

# The Promotion of Lifelong Learning: A Study Abroad Program for Practitioners

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**Abstract:** For the social work profession, continuing education (CE) expectations serve to stimulate the greater purpose of professional growth, transformation, and lifelong learning. Currently, CE is delivered in a variety of formats—from paper-based methods with little to no interaction in the learning process to conferences and workshops with more face-to-face participation. An overview of the profession’s expectations of continuing education, the practice of lifelong learning, and the integration of experiential learning are discussed. Our narratives explore a unique approach to continuing education from the leader, as well as one participant’s personal reflections on being immersed in a transformative CE learning experience in Costa Rica.

**Keywords:** continuing education, lifelong learning, social work licensing, transformative learning, values and ethics, experiential learning, study abroad

## Introduction

The importance of continuing education (CE) has long been emphasized within the social work profession. Knowledge changes, and this understanding should lead social workers and other licensed professionals to actively engage in ongoing learning. As of January 2015, all 50 states require social workers to earn continuing education units (CEUs) in order to meet licensing requirements (Kurzman, 2016). These requirements range from a low of nine hours per year in Tennessee (Tennessee Department of Health, n.d.) to a high of 48 hours across two years in Arkansas (Arkansas Social Work Licensing Board, n.d.). States require varying hours of continuing education depending upon the level of licensure. Each state sets its own requirements for licensure and the continuing education required for renewal, but it is important to reiterate that all states have *some* level of licensure and continuing education requirements.

How can continuing education be offered in a way that allows for personal and professional growth and transformation while also enhancing practice knowledge and/or skills? Increasingly, CE can be earned via online modules, but are also available through conferences, workshops, and paper-based methods such as reading and responding to articles. In this paper, we (Misty and Melody) outline an approach to continuing education that encourages true involvement and may lead to transformation. We will lay some groundwork from the literature, outline the program, and share personal narratives from the leader (Melody) and one participant (Misty).

## Expectations of the Social Work Profession

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015), in its latest version of the *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS), addresses lifelong learning. In the definition of Competency 1, “Demonstrate Professional and Ethical Behavior,” is this statement: “Social

workers recognize the importance of life-long learning and are committed to continually updating their skills to ensure they are relevant and effective” (p. 7). This commitment to lifelong learning was also present in previous iterations of the EPAS. Social workers have a sacred responsibility to remain abreast of changes in knowledge, but also to continue on the quest to being self-reflective practitioners. One of the behaviors outlined under Competency 1 is to “use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations” (p. 7). The idea that one can graduate “competent” should not imply that growth is over once a diploma is received. In fact, personal and professional growth is only just beginning.

### **NASW Code of Ethics and Values of the Profession**

The preamble to the NASW (2017b) Code of Ethics states:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. (para. 1)

The preamble also outlines the core values of the profession, which include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

Section 1.0.4 outlines the need for social workers to strive for competence. Other sections of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017a) that were particularly relevant to the CE opportunity described in this paper are outlined under Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity. We would argue that traditional workshop-based CE courses, whether face-to-face or online, may not be the ideal pedagogy to encourage true growth and deep learning. Experiential learning is highlighted in social work programs, focusing on field education (i.e., hands-on learning) as the signature pedagogy. Furthermore, the Code states:

Social work administrators and supervisors should take reasonable steps to provide or arrange for continuing education and staff development for all staff for whom they are responsible. Continuing education and staff development should address current knowledge and emerging developments related to social work practice and ethics. (Section 3.08)

Being a licensed social worker, I (Misty) feel that I have been trusted with a very important responsibility to all individuals who cross my path in the communities where social workers practice. We work with people who are often at their most vulnerable point in life, and they are trusting us to be of help, support, or guidance in this difficult season. Within these encounters, it is imperative that I am prepared and that I have not relied on my education alone to be an effective practitioner. The pursuit of learning and preparation is much broader than formalized education; it is a commitment to never become complacent or view myself as the “most experienced professional” or “perfect,” and to always be humble in the realization that continual learning is necessary to be able to address the challenges that evolve in our communities. In

addition to being a licensed social worker, I have also been trusted with a very important responsibility as a social work educator in preparing future social workers for their profession. In my role, it is important that I am clear about expectations of social workers, both ethically and legally, but it is also just as important that social work students see me as a model of a social worker, living out those responsibilities. I believe students need to see me as a learner, as well—a *professional* that is still learning, even from them. If I want my students to be self-reflective practitioners and continually evolve their practice, then I am responsible for not only teaching this value but demonstrating this value. Because upon graduation, they, too, will also be trusted with a significant responsibility in our communities.

### **Continuing Education versus Lifelong Learning**

The changing landscape of the social work profession and the need for more social workers make competent, self-sufficient, and self-reflective practitioners imperative. Social work practice requires engagement with a diverse clientele and the ability to work in partnership with multidisciplinary professionals. To maintain pace with today's rapidly changing context, knowledge must be continually refreshed and advanced throughout a practitioner's career. Thus, the notion of practicing lifelong learning becomes essential to the progression and evolution of the profession (Nissen et al., 2014).

Today, CE is being provided in diverse delivery modes by colleges, agencies, professional organizations, and private entities (Gianino et al., 2016). This diversity has created discourse within the profession on the quality and effectiveness of CE delivery. As a result, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) funded a major research effort, *The Missing Link Project* (Ruth et al., 2014), to study the social work CE system in the United States over a three-year period. Although findings from stakeholders on the overall quality and effectiveness were generally positive, all stakeholder groups strongly agreed that CE content tends to align with popular trends and the CE instructor's interest area rather than needed content. Social justice issues, social work profession-specific content, workplace safety, and macro social work topics were noted as missing among CE offerings. In the comparison among the quality and effectiveness of CE providers, positive views were strongly shared regarding traditional CE providers such as schools of social work, social work professional organizations, and conferences. CE providers receiving the lowest ratings included home-based providers, mail-based providers, non-social work organizations, for-profit companies, online or web-based courses, and employers. To address CE effectiveness, participants suggested inclusion of the assessment of learning but also the application of learning in their social work practice settings (Ruth et al., 2014). ASWB has established an Approved Continuing Education (ACE) Program to provide consistency to CE in social work by outlining quality-based criteria for CE approval. Among the regulatory jurisdictions, only 39 U.S. states currently accept ACE-approved CE hours (Kurzman, 2016).

Because CE requirements today are primarily driven by licensure mandates of individual states and territories, standardization of CE criteria is difficult (Kurzman, 2016); consequently, the burden of assessing for the quality of CE offerings lies with the individual practitioner (Gianino et al., 2016). Social work education has made an intentional shift to competency-based learning

focused on outcomes, pointing toward the need for further discussion and research regarding competency-based outcomes for CE.

From the perspective of the first author (Misty), continuing education requirements provide an expectation for the ongoing practice of learning, but I think most social workers would agree that learning takes place every day. My experience with receiving continuing education has been varied over my career. I have been a social work practitioner in settings where continuing education was infused within the culture of the agency, but I have also been in settings where I was the only social worker and thus was required to perform continuing education on my own time external to the agency. I have completed continuing education online as well as through attendance at workshops and conferences. Sometimes, the offerings were relevant topics to my social work practice and other times they were not so relevant. The CE experiences that I valued the most were the face-to-face ones where I could engage in topics that I could actually apply to my work with clients in practice. I love to leave CEs with additional tools for my expanding toolbox. The CE requirements for social work licensure in my state of residence indicate completion of 30 hours every two years (including six hours of ethics). Although this expectation serves as a positive reminder to remain current, as a CE participant, much more than 15 hours per year of learning is necessary to perform as an effective social worker in the ever-changing contexts of our profession. Owning an outlook of intentionality, responsibility, and purposefulness for my learning has become a must in my personal life and career.

My (Melody's) understanding of lifelong learning has evolved in the years I have spent in academia. Throughout my career as a licensed social worker, I have always been diligent about accumulating continuing education hours for renewal. Often, however, the focus became what CEUs were available and how the timing fit into my schedule, versus the topic or focus of the training. I also believe that continuing education, in and of itself, is not enough to change behaviors. For example, many licensing boards may mandate continuing education on ethics. However, having presented ethics workshops for a number of years (and always trying to move content beyond the very dry rules and regulations of state laws and licensing rules), I have experienced more than a few practitioners attempting to circumvent the system: "I have to leave early; may I have my certificate now?" Or, perhaps even worse, colleagues attempting to pick up certificates for others who left early from the workshop. One must ask if continuing education in and of itself is sufficient. I believe that we should focus more on the concept of lifelong learning, which should include both personal and professional growth.

### **Transformation and Experiential Learning**

Ideally, continuing education provides the opportunity to transform and grow, which best occurs through experiential learning. It has long been acknowledged that experiential learning and social work education fit well together. Human interaction is a necessary component of building social work skills; however, the format of many continuing education opportunities includes an instructor presenting information. Participants may or may not have the opportunity to practice new skills, engage in discussion, or apply their learning. Online opportunities for CE abound, lending flexibility to when CEUs can be earned. This allows for rural social professionals to have a greater level of access to continuing education. However, these online workshops do not

generally involve interaction, and there is some concern about the quality of these offerings (Ruth, et al., 2014).

In school, social work students are taught about the importance of reflective or reflexive practice, but this seems to be rarely, if ever, emphasized in ongoing learning once a practitioner is licensed and is working in the field. Lifelong learning, according to Nissen et al. (2014) “relates to a set of values and principles regarding the role of ongoing acquisition, integration, and application of new knowledge throughout one’s lifetime” (p. 386). Whether licensed or not, lifelong learning should be a professional mandate for social workers, and it is a corequisite to effective practice and growing competence. Nissen et al. further states that “educators [must] be *deliberate and intentional* about building updated lifelong learning models into *social work practice frameworks and educational structures*” (p. 386). They also posit that the emphasis on evidence-based interventions may disenfranchise some communities through a lack of support for varied ways of knowing.

Lifelong learning needs to be distinguished from simply receiving ongoing education. Lifelong learning implies a deeper application of problem-solving through both individual and group processes. It is “essential not only to us and those close to us, but also to the remaking and transformation of the society in which we live” (Billet, 2010, p. 403). Billet (2010) emphasizes a framework that integrates lifelong learning with the personal; it is a social process, while also being uniquely individual. Meaningful lifelong learning infers personal growth and transformation, and not just the accumulation of additional knowledge through continuing education. However, there is a dearth of social work literature exploring the concept of lifelong learning. One model of lifelong learning developed by Nissen et al. (2014) discusses the intersection of knowledge, values, and skills with organizational contexts, political and economic issues, and community and cultural contexts.

The demographic composition of the United States is experiencing the most expansive cultural diversity in its history. This changing face of our communities places an important responsibility on the social work profession to have a strong understanding of global issues that impact our clients from a holistic perspective. The International Federation of Social Workers (2014) emphasizes that the “principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work” in its global definition of the profession (para. 1). As a result of this shift, ongoing education to remain current on globalization issues that impact the lives of people becomes necessary in order to make effective practice decisions. Previous research has supported the notion that social workers have an interest in understanding the global context and its potential impact on their interactions with clients (Smith & Cheung, 2015). Furthermore, after delivery of an educational program focused on the topic of global issues, Smith and Cheung (2015) found that social work practitioners increased their interest in seeking global knowledge, with particular emphasis on the importance of increasing this knowledge through traveling abroad.

Non-traditional delivery modes of continuing education are surfacing in the health science and human service fields. The CSWE (2014) has sponsored “social work study tours”; in 2014, a group traveled to Costa Rica, but the focus of the program was not on continuing education

hours but rather on faculty development. Of late, professional organizations and private entities have begun sponsoring and promoting continuing education programming on cruise lines. Many of these CE offerings are marketing to interdisciplinary licensees in social work, mental health counseling, marriage and family therapy, nursing, and medical practice. For example, one state's NASW is sponsoring a cruise that is dubbed "Social Workers at Sea" and offers 10 CEs for the week-long cruise (NASW-NM, 2019). Although these CE opportunities may be viewed as study abroad or study away, the true focus of the education is not on studying the geographic environment or the population where they are traveling. The aim appears to be focused on workshop topics that would traditionally be delivered in a face-to-face format, with the added element of travel to promote self-care and relaxation.

As a learner, I (Misty) value interactions and experiences that promote hands-on application. I prefer to be an active rather than passive learner. Learning can be transformative, both personally and professionally, when the boundaries of comfort are pushed. Being a self-reflective social worker becomes vital to identifying our areas of growth, where we need further development and knowledge. Many times, our experiences as social workers highlight, in real time, those knowledge or skill gaps. As our context continually changes, and the multicultural demographics of our communities change, it becomes imperative that we learn about the global impacts affecting our society. Study abroad provides an important stage for this learning.

I (Melody) have presented many workshops over the years and try to infuse the opportunity for practitioners to see things from a different perspective. After being thrown into study abroad almost by accident, I began to see the possibilities for practitioners to participate in a worldview-shifting opportunity. Often, when we travel, it is from the standpoint of being a tourist. We are on a quest for adventure, or rest and relaxation, and may confine ourselves to tourist areas and activities. I began thinking about how to bring to professionals the opportunity that I regularly provide to students. For me, study abroad is more than a tour with a syllabus (Slimbach, 2010). Travel in general, but particularly study abroad programs, should help us grow and should help us shift our worldview. I have learned as much from leading programs as my students do from participating in the program. Seeing myself as a lifelong learner, I am transparent with my fellow travelers—whether students, practitioners, or faculty—about my own experiences, my personal growth, and my view that I remain a "human becoming," not a human being. The day I think I know it all, and cannot learn from others (whether colleagues, supervisors, students, or the communities and individuals that we visit when in Costa Rica), is the day that I need to leave academia and social work behind. We should always seek transformation and a deeper understanding, and always be willing to learn. The opportunities that have been afforded to me through study abroad have been pivotal in growing my understanding of our place in the world. For me, that ongoing transformation is at the heart of my commitment to engage in lifelong learning.

### **The Costa Rica for Professionals Program**

The Costa Rica for Professionals Program developed from a similar program offered to social work students. I (Melody) developed the student program eight years ago and have led groups

multiple times. While the student program runs two full weeks, the professionals program lasts one week. Other than the length of time abroad, all aspects of the professionals program mirror those of the student program. All participants stay with host families, and the schedule includes *charlas* (lectures), visits to agencies, and cultural excursions. The overarching topic of the inaugural CE program was women and children, with a focus on immigration. All activities included a period of debriefing in order to reflect on thoughts and feelings, integrate knowledge, and explore the relevance to the participants' practice (whether educator or practitioner). Participants included eight women (seven from Texas and one from Utah) and one leader. The first author (Misty) was a participant. The group included six social work faculty members and two practitioners. Participants were provided with pre-travel readings and a link to a YouTube video which included information about the schedule and the agencies we would visit, tips for living with a Costa Rican family, money exchange, etc. The leader also communicated regularly via email with participants, answering questions and inviting pre-travel interaction.

Participants gathered in Costa Rica and were met by a representative of our third-party provider. On the first day, we were delivered to our host families and given information about when and where to meet the next day when our program officially began. Host families are responsible for getting participants to the agency (teaching them the walking route, or where to get a bus or taxi). During the week, we visited multiple grassroots agencies focused on women's issues, including domestic violence and immigration, listened to *charlas* about social issues and social work services, and visited with social work faculty from the Universidad de Costa Rica. There were cultural excursions to the central market, a walking tour of San José (with a lot of historical context of colonialism and reminding participants of the influence of figures like William Walker), Irazú volcano, and the National Museum, which is housed in the old fort. Four intrepid participants walked 12 kilometers in *la Romeria*, an annual pilgrimage to the *basilica* in Cartago where the patron saint of Costa Rica, *la Negrita*, is housed. We visited a grassroots agency focused on women's empowerment, and then visited a squatter's community where (primarily) Nicaraguan migrants lived. The community is in stark contrast to the propaganda of Costa Rican commercials offering to "save the Americans" if we "come to Costa Rica" (Costa Rica Vacations, 2014), a country marketed as teeming with rainforests, oceans, varied landscapes, and biodiversity. Group processing occurred at the end of each day, highlighting our learning and contrasting Costa Rican social work and social issues with those in the United States.

I (Misty) have always wanted to study abroad but never had the opportunity as a social work student. I have traveled outside of the United States only twice in my lifetime; neither time was for an intentional focus on studying. As a social work educator, I have lived on the periphery of hearing and seeing pictures of my faculty colleagues' and students' study abroad experiences and was always envious of the rich growth experience I was missing out on. It had proven difficult for me, previously, to be a study abroad faculty leader because it required being away two weeks from my young children in the summer months, a difficult time to provide arrangements for my absence. So, when this new and innovative one-week CE opportunity to study abroad was developed and advertised, it really spoke to me. It appealed to me because it was different from most CE offerings, as it deviated from the traditional types of CE learning (workshop, webinar, mail submission). This opportunity was a hands-on option to experience learning from others abroad in their natural environment, rather than through a textbook,

classroom, or internet search, which aligns well with my learning style. I was also intrigued by this option because I did not (and do not) want to become stagnant as a professional social worker or educator. I want to continually push myself to face situations and experiences that force me to grow and evolve in our global society. I felt like this learning experience would align well with advancing my personal and professional growth.

## **Experiences of the Program**

### **Host Family Stay**

I (Misty) will be honest: The thought of staying with a Costa Rican host family was both intriguing and frightening at the same time. I think the frightening part was the idea of not being able to communicate. I speak *very* little Spanish, and I know from my professional experience how difficult it can be to communicate when you do not share the same language. But I was looking forward to facing the challenge upon arrival. The very first day, after being dropped off at my homestay, I was nervous as the other CE participants drove away. Although I was a stranger, I was immediately embraced by my Tica mom and her family. They included me in every aspect of their Sunday, spending time with me like family. One of my Tica mom's daughters spoke English, so this gave us an initial pathway to communicate. From her daughter, I learned that my Tica mom did not speak any English. So, her daughter set up the Google Translate application on her cell phone and I, too, had the application on my phone. My Tica mom had a granddaughter that was just about the same age as my daughter, so we played hide-and-seek and played with dolls. At the end of the day, her family left to return to their homes. I was in my room alone, and I had this strange feeling of loneliness (even though I was not alone). But it made me connect this experience to a youth who is placed in a foster home or a family living in a homeless shelter, where although love and support may be extended, everything is new and different.

For me, the culture, language, food, and environment were all new and different. But that lonely feeling, that experience, made me get in touch with *those* feelings, embrace vulnerability and discomfort, and learn about myself as well as my Tica mom and her culture. Obviously, we found many similarities to share and embrace. We found ways to communicate; it really is amazing what you can accomplish with hand gestures and a little help from technology. My Tica mom was widowed and lived alone, so she really embraced taking care of me all week. She knew that I had children and that I missed them, so she made a point to ask me questions about them so that I could keep them close at heart, because family was so important to both of us. Although she gave me a key to her home, when I had to come in late, she was always waiting up for me. I did not try one authentic Costa Rican meal that I did not like. Mangos and pineapples were way better in Costa Rica! Although staying with host families was one of the most initially intimidating components (fear of the unknown), it ended up being one of the most enriching and meaningful experiences of the entire CE experience. I have even remained in contact with my Tica mom through letters and email since my departure, only because I don't have Facebook!



## **Agency Visits**

Our visits to grassroots social service agencies provided insight into the commitment of agency leaders, who have dedicated their lives to finding creative ways to build these agencies in order to meet and address the needs of their communities. It was a practical experience to learn of our common challenges between countries in the social service arena, but also to explore new and innovative ways to meet clients' needs. Listening directly to clients share their personal experiences of overcoming struggles and also their praise for these agencies was meaningful; it clearly indicated that they would not be where they were without the services offered by the respective agencies. Meeting teenage mothers who through the support of the social service agencies were able to continue to pursue their education—while also learning to grow as new parents with their children alongside them—was a phenomenal model to see in action. These mothers were being supported in having both paths, rather than being forced to choose one over the other. We have much to learn from our social service communities abroad because we do not have all of the answers. Although we have some commonalities in the struggles we face, we can learn new ways to address those challenges. Our ways are not perfect, and others may perform better in particular areas. In the social service arena, Costa Rica really focuses on the macro context and social justice issues, whereas the United States predominantly takes a very micro-oriented approach, sometimes forgetting the broader context and its hovering impact. This focus on macro issues and social justice was echoed by social work faculty on the visit to the Universidad de Costa Rica. Ideas were brainstormed and shared for ways to address concerns with collaboration efforts through organizations and research endeavors. Reflection and debriefing were infused in each day's concluding activities, which really provided a holistic vantage point of each CE participant's on-going growth and learning takeaways.

## ***La Romeria***

The timing of the CE experience coincidentally happened during the time of Costa Rica's *la Romeria* on August second, the pilgrimage for their patron saint *la Negrita*. Costa Ricans from all over the country travel to the church on foot (though some crawl)—some for many days—to honor *la Negrita*, pray, and ask for miracles. I (Misty), along with three other CE participants, decided at the conclusion of our day's planned activities to walk the pilgrimage. The distance was 12 kilometers, and we started our journey at 5:30 p.m. It was a rainy trek requiring rain gear and umbrellas—the kind of wet that makes your socks and shoes squishy! We were surrounded by thousands and thousands of people making this journey. People of all ages were represented, from children in strollers to older adults, some individuals even in wheelchairs. Along the route, businesses passed out food items and Red Cross tents were available for help. It was a humbling and once-in-a-lifetime experience to walk alongside all these Costa Ricans, so passionately and fiercely dedicated to showing honor and faithfulness. I never felt scared walking this great distance in a country I had never been to before; I felt like we were all on this journey together. We were immersed in their cultural experience. Despite the problems and challenges we each faced, we suspended our day-to-day struggles to be faithful to this journey that was greater than ourselves. Don't get me wrong—it was a mind-over-matter experience, with a great deal of positive self-talk, as the trek progressed way into the evening. I saw so many parents pushing their children in strollers or holding their children's hands on this walk; it made me think of my

own children. I thought about how worried I would be to lose my kids in the crowd of people, as it was very difficult in rain gear to recognize others; it made me think of the level of faith parents must have on this journey and the socialization occurring by their parents modeling this passion, faith, and dedication to their children. But, really, we were not that different from one another. I, too, would do this for my family and my children (to pray for them and to teach them something of significant value). We were getting tired, we were hungry, and we had been walking on these downtown community streets passing storefront after storefront when all of a sudden, we turned the corner and the Basilica appeared out of nowhere. It was breathtakingly beautiful, all glowing with lights and color. We had finally arrived at around 11:30 p.m. that evening. Thousands of people were gathered outside the church with thousands more arriving every minute. There were two lined entrances to the church, one for those walking in on foot and one for those crawling on their knees. It was mind-blowing! Yes, I could have been told about this rich cultural tradition in a classroom or read about it in a textbook, but I have seen it, felt it, heard it, and hurt through it, and, therefore, I will never forget it. It was truly a transformative experience!

### **Squatter's Community**

Visiting the Nicaraguan migrants in the squatter's community was one of the most raw and powerful experiences on this CE trip. I (Misty) don't know that anything prepares you mentally and emotionally for being up close and personal with seeing something you so wish wasn't a reality in others' lives. From the moment we arrived, the women were inclusive, warm, and welcoming toward us. One young woman in particular was most eager to show us her home; her pride was obvious—both for her home and for her community. As we began our trek uphill with her through this community, I really thought that I had seen the depths of poverty in my practice as a social worker, but as we kept moving, I realized I had not—not ever to this magnitude—and I was so incredibly surprised. I made a point to notice my surroundings using all of my senses; this community had developed their own “homes” made from any materials that they were able to locate (metal, mesh wiring, wood, pallets, plastic). They had found creative ways to connect these materials into structures and walls with the earth being the flooring in their homes. They had found ways to informally organize and collapse their skill sets to lay their own plumbing underneath the ground. Upon finally arriving at this woman's home, she welcomed us inside and showed us the rooms. Rooms were segregated by materials, but there were no doors on the rooms. Peering into one of the rooms, we could see a mattress on the dirt with her two small children lying on top. Pets roamed freely through the community and the smells changed as we continued our journey. As we walked back downhill, I noticed that their view was a skyline of the city. This struck me as such a stark dichotomy to see the skyline of buildings, where money flowed freely, from the vantage point of a community living in extreme poverty, but yet so incredibly proud of their homes. I internally processed and reflected so much throughout this experience. I was captivated by the incredible faces of strength I saw; strength really does have many different faces. They shared their stories, and many were about migrating to Costa Rica from Nicaragua. Some women migrated alone, and some migrated with their families through intense conditions, physically and emotionally. These women were strong and brave, and they were dedicated to finding a pathway for better opportunities for their families. It made me think about the conditions they escaped, as they were so proud to be in Costa Rica and a part of this community. I could empathize with the mothers, as I would do anything to keep my children

safe and provide them with a better future. I could also connect this experience to the border crisis families are dealing with in the United States. Tears flowed freely that day, both from us as CE participants and the women of this community as they shared their experiences and prepared a traditional meal for us to enjoy alongside them. These women had come together supporting one another to build a community, with the support of a grassroots social service agency. It was incredibly humbling, to say the least; the strength, resolve, and pride of these women was motivating and powerful. It not only made me appreciate the basic things that I have and often take for granted, but it also reminded me about perspective and finding pride, joy, and hope in spite of the struggle. Every one of us walked away that day changed people and professionals.

### **Summary**

Attending this CE opportunity as a participant was transformative for me (Misty) as a person and as a social work professional in the teaching role. It was like no other CE I have ever encountered; it forced me to embrace vulnerability and broaden my perspective. It reminded me of the value of humility that we should extend as professionals in our practice with clients as well as with students. How many times are our clients or our students in the uncharted territory of new and unfamiliar places that make them feel alone and, as result, shut down? This CE experience has made a difference in helping me remember to be humble and helping my students be okay with vulnerability to grow and to help their clients grow as well. The richness of learning through listening to the clients' stories at various agencies and observing clients' natural environments cannot be conveyed with the same value and meaning in a classroom. It was a strong reminder that no one is immune from needing support or help. It has made me more mindful of intentionality and serving purposefully. It also reignited my passion for my work as a social worker. We have the ability to learn so much from our clients and our encounters. This CE experience taught me so much about the meaning of relationships and community. Relationships are critical. I built relationships with my Tica mom and her family, and I built relationships with fellow social work faculty and practitioners, who I could call today and know they would assist me. Connection, no matter whether it is brief or extensive, has the potential for significant impact. As individuals, we may not know the timing of when our brief or extended relationships will instill inspiration, hope, motivation, and change; therefore, every connection matters. This CE experience has had a vast impact on me; it has made me a more well-rounded person, practitioner, and educator.

From the perspective of the developer and leader (Melody) of this fairly unique continuing education offering, my travels to Costa Rica have influenced me as a faculty member in a social work program, as a leader of students on study abroad, and as a social work practitioner. Most importantly, leading these groups has taught me multiple lessons about teaching, social work, and life. My interactions with Costa Rican social workers helped me shift from viewing the U.S. social worker's focus on "helping" to a focus on "accompanying" clients on their journey. I have learned a great deal about South-South migration and the impact of U.S. policies on Latin American countries throughout history. I have a more nuanced view of colonialism and have learned firsthand about the impact of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on Costa Rican social services. I have developed deep and lasting relationships with my Tico family. Like Misty, I experienced a considerable amount of angst over my first homestay;

however, it has become one of the things I most look forward to. My husband, who does not travel with me on work programs, has been able to meet my Tico family when we have traveled to Costa Rica on vacation. I have experienced skepticism and downright suspicion regarding my motives for wanting to visit Costa Rican social work classrooms and visit with professors, giving me insight into how the United States is viewed in other countries. I gained empathy for others who migrate to the U.S. and have difficulties in learning English or understanding U.S. customs, culture, and worldviews. I have grown a great deal through my educational experiences in Costa Rica and other Latin American countries, and I am always excited to share that deeper, more transformational learning with others.

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