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# Transdisciplinary Learning Through Narratives: A Collective Reflection on Teaching, Storytelling, and Discovery in Panama

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## ABSTRACT

*This reflective essay examines the intersection of narratives, experiential learning, and transdisciplinary collaboration within a professor-led travel study to Panama. To investigate this intersection, five professors representing nursing, secondary education, elementary education, counseling, and social work participated in a shared international learning experience designed to engage professors through storytelling, lived experiences, and cultural exchanges. Drawing on authored reflections grounded in narrative pedagogy and experiential learning; the authors explore how collective reflections across disciplines reshape teaching practices and support professional growth in intercultural understanding and critical inquiry. Furthermore, by stepping outside traditional academic departments, the faculty encountered complex, real-world situations that demanded flexible thinking, vulnerability, and shared expertise, ultimately modeling the interdisciplinary competencies that universities strive to instill in modern graduates. The manuscript presents a contextual description of the travel study, detailing the setting and structure of the international experience. Next, it highlights discipline-specific reflections from the five academic disciplines that illustrate how transdisciplinary dialogue fosters relational learning and professional insight. Through these diverse lenses, the faculty analyze how shared dialogues transformed their approaches to student-centered learning, cultural responsiveness, health advocacy, and relational care. Finally, the manuscript concludes by offering implications for institutions seeking to design international travel study experiences that dismantle academic silos, cultivate institutional resilience, and transform faculty members' personal and professional practices.*

**KEYWORDS:** transdisciplinary learning, narrative pedagogy, travel study, experiential learning, professor collaboration, cultural competence, global education

Sometimes the most meaningful learning experiences and stories emerge from human connections made through travel. During a faculty-led travel study to Panama, there were several

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times in which significant transdisciplinary learning occurred. For example, during a field excursion, an individual experienced emotional distress while navigating international travel. The professors gathered to discuss the best approach to a successful outcome. Although their responses reflected nursing, education, counseling, and social work, the outcome ultimately aligned more closely with counseling. This example illustrates how professional knowledge can extend beyond the boundaries of a single discipline. Thus, the travel study did not focus solely on learning about Panama, but it provided opportunities for discoveries, reflections, collaborations, and meaning making.

Travel study has become an increasingly significant practice in higher education. Mody et al. (2017) reported that participation in travel study programs among college students has increased. Despite the positive effects these programs can have on students' outcomes, there is a lack of scholarly research to examine how faculty members make meaning of and learn from faculty-led international travel experiences. Soulard et al. (2020) demonstrated the value of examining transformative travel experiences, while other research emphasized the learning potential of international and experiential contexts (Davis & Knight, 2021). Building on this literature, the present manuscript focuses on faculty learning rather than students' outcomes. Emerging research suggests that faculty members who lead international travel study programs may experience professional development that informs their instructional approaches and cross-cultural responsiveness (Dechert, 2023). When faculty members participate in travel study experiences that extend beyond traditional academic silos, they may be prompted to reconsider their pedagogical assumptions (Hoff & Medina, 2022). These assumptions may also be shaped by social and economic encounters and by cognitive and emotional responses (Mincu, 2022). In this manuscript, five professors from distinct disciplines present collaborative narrative reflections on their experiences during an international travel study in Panama.

Recent literature suggests that short-term international field experiences can support educators' professional capacity, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving skills (Butler, 2026). When faculty members work outside of their traditional academic departments, they encounter complex, real-world situations that demand flexible thinking and shared expertise (Peeters et al., 2026). Such collaboration can help instructors model the cross-disciplinary competencies that universities seek to develop in students (Myatt et al., 2026). The purpose of this collaborative narrative reflection is to examine how a shared international travel study involving professors from different disciplines informed narrative pedagogy, experiential learning, and transdisciplinary dialogue. Quade et al. (2026) describe how narrative inquiry can highlight an encounter through an observer's knowledge and cognitive processes. Using complementary perspectives, the authors reflected on intercultural awareness, educational practices, health resources, counseling, and school and community resources that shaped their professional thinking and prompted consideration of future pedagogy and practice. This manuscript presents faculty reflections, transdisciplinary collaboration, and international experiential learning as related processes that may contribute to faculty professional and personal growth. Research on faculty development during travel study also suggests that cross-departmental collaboration can strengthen institutional connections and enrich multi-disciplinary curricula (Buntain, 2023).

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Our approach was rooted in three complementary ideas or frameworks: narrative pedagogy, experiential learning, and transdisciplinary collaboration. Together, these frameworks shaped how

we engaged in reflective practice and made meaning of our shared experiences as professors in different disciplines.

### *Narrative Pedagogy*

Narrative pedagogy recognizes that learning can occur through stories, including the telling, listening to, and interpretation of lived experiences (Li et al., 2024). Research on storytelling and short-term travel study suggests that narrative practices can support meaning-making and intercultural identity development (Hudak et al., 2024). In this manuscript, narratives serve both as reflective practices and as relational bridges through which five professors interpreted experiences from their distinct disciplinary positions. This framework helps explain not only what the authors experienced, but also how storytelling and listening shaped what they learned. By grounding reflections in personal narratives, educators may examine ethnocentric assumptions and reconsider their identities through empathetic listening and shared discourse (Hoff & Medina, 2022). Narrative pedagogy is particularly relevant to international travel because such experiences can involve unfamiliar cultural, community, and educational contexts.

Recent scholarship highlights that storytelling functions as a dynamic epistemological tool, allowing instructors and learners to bridge the gap between abstract academic theories and concrete human realities. By organizing daily field observations into coherent personal narratives, faculty members can process emotional complexity and construct shared meanings that transcend traditional departmental jargons. Narratives given during this international travel study fostered cross-cultural and psychological discussions.

### *Experiential Learning*

Experiential learning provides a foundation for interpreting aspects of the travel study. Rather than treating the experience as simply a trip, the authors approached it as a potentially transformative, hands-on learning experience (Davane, 2025). Unlike traditional classroom instruction, travel creates opportunities for learning beyond classroom walls (Davane, 2025). For example, professors traveling to a new country may learn about different aspects of its culture through direct observations and participation. New cultural settings offer concrete experiences that can be followed by reflection, conceptualization, and consideration of future applications (Kolb, 1984). Faculty-led travel studies are strengthened when educators intentionally create opportunities to interpret experiences rather than relying on exposure alone (Ostojski & Cilke, 2023).

During the travel study, daily journaling and group dialogue created opportunities to move from observations to reflections and from reflection to professional application. Dechert (2023) emphasizes the importance of structured experiential learning in helping faculty members process complex global encounters and translate them into classroom practices. Structured experiential models also encourage participants to test their assumptions against unfamiliar social realities, helping ensure that travel becomes an opportunity for sustained professional inquiry rather than superficial tourism. Marvell and Simm (2026) suggest that testing preconceived ideas against real-world experiences can inform educators' instructional approaches and sensitivity to diverse environmental and human needs.

### *Transdisciplinary Learning*

Transdisciplinary learning has increasingly been discussed in higher education in relation to problem-solving, although less attention has been paid to teaching and learning among faculty, staff, and students (Diphoorn et al., 2023). Although transdisciplinary learning is not a new concept, it has gained recognition in education, particularly in discussions of travel and experiential learning (Diphoorn et al., 2023). Transdisciplinary learning emphasizes collaboration that transcends traditional boundaries to address complex questions (Nicolescu, 2002). Unlike interdisciplinary teaching, which integrates perspectives from related fields, transdisciplinary learning encourages dialogue across distinct areas of study. Participants in travel studies and similar interactive learning opportunities may learn from related fields; transdisciplinary learning encourages dialogue across distinct areas of study. They may also learn from others' cultures and experiences through this approach (Scharoun et al., 2023). This framework allows us to understand the journey as a space for shared meaning-making rather than a series of isolated learning events. The professors entered the experience with different lived experiences, professional knowledge, and expectations. For example, during a school visit, their perspectives differed: the educators focused on the instruction and practices of the teacher, the counselor observed students' wellbeing, the nurse analyzed health resources, and the social worker considered community conditions and resources.

### *Integrating Narrative Pedagogy, Experiential Learning, and Transdisciplinary Learning*

Together, narrative pedagogy, experiential learning, and transdisciplinary learning provide the conceptual structure for interpreting the authors' reflections. Narrative pedagogy foregrounds storytelling, listening, and interpretation; experiential learning emphasizes movement from concrete experience through reflection, conceptualization, and application; and transdisciplinary learning highlights meaning making across professional boundaries. In this collaborative narrative, these frameworks are not treated as separate explanatory models. Instead, they guide how authors from different disciplinary positions interpret the same travel study experiences during dialogues that developed shared professional insights.

As faculty members from different disciplines, we sought to identify shared perspectives and interpretive lenses through which to understand our international experience in Panama. These lenses included narrative pedagogy, experimental learning, and transdisciplinary learning. Although each of the frameworks offers a distinct perspective, together they provide an overlapping structure for making sense of the travel study. These perspectives helped the authors examine their experiences and interpret them through storytelling, dialogue, and reflection.

### *Context of the Panama Travel Study*

This 10-day travel study program took place in Panama City, Panama. Each day, educational opportunities and cultural experiences were coordinated in partnership with a local third-party tourism company. Highlights from the immersive travel study include visiting local schools, villages, and historical landmarks.

Herein, each professor's narrative is grounded in a specific professional lens and reflects educational background, disciplinary responsibilities, and personal meaning-making. The five disciplinary perspectives are represented through nursing, elementary education, secondary education, counseling, and social work. The elementary and secondary education perspectives are

presented together in the "Educators' Perspectives" section while retaining attention to the distinctive instructional concerns of each field. Across the narratives, the reflections are intended to be read as interconnected accounts rather than isolated discipline-specific reports. This structure allows the authors to consider how relational learning, professional identity, intercultural awareness, and collaborative meaning-making emerged across disciplines.

## Methodology Positioning: Collaborative Narrative Reflection

This manuscript is presented as a collaborative narrative reflection, a form of reflective scholarship rather than a traditional empirical qualitative study. The Panama travel study took the five professors beyond their usual professional environments and created opportunities for encounters with academic, cultural, health, community, and historical contexts. The reflective process was designed to help the authors document lived experiences, consider their disciplinary assumptions, and make meaning of those experiences individually and collectively. The reflections are presented as authored narratives for scholarly interpretations rather than as systematically collected data from students, community members, and other third parties. McAlpine and Weston (2000) found that reflections can help professionals learn about and improve their practices.

Five professors kept journals during the travel study and responded to reflective prompts about what was observed, how the experience related to their disciplinary roles, which assumptions or questions arose, what similarities and differences they noticed across contexts, and how the experiences might influence future teaching or professional practice. During daily reflection periods, the professors discussed observations, made comparisons, asked questions, and shared discoveries. Group norms were established to ensure each professor had an opportunity to share and respond to others' perspectives. Professors recorded shared ideas and responses in their journals. At the end of the 10-day travel study, the group discussed individual reflections, identifying recurring concepts, distinctive disciplinary interpretations, and areas of convergence and divergence. The authors selected reflections that directly addressed the article's purpose and illustrated connections among narrative pedagogy, experiential learning, and transdisciplinary learning. Vujnovic and Medic (2022) describe reflections as a way for professionals to apply learning. The group organized journal material around the authors' perspectives and cross-cutting ideas that best represented the collective experience. This process created a transparent link between individual reflection and collaborative interpretation without presenting the manuscript as a systematic qualitative analysis.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Institutional review board (IRB) approval was not required because the manuscript is based on authors' reflective narratives and does not involve human subject participants.

### *Authors' Positionality and Collaborative Interpretation*

In academic writing, it is important to explain the authors' positionality. Positionality refers to how reflective practitioners or researchers understand the world through their perspectives (Goundar, 2025). It also considers factors that may influence how practitioners view the world such as gender, race, occupation, and other forms of identity (Goundar, 2025). Accordingly, we describe our collective positionality and approach to interpretation. Throughout this reflection, we discuss

how our disciplines, academic training, teaching experiences, and lived experiences shaped what we noticed and how we interpreted the experiences and interactions in Panama. Although each of us participated in the same travel study, we did not interpret the experiences in the same way.

### *The Nurse's Reflection*

As a nursing professor and practicing registered nurse, I found that the travel study broadened my perspective on identity, health, and support. My nursing education taught me to prepare basic medical supplies that people might need. During the travel study, I was able to provide basic medication to an individual who needed assistance and help the individual connect with the appropriate support. The unfamiliar environment became overwhelming for this person. This experience reminded me to remain willing to help when I can do so. The need does not have to be medical; it may simply fall within my abilities and knowledge. This experience reinforced the broader professional responsibility to recognize needs and respond appropriately. Working alongside professors from different disciplines highlighted the strengths each professional brought to the group. Although we had not previously worked together as a team, our daily interactions encouraged us to learn from one another and contribute different forms of knowledge to the shared experience.

I observed health-related differences across some of the settings that were visited. The interactions allowed me to reflect on how socioeconomic conditions may influence access to care. Global health literature highlights the influence of social determinants on access to care and health outcomes across nations (Zumstein-Shaha & Grace, 2022). Based on our experiences during this travel study, I became more attentive to the ways that health concerns can be understood across professional and cultural contexts. During one school visit, I had the opportunity to connect with a school nurse and observe her practice. Through our conversation, I learned that, within the school setting we visited, nurses were registered nurses with extensive training and credentials. One of the nurses explained that more than 19 nurses serve 27 schools and provide immunization, vision, and dental services. Through an interpreter, I also observed similarities between the responsibilities described by the Panamanian school nurse and those commonly associated with school nurses in the United States, including leadership, coordination of health and safety initiatives, disease prevention, and support for students, families, educators, and staff.

Engaging directly with international healthcare practitioners offered a tangible reminder that clinical competencies must be continuously adapted to fit local community structures and cultural nuances (Zumstein-Shaha & Grace, 2022). Observing healthcare delivery in diverse settings challenged me to rethink how nursing education prepares future clinicians to collaborate seamlessly with non-medical professionals, such as social workers and educators, when addressing community health disparities. It was a privilege for me to participate in this Panama travel study. The experience reinforced my understanding that learning is continuous and that professional knowledge can be expanded through exposure to new cultures, perspectives, and shared human experiences. This experience prompted me to consider how narrative reflections and transdisciplinary dialogue can strengthen professional learning by making visible forms of knowledge that may be overlooked when disciplines work separately.

### *The Educators' Perspectives*

Classrooms around the world are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of disabilities, learning styles, academic performance, cultural backgrounds, and available resources (Tomlinson, 2017). Diversity was also visible in the schools we visited in Panama. Although the educational stakeholders in these educational settings differed in many ways, the settings reflected shared goals related to academic, social, and emotional development. Gay (2018) notes that teachers are challenged to design and implement differentiated instruction that responds to learners with varied abilities, backgrounds, and interests. During our school visits, instructors used different resources to educate students. Some resources offered choices for completing assignments to demonstrate learning. These observations prompted reflections on how learners' voice, autonomy, and responsiveness might be incorporated into teacher preparation. International classroom observations can challenge preservice and in-service teacher educators to evaluate their pedagogical assumptions and develop culturally responsive practices (Milner, 2020).

Milner (2020) noted that many teachers have limited exposure to cultures beyond their own when entering the profession, which can contribute to challenges related to relationship building, classroom management, and differentiated instruction. These observations encouraged us to reconsider assumptions about student behavior and voice that can sometimes influence classroom management decisions. This experience prompted reflections on how future teachers might examine their own assumptions and create culturally responsive opportunities for student voice and autonomy. Exposing educators to international educational settings directly fosters the development of global citizenship and intercultural sensitivity, which are critical traits for effective modern instruction (Stebleton et al., 2013).

There were similarities between the Panamanian and U.S. schools visited, including instructional structures and the presence of public and private schools with specific curricula and subject-based requirements. During school observations, we critically examined teaching practices in settings where language barriers, limited resources, and unfamiliar content were part of the observed context. Within the schools visited, educational leaders appeared intentional in their instruction while using engaging activities in the learning process. Activities inspired independency and accountability inside and outside the classroom.

Learners of all ages were engaged in outdoor activities that encouraged implementation of social, motor, and academic skills. Research on student-centered learning in secondary education emphasizes that autonomy and accountability support deeper engagement and motivation when students are trusted to manage their learning processes (Wang, 2023). This level of independence reflected a learning culture that aligns with the stated goals of secondary education, though it is not always fully realized in traditional instructional settings.

Furthermore, witnessing student-centered methodologies across international classrooms reinforced the notion that academic rigor and emotional support are deeply intertwined (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). When educators observe teaching practices outside their native educational systems, they gain fresh insights into cultivating agency, reducing opportunity gaps, and fostering inclusive learning environments that honor diverse cultural backgrounds (Milner, 2020).

Overall, the travel study reinforced the value of student-centered learning while prompting reflection on how autonomy, accountability, and assessment can be balanced effectively within elementary and secondary classrooms. Observing the classroom environments strengthened our perspectives as college professors and reaffirmed the importance of preparing future educators to be culturally responsive and reflective practitioners (Gay, 2018). From an experiential-learning

perspective, the observations provided concrete experiences that were followed by reflection and discussion. From a narrative-pedagogy perspective, the stories shared about these classrooms helped us interpret what we observed. From a transdisciplinary perspective, conversations with colleagues from counseling, nursing, and social work broadened how I considered student wellbeing and learning beyond the classroom. Positioned between secondary and higher education, this experience reinforced our responsibilities to prepare future educators who can navigate instructional autonomy, cultural responsiveness, and reflective practices across diverse educational contexts.

### *The Social Worker's Perspective*

Whereas education focuses on teaching and learning environments, the social work perspective considers systemic inequality, socioeconomic conditions, and community resilience. Quality education, pedagogy, and curriculum promote the development of the National Association of Social Workers' six core values of the profession: social justice, service, integrity, competence, dignity and worth of all people, and the importance of human relationships (NASW, 2021). International travel study represents a powerful pedagogical approach that allows individuals to critically examine social systems and inequalities within real-world contexts (Healy, 2008). During the travel study, I observed several classrooms and spoke with different community leaders about socioeconomic factors, cultural competence, and professional resources.

Some of the Indigenous community members described economic differences between upper- and lower-income groups. They noted many of their challenges related to being in poverty-stricken environments where funding and resources were often difficult to obtain. The conversation prompted me to consider how structural conditions, historical forces, and economic opportunities shape community experiences. These reflections are consistent with social work literature on poverty and social exclusion (Halkos & Aslanidis, 2023). During one community visit, we observed a housing complex that was once a local jail. The structure did not have efficient plumbing, and all residents shared one community bathroom that was in the basement of the five-story complex. The area that was once where inmates received outdoor time was now visibly used for recreation, storage, and drying clothes. The building did not appear to receive frequent updates or inspections to ensure sanitary, safe conditions for residents. These observations illustrated conditions within the specific community settings we visited but did not represent all the housing conditions throughout Panama.

Community leaders also discussed gentrification and advocacy efforts focused on protected and affordable housing. Some community members and leaders described how increased investment in restaurants, hotels, and commercial development affected long-term residents' ability to remain in their communities. Research on urban development documents ways gentrification can disproportionately affect residents and contribute to housing insecurity (Acolin et al., 2024). Witnessing firsthand how systemic economic shifts affect housing and daily survival reinforced the necessity of training future practitioners to critically evaluate structural inequalities rather than relying on generalized assumptions (Halkos & Aslanidis, 2023). Engaging with local community members in different settings reinforced the idea that sustainable advocacy must be rooted in active listening and cultural humility (Healy, 2008). These conversations prompted me to connect social work concepts of advocacy, social justice, and community resilience with what we were learning directly from community members. Rather than making a broad claim about Panama's economy,

the experience helped me examine how local voices can deepen professional understanding of structural conditions and lead a call to action.

The cultural richness encountered in these settings was significant. One of the most memorable experiences was visiting a village that was only accessible by a thirty-minute boat ride upstream. Here village leaders shared their cultural norms related to food, shelter, clothing, handicrafts, sustainability, and education. For instance, young children wore cloth diapers, and males wore loincloths; food was caught and cooked from the river and surrounding nature; and face paint and hair accessories were handmade from plants. These immersive experiences provided forms of learning that could never be developed without engaging in the travel study.

The influence of such a study is difficult to reproduce through classroom discussion alone. Healy (2008) supports this idea by suggesting social work pedagogy should value relational, community-centered, and experiential approaches to learning. This experience connected directly to transdisciplinary learning because discussions with educators, nurses, and counselors expanded our interpretations of community wellness and professional responsibility.

### *The Counselor's Perspective*

Complementing these structural and pedagogical observations, the counseling perspective foregrounded emotional learning, vulnerability, and relational care as central components of the travel experience. Counseling scholarship emphasizes that learning is not solely cognitive but also emotional and relational, particularly in unfamiliar or high-intensity contexts. Research on experiential and transformative learning suggests that unfamiliar environments can prompt self-awareness, vulnerability, and emotional engagement for learners and educators (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991; Ostojski & Cilke, 2023). As we navigated Panama together, familiar roles of professors and a counselor became less rigid, creating opportunities to support one another and learn through shared experiences.

At a natural pool, while others photographed starfish and enjoyed the clear water, I sat observing the different emotions of participants witnessing unfamiliar things, places, and people. Drawing on counseling practices related to grounding and present-moment awareness, I offered support to help individuals navigate, control, and understand their emotions. Gradually, the environment became a joyful location filled with teachable moments and new learning. I interpreted this moment as a professional reflection rather than evidence of a broader pattern among students who are involved in a travel study.

While much of my focus centered on emotional experiences, I gained insights from observing educators and counseling staff in the settings we visited. Their approaches to individual's wellbeing, shaped by local expectations, helped me identify the available resources. I learned that care can be structured in different ways while remaining rooted in support and connection. On the seventh day of our trip, we attended a presentation that outlined aspects of Panama's education system. Learning that fewer than one percent of public schools, according to the Panama presentation, had social workers, psychologists, or special education services prompted reflection on how students may experience academic and emotional support within the settings described.

Observed support models shared similarities with frameworks commonly used in American educational settings, such as positive behavioral supports and specialized student services (Sugai & Horner, 2002). At various educational sites, professionals provided social-emotional and academic support, although roles differed from those commonly associated with school counseling in the United States. These experiences reinforced that support structures vary across contexts

while the need for wellbeing remains an important concern. They also prompted me to consider how cultural context should be included when preparing counselors and educators to work across settings. In addition, psychological and emotional resilience during immersive travel relies heavily on establishing empathetic, human-centered connections among participants (Goleman, 1995). Allowing space for vulnerability within faculty-led groups not only models healthy coping mechanisms but also strengthens the emotional safety of the entire academic community.

Counseling literature consistently affirms that students' emotional experiences are connected to their learning environments, particularly in immersive and relational settings (Goleman, 1995). This experience prompted me to consider transformative learning as a process that requires space for vulnerability, shared responsibility for care, and intentional attention to emotional realities. Beddes (2026) supports this idea by highlighting the value of fostering mindfulness to further promote transformative learning. In addition, this reflection also connected directly to narrative pedagogy because the observations and encounters became part of the story through which I interpreted the role of relational support. These principles continue to influence my teaching, mentorship, and collaborative work, reminding me that emotional learning is not supplemental to education but can be central to meaningful professional learning.

## Integrative Synthesis Across Disciplinary Perspectives

Across the five disciplinary perspectives, three cross-cutting insights emerged. First, relational learning was central to experiences. Whether the authors were responding to a student's immediate need, listening to community leaders, observing teachers, or discussing health and counseling practices, learning occurred through relationships and dialogue. This finding aligns with narrative pedagogy because meaning was developed through telling, listening, and interpreting lived experiences. It reflects the relational emphasis of social work and counseling perspectives.

Second, the experiences prompted shifts in professional identity and perspective. The authors did more than engage in a travel study; they repeatedly compared what they encountered with assumptions and practices from their professional contexts. This process reflects experiential learning, in which concrete experience is followed by reflection and conceptualization that can inform future application (Kolb, 1984). The reflections also suggest influence and reconsideration rather than a measurable or permanent transformation.

Third, collaborative meaning-making expanded what any single discipline could have noticed. Nursing foregrounded health and preparedness; education emphasized instructional practice and student agency; social work highlighted structural conditions and community voice; and counseling emphasized emotional wellbeing and relational care. When these perspectives were discussed together, the same experiences could be interpreted through multiple lenses. This is the transdisciplinary contribution of the travel study: professional boundaries remained visible, but dialogue across those boundaries generated a broader understanding of teaching, learning, care, and community.

## Implications for Higher Education

The collaborative narratives and integrative synthesis suggest several implications for higher education. First, institutions should intentionally design international learning opportunities that include structured reflection, dialogue, and interpretation rather than relying on cultural exposure alone. This recommendation is grounded in the authors' daily discussions and end-of-trip

synthesis, during which observations became more meaningful when viewed through multiple disciplinary perspectives. Guided reflections can help faculty connect concrete experiences to professional questions, consistent with experiential learning, and reflective practice (Kolb, 1984; McAlpine & Weston, 2000).

Second, institutions may benefit from intentionally positioning professors as learners and creating opportunities for transdisciplinary collaboration. The reflections showed that nursing, education, counseling, and social work perspectives drew attention to different dimensions from the same international experience. Designing travel studies with cross-disciplinary faculty teams can therefore create opportunities for collaborative problem solving, questioning of assumptions, and professional renewal. This recommendation follows directly from the group's experience of comparing disciplinary interpretations and identifying shared themes after daily reflections.

Third, international travel study programs should be prepared to assist with emotional learning and relational care. The counseling narrative, as well as the group's broader reflections on vulnerability, support, and unfamiliar environments, suggests that immersive experiences can surface emotional needs that may not be visible in traditional classroom settings. Future programs may benefit from intentional structures such as guided reflections, debriefing, peer support, and opportunities for unscripted discussions. Recognizing emotional learning as part of the educational experience can strengthen ethical and responsive program designs.

Finally, the reflections suggest that international experiences can influence professional thinking across fields. The educators reconsidered assumptions about student voice and autonomy; the nursing reflection emphasized preparedness and shared responsibility; the social work reflection deepened attention to community voice and structural conditions; and the counseling reflection highlighted emotional wellbeing and relational care. These examples support a cautious claim that international experiential learning can prompt faculty to reconsider future practices and professional roles. Further scholarship is needed to examine these processes more systematically, particularly because much of the existing travel-study literature focused on students rather than faculty.

## Conclusion

This collaborative narrative reflection suggests three primary takeaways. First, faculty can learn as co-learners when international experiences create space for shared observations, storytelling, and reflections. Second, transdisciplinary interpretation adds depth because different professional perspectives illuminate different dimensions of the same experience. Third, structured reflections help convert international experiences into professional learning by connecting concrete encounters with questions about future teaching and practices. The authors' experiences therefore suggest that international travel study can prompt professional reconsideration and growth.

The experiential learning cycle moved from concrete experiences to individual and group reflections, to conceptual interpretation and consideration of future applications. Narrative pedagogy further supported learning through storytelling, listening, and interpretation, while transdisciplinary dialogue allowed the authors to compare and extend their understandings across professional boundaries. Together, these processes made the travel study a relational learning experience rather than simply a series of observations.

Ultimately, the journey to Panama prompted the authors to reconsider assumptions about teaching, learning, care, culture, and professional responsibilities. The value of these experiences was not located only in what each professor observed, but also in what became possible through

collective meaning-making. For higher education, this reflective account highlights the importance of positioning faculty as co-learners, designing opportunities for transdisciplinary dialogue, and intentionally structuring reflections so that international experiences can contribute to continuing professional learning.

Recent investigations underscore that when higher education institutions intentionally foster cross-boundary faculty development through immersive global engagement, the results have a greater impact on the building of institutional resilience and curriculum internationalization (Buntain, 2023; Butler, 2026). As faculty members continuously adapt their pedagogical frameworks to reflect complex socio-cultural realities, they cultivate a sustainable culture of inquiry that directly enhances both academic programming and professional practice (Ludwig, 2026; Myatt, 2026). Future research should continue to explore how collaborative faculty mobilities can further dismantle disciplinary silos and promote lifelong professional transformation across diverse academic landscapes.

## Limitations of the Study

While this reflective essay offers insight into the intersection of transdisciplinary learning, narrative pedagogy, and experiential frameworks during an international travel study, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the findings are based solely on the authors' self-reported journal reflections and collaborative dialogues. While this approach aligns with narrative inquiry and reflective scholarship, it lacks objective, standardized metrics to measure the long-term institutional impact of the experience on future instructional practices. Second, the scope of this study is constrained by a small sample of five professors representing nursing, education, counseling, and social work. The observations and transdisciplinary interpretations cannot be broadly generalized to all faculty-led travel studies or other higher education contexts. Third, the authors served simultaneously as both the subjects of the study and the analytical interpreters of their own lived experiences, which can be susceptible to confirmation bias. Although group norms, structured journaling prompts, and collaborative synthesis were implemented to mitigate individual subjectivity, the findings remain bound to the authors' specific professional identities, background assumptions, and contextual interactions in Panama.

Future research should expand on these findings by incorporating larger, cross-institutional participant pools and longitudinal tracking mechanisms to evaluate how faculty-led international experiences persistently transform classroom methodologies over time. Despite these limitations, this study offers meaningful insight relating to faculty from distinct disciplines using reflections and collaborations to reshape teaching practices and support professional growth in intercultural understanding and critical inquiry.

## Declarations

### Author Contributions

Mary Giles, Austin Ferrell, ZeVida A. Jones, Esther Sellars, and Cayce Batts collaborated and designed all sections of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the first draft of the manuscript, drawing on their reflective journal and experiences during the travel study. Mary Giles, Cayce Batts, and ZeVida A. Jones were involved in editing the manuscript.

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N/A - Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required for this study because the manuscript is based on the authors' reflective narratives and does not involve human subject research.

**Informed Consent**

Each author agreed to the work via email and worked collectively to complete this submission.

**Data availability statement**

Additional details about the analysis process are available on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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**Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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