this cultural immersion experience connected participants’ learning and reading about cultural awareness to practicing the concept (Thibeault, 2019).

Moreover, the experiential learning during the program ignited participants’

desire to apply their new insights to their practice in their home communities. As Dubus (2014) found, students gained a greater awareness of social justice and social work ethics; and corresponding with Cordero and Rodriguez (2009), the importance of diversity and social justice was reinforced. Furthermore, meeting with and speaking to a variety of experienced social workers showcased professionals in practice who demonstrably promoted the dignity and worth of the person and the importance of human relationships, were committed to social justice and service, and who showed integrity and competence as aligned with the core values of the National Association of Social Work ([NASW], 2020). For several, this was an epiphany – a “light bulb moment.” Significantly, the program helped participants see themselves in the roles of the social workers they met – not at the specific agency they visited but back in their home communities. Taken together, this applied learning experience fostered students’ reported self-confidence, self-direction, and self-efficacy (Brown, 2009; Schvaneveldt & Spencer, 2016) – particularly as related to their self-identity as professional social workers. In many ways, the experience solidified their commitment to the field reinforcing the finding that well-designed applied learning opportunities connecting students’ classroom learning to real-world practical experiences including those outside of the classroom can positively impact students’ motivation in their field of study (Trolan & Jach, 2020).

### ***Practical Implications for Undergraduate Education***

A short-term domestic academic sojourn can give undergraduate programs – particularly professional programs – the opportunity to build upon classroom learning and deepen students’ connection and commitment to their field. In addition, it is a chance to further foster cultural competence – an essential skill for today’s workplace. For US-based programs, the United States is an ideal short-term study away destination for expanding students’ multicultural understanding and can match many of the learning outcomes associated with study abroad programs (Sobania, 2015). Further, these programs are usually more affordable and accessible to students who may have other commitments limiting their resources and ability to travel for extended periods of time (Moorhead et al., 2014). Study away programs can be led over winter, spring, or summer breaks so as not to disrupt the traditional fall/spring semester and can be an additional elective credit option (as was done with Study Away LA).

Importantly, organizers and faculty leaders must carefully plan learning objectives (Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Gjelten, 2012) and work closely with contacts in the destination community (Castemeda & Zirger, 2011; Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015; Mapp, 2012) to provide a set of experiences that will broaden participants’ views of what social work practice can encompass. Service-learning opportunities (Bolea, 2012; Lane et al., 2017) should also be considered to benefit the community visited. Assessing students’ knowledge and attitudes prior to and following the program is also key (Mapp, 2012). This can be accomplished through formal data collection, i.e., pre-and post-surveys, interviews and focus groups, informal discussion, or some combination of these.

While on the program, it is critical to provide the space for discussion and reflection to support participants in processing their experiences (Bolea, 2012). Further, the opportunity to reflect on what they learn during and after the trip is essential (Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Gjelten, 2012; Salisbury, 2012). This could be achieved through a post-trip written assignment or some other creative presentation of participants' experiences as applicable to the personal and professional insights they gain and anticipated implications for their professional practice. Finally, while careful planning is critical, allowing for spontaneous learning is essential.

While the Los Angeles metropolitan area offers an abundance of innovative service providers and cultural experiences, it is not an inexpensive or convenient area to visit for participants who may be from regions in another part of the country. Many regions of the US are rich with opportunities to replicate such a program (Sobania, 2015). If cost and time are constraints, programs may consider study away programs closer-to-home. For instance, the first author traveled with two-dozen students as a faculty leader on a week-long spring break bus tour of Kentucky exploring the unique geography, culture, and history of the state. A particular advantage for many of the nontraditional students who participated in that program was the fact the group was never more than 3-hours from home. This may be critical for place-bound students who may select a short-term study away versus a short- or long-term study abroad program based on their convenience and affordability (Moorhead et al., 2014).

### ***Limitations***

The interviewer (the second author) was not previously known to the participants. This may have been a possible limitation in that the respondents may have tempered their responses due to their lack of familiarity with the interviewer. However, it is argued, on balance, the reduced potential for bias on the part of the interviewer (or the interviewees) versus the first author conducting the interviews was preferable given his prior and ongoing relationship to the participants.

### ***Further Research***

A quantitative study utilizing pre- and post-surveys to assess student learning outcomes related to participants' knowledge, values, and cognitive and affective domains specific to their understanding of the scope of professional practice, identification, and motivation in the field, and cultural understanding/competence/humility is needed. In addition, comparing outcomes across multiple academic sojourns can establish the efficacy of these programs.

### **Conclusion**

In an era of escalating costs for students in higher education (Kimball & Luke, 2018), a well-planned, short-term academic sojourn is a more affordable alternative to a long-term study abroad program and can be equally as effective

at promoting participants' cultural competency (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2019; Core, 2017; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Sobania, 2015).

As an applied learning experience, Study Away LA had a lasting effect on those who participated. The participants enthusiastically reminisced on how the two-week sojourn was transformative not only on a personal level but also as it impacted their current work as graduate students and professional social workers. In fact, for one student, it was essential to her entire undergraduate experience when she claimed "[the program] taught me more [about] myself in two weeks than my whole college career did in three-and-a-half years."

Given its potential impact on participants' cultural competence and sense of themselves as professionals, undergraduate programs should consider tailored, short-term domestic academic sojourns as a relatively affordable, applied learning experience. As one Study Away LA participant implored, "get out there, [and] learn something new!"