



Beyond the classroom: The benefits and drawbacks of implementing a faculty-led, study abroad program in Chennai, India

Ashley Cureton¹, Kathleen Lopez¹, Prince Solomon Devadass²,
Zachary Sessa¹

Abstract

Due to graduate students' growing interests to engage with global issues, more graduate programs are interested in implementing study abroad programs into their curriculum. This article focuses on the benefits and drawbacks of implementing a faculty-led, short-term study abroad programs (FLSTSA) in India. First, this manuscript describes how a U.S.-based university and an India-based college developed a connection that led to faculty and student exchanges across both institutions. Second, this paper shares best practices for implementing this experiential course, such as developing strong local partnerships with consistent check-ins, creating supportive networks among faculty, staff, and students to manage program logistics, and establishing clear expectations for all participants and institutional partners. Third, this paper addresses potential challenges and considerations, including pre-departure logistics, such as visa procurement, travel costs, institutional financial policies, and in-country obstacles related to environmental conditions and local travel logistics. Concluding, we recommend developing transformative FLSTSA programs that enhance graduate students' intercultural competencies.

Keywords

Cross-cultural competencies; faculty-led, short-term study abroad programs (FLSTSA); graduate students; India

¹ University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, United States of America

² Madras Christian College, Chennai, India

Corresponding author: Ashley Cureton (curetona@umich.edu)

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1. The impact of globalization on student learning

While the world has become more interrelated, the shifting economies, cultures, environments, and ideologies have increased inequality and oppression. Moreover, due to war and political strife, many people have become forcibly displaced, causing humanitarian crises that impact individuals, families, and communities globally. The climate change crisis has also led to environmental destruction and displacement and continues to plague particular regions around the world. To address these rapid societal changes, graduate students across disciplines must develop skills and strategies to engage with global populations and contexts to address a wide range of challenges plaguing urban and rural communities globally.

2. Objectives

Since graduate students are often future leaders in their fields, and global issues require collaborative, interdisciplinary solutions, exposure to global themes helps them develop the knowledge and skills to address these challenges efficiently. One method to expose graduate students to global issues that will inform their education is for them to participate in study abroad programs. Drawing on critical pedagogy (Hall et al., 2016) as a framing mechanism, we propose a faculty-led, short-term study abroad program (FLSTSA) in Chennai, India to provide students with exposure to pressing global issues. This paper describes the value of study abroad programs for graduate students' professional development and highlights the process of how a U.S.-based university (University of Michigan – Ann Arbor) and an India-based college (Madras Christian College) developed a mutual and sustainable connection, which led to multiple exchanges of faculty and students across both institutions. We highlight best practices and strategies for implementing the faculty-led program based on reflections from members of both institutions and challenges that occurred while executing this innovative program. In conclusion, we offer recommendations on how graduate programs can successfully implement this distinct study abroad program or a comparable one in the future.

2.1. The value of study abroad programs

Engagement in study abroad programs can be life-changing for students by exposing them to different ways of life and promoting understanding and tolerance. Extant research emphasizes the value of study abroad programs, such as fostering global citizenship, preparing students for an increasingly interconnected world, and offering critical experiences that extend beyond traditional classroom learning (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2024; Lee, 2024). While the concept of “global citizenship” remains contested, it is widely framed within

three dimensions: social responsibility, global awareness, and civic engagement (Morais & Ogden, 2011; Schattle, 2009). These dimensions underscore a commitment to broader societal and environmental concerns, an appreciation of global interconnectedness, and active participation in addressing global challenges (Tarrant et al., 2014). Researchers suggest combining experiential, field-based learning and a global location is pivotal in fostering these outcomes (Lee, 2024; Tarrant et al., 2014). Simple exposure to international environments, particularly for students with limited prior experience, can provoke profound learning by creating moments of discomfort that challenge existing perspectives (McKeown, 2009).

2.2. The value of graduate students' engaging in global education

Graduate students' exposure to global education has been deemed extremely important because it allows them to understand and address the complex social issues that transcend borders. Incorporating global education into graduate education curriculum will enable students to develop a greater sense of agency and inspire them toward social change (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2024). Moreover, it assists the new generation of practitioners to navigate and impact global issues as they arise, such as climate change, over-population, social epidemiology, aging, and migration (Mason et al., 2017). Gearing et al. (2020) found that study abroad programs tend to increase graduate students' competencies, particularly in understanding diversity, advancing social justice, and fostering community engagement.

Study abroad experiences are significant in cultivating global citizenship, characterized by perspective-taking, critical thinking, and a commitment to social responsibility (Rice & Girvin, 2021). By embedding these life-changing experiences into the curriculum, study abroad programs align closely with transformative learning theory, empowering graduate students to develop the skills and insights necessary to address global challenges. Additionally, these programs develop students' cultural awareness, cross-cultural competence, and a deeper understanding of complex issues such as privilege and ethnocentrism. Even short-term study abroad courses, when grounded in transformative and experiential learning methodologies, can provide valuable and life-changing experiences for graduate students (Bennett, 2008;).

2.3. Faculty-led, short-term study abroad programs

There is a wide range of study abroad programs, such as faculty-led, exchange, internship, and volunteer programs. We implemented a faculty-led program taught by a lead faculty member with prior lived and work experience in India for this particular program. Study abroad programs led by faculty

members are a specific form of study abroad that combines teaching experience and professional development opportunities with the added benefit of international experiences that can motivate faculty participation (Forum on Education Abroad [FEA], 2011). Faculty-led, short-term study abroad programs (FLSTSA) typically involve a faculty member taking students from their home institution to a location abroad where the course is taught for fewer than eight weeks (FEA, 2011). This type of program allows faculty members to plan experiences specific to the host location, and they typically take on multiple roles beyond typical classroom instructors (Cureton et al., in press; Goode, 2007), including mentor, chaperone, and administrator. FLSTSA programs differ from semester-long programs in which students generally take on-campus courses at a separate international institution in the host location with faculty from that institution. Faculty-led programs offer a distinct opportunity for students, combining professional development and teaching to ensure that the students receive a personalized and supportive learning experience. Another benefit of FLSTSA programs is they provide a supportive environment for students who may have limited to no previous international experience, which allows institutions to diversify the groups of students that participate in these meaningful programs (Gaia, 2015; Tarrant et al., 2014; Whatley et al., 2020). As a case study within a social work graduate program, the next section describes how two institutions developed a partnership that led to the development of the inaugural FLSTSA program in Chennai, India.

3. History of the institutional partnership

The initial partnership between the two institutions—the University of Michigan’s School of Social Work (U-M SSW), based in the United States, and Madras Christian College (MCC) Department of Social Work, a college based in Chennai, India—took several years to develop. U-M SSW has a long history of involvement in global social work research and education. More specifically, the U-M SSW Office of Global Activities (OGA) was created in 2003 after a task force developed a vision and agenda to internationalize the school’s activities, emphasizing principles of co-learning and partnership. The OGA was initially charged with creating academic opportunities for Master of Social Work (MSW) students in global contexts, including field placements. Currently, the OGA offers numerous programs, including global field placements, global independent studies, faculty-led short-term study abroad courses, and support for degree-seeking international Master of Social Work (MSW) students, and visiting scholar and exchange student programs. In 2013, the director of OGA prioritized India as a potential location for social work engagement and collaboration because of its importance globally, such as its ethnically, demographically, and religiously diverse population (Kramer, 2021), status as the world’s largest democracy (Warsi, 2024), rapidly growing economy (World

Economic Forum, 2024), significant influence in the Global South (Hogan & Patrick, 2024), its presence as a major player in the tech industry (Taneja & Zakaria, 2023), and commonalities between the origins and priorities of the social work profession in India and the U.S. (Baikady et al., 2020). Further, numerous U-M SSW students expressed a desire to engage with India's culture due to its widespread use of English as one of its national languages.

After the SSW OGA confirmed India as an ideal location for students to engage, a U-M psychology professor with Indian heritage suggested MCC, a 187-year-old higher education institution offering liberal arts and science subjects affiliated with the University of Madras, as a potential collaborator due to its strong academic reputation and well-established social work program. During a 2014 visit to Chennai, India, a U-M social work professor met with an MCC administrator of the Department of Social Work, an aided stream, government-funded social work program. Dialogues around potential partnerships continued through May 2016, when a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and an Exchange Agreement were finalized. The MOU outlined potential collaborative initiatives the two institutions could engage in, including joint research projects, academic publications, conference presentations, faculty development and exchange opportunities, and other academic possibilities. The Exchange Agreement established a formal framework for two students from U-M and MCC to complete coursework at the partner institution annually. Professors and staff from both institutions met in 2017 at the Joint World Conference on Social Work Education and Social Development in South Korea and discussed and planned student engagement opportunities.

The first student exchange occurred in 2018 with a U-M SSW student completing a graduate-level field placement in Chennai, India. Five MCC students have completed field placements in U-M, and three U-M SSW students have completed field placements in Chennai, India. In 2022, an MCC professor and administrator spent five months at U-M as a visiting scholar, and he connected with the U-M SSW faculty and staff. For example, he engaged in numerous activities—attending and offering two semester-long global social work courses, developing a course with a U-M SSW faculty member entitled “Dialogues between Global North and Global South,” which engages U-M SSW and MCC students in a combined virtual classroom; and giving guest lectures to the SSW and wider campus community. During this visit, several meetings were initiated between the MCC and U-M SSW faculty around developing a faculty-led course in India. Both institutions' investment of time and financial resources made this faculty exchange possible and accelerated and strengthened the partnership in invaluable ways. It afforded faculty consistent opportunities to meet in person to develop new ideas and collaborative projects without the challenge of working across time zone differences. While working remotely is

inevitable for maintaining international partnerships over time, opportunities to meet and work in person can provide crucial opportunities to strengthen and advance collaborations.

4. Course design and description

A general course theme was established to highlight commonalities and differences between the social work professions in the U.S. and India. Over the last two decades, India has experienced significant urbanization concurrent with escalating poverty and a burgeoning informal sector (Singh et al., 2024). The course was designed to be both locally grounded and explicitly comparative, and it combined practical fieldwork experiences with coursework and structured, critical reflection at MCC. This course provided students with an intensive introduction to how the social work profession is organized in India, key issues confronting vulnerable populations, and how the issues in India compare with those in the U.S.

To respond to the shifting and evolving context in India, this intensive, inaugural FLSTSA experience was designed as a two-part course with one component occurring in the U.S. before traveling to India, while the second part occurred in Chennai, India. The first part of the course consisted of five weekly 3-hour sessions taught at the U-M SSW. The second part took place over two full weeks in Chennai, India. As a framing mechanism, the course draws on the ‘Grand Challenges for Social Work (GCSW),’ which was a framework developed by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare as a groundbreaking initiative to champion social progress powered by science (Grand Challenges for Social Work, n.d.). This framework seeks to address a social agenda, promoting “individual and family well-being, a stronger social fabric, and a just society that fights exclusion and marginalization” to create a sense of belonging, promote trust, and offer pathways for social and economic progress.

From a global and comparative angle, this course explored challenges facing the social work profession, such as comparing and contrasting two systems of oppression—casteism and racism, eliminating violence against women, closing the health gap, reducing extreme economic inequality, and addressing climate change. Students engaged in various educational activities to learn about India’s culture, such as attending language courses in Tamil, the official language of the state of Tamil Nadu and the union territory of Puducherry; visiting local villages and schools that overlapped with course themes; and listening to thought-provoking lectures from MCC scholars and local practitioners on pressing social issues in India. Students also engaged in reflective exercises to process daily activities and observations, highlighting parallels and differences between India and U.S. cultures.

5. Critical pedagogy

For this FLSTSA course, critical pedagogy was an essential framework for its development and implementation. This course draws on critical pedagogy as an educational approach to assist students with challenging and transforming oppressive systems and critiquing the world around them. Developed by Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy seeks to share power with students, pushing against the notion that educators possess all the answers and that students absorb content as “empty vessels.” Instead, this educational philosophy seeks to create a harmonious connection between teaching and learning (Bohman et al., 2019; Freire, 2000). Critical pedagogy combines reflection and action, moving beyond theory to empower students to improve social conditions. Through dialogue, students and teachers develop critical consciousness (*conscientização*), an awareness of socio-political contexts and power dynamics, enabling people to challenge societal norms and dismantle oppressive systems (Filippakou, 2023; Freire, 2000). Giroux and Filippakou (2020) emphasize the concept of “educated hope,” which calls for imagining and building a better future: “Educated hope is not a call to overlook the difficult conditions ... [but] the precondition for providing those languages and values that point the way to imagining a future” (p. 2092). “Educated hope” is achieved through praxis, moving social justice courses beyond theory and equipping students with transformative skills to create change beyond the confines of the systems and institutions they operate within. Educators benefit from these dialogues with students by gaining exposure to new possibilities and ideas that expand critical perspectives.

6. Implementation: Best practices and strengths of the program

This faculty-led, short-term study abroad program has several strengths, such as the leaders possessing prior lived or work experiences abroad, strong local partnerships, consistent check-ins among university partners, the establishment of clear expectations for the students and partners, and the incorporation of reflection exercises that draws on the critical pedagogy (Filippakou, 2023).

6.1. Prior lived experience in another country

Study abroad leaders with prior global experience in the host country can benefit student travelers. They have previously lived in a country other than their own, which is considered a significant advantage when leading study abroad programs, as it gives them a firsthand understanding of cultural nuances, adaptation challenges, and navigating a different environment,

allowing them to support students during their time abroad better (Onosu, 2021; Sobkowiak, 2019).

Prior global lived experience is ideal for study abroad leaders for the following reasons: *cultural sensitivity, empathy and understanding, practical knowledge, crisis management, and authentic connection* (Onosu, 2021; Sobkowiak, 2019). When a study abroad leader possesses cultural sensitivity, they can anticipate potential cultural challenges and misunderstandings, guiding students through challenging cross-cultural engagements with greater sensitivity, care, and empathy. An empathetic and understanding study abroad leader understands how students adapt to the new place, particularly areas where they have experienced some challenges due to homesickness, language barriers, food, and adjusting to new customs. Practical knowledge relates to the study abroad leaders' understanding of the daily practices of the host country, such as transportation, local markets, religious institutions, social etiquette and norms, and traditional customs (Onosu, 2021). Additionally, study abroad leaders possess cultural and historical facts about the host country, giving them a nuanced perspective on daily interactions. Moreover, leaders can navigate potential challenges and situations during everyday activities, such as shopping, commuting to local sites, and interacting with local people. By understanding local practices and customs, study abroad leaders can offer students practical and timely advice on functioning appropriately and respectfully in different situations.

Additionally, study abroad leaders also possess the capacity to engage in crisis management when unexpected situations and emergencies arise. Based on prior experiences, they can manage their emotions while supporting students as they navigate unfamiliar terrain (Onosu, 2021). For example, if a student's luggage is lost, an experienced study abroad leader can remain calm as they seek to locate the bag and determine when they can retrieve it. Study abroad leaders can share best practices or failures as they pertain to previous travels, making them more relatable to their students. New student travelers will be confident knowing that their study abroad leaders have overcome the challenges of earlier travels.

The U-M SSW course leaders had considerable past global experience living and working abroad in various contexts. The lead instructor for the course has over 15 years of experience working and living abroad in numerous countries— Jordan, Morocco, Peru, South Africa, Turkey, Uganda, and Zambia, among others. Before leading the course, she worked in India for two years at another leading social work program in Mumbai, India. Therefore, she possesses a strong affinity and familiarity with India's culture and pressing social issues that were highlighted in the course. She has taught over 25 service-learning experiential courses in domestic and global settings through the

Northwestern University Center for Talent Development and Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. The faculty study abroad coordinator has also studied abroad, assisted with research, and engaged in experiential learning for more extended periods in Honduras, Mexico, the Philippines, and Tanzania. She has engaged in partnership activities with social work institutions and agencies in over 10 countries for 14 years organizing international experiences for MSW student learners. Based on the instructors' combined study abroad experiences, both faculty members displayed high confidence and problem-solving skills when navigating students' travel-related concerns.

6.2. Strong local partnerships and consistent check-ins among partners

The benefits of the longstanding partnership between U-M SSW and MCC cannot be understated in terms of how this relationship contributed to the success of the course development and implementation. The strong institutional and personal relationships between faculty and staff at the two institutions resulted in frequent, productive communications via Zoom throughout the planning and development process. Scholars have emphasized the importance of strong partnerships with host country organizations, especially when designing education abroad experiences in the Global South or non-traditional education abroad locations (Metzger et al., 2023; Seay et al., 2016). Working around a 10-hour time zone difference, faculty and staff arranged 12 video conferences over 11 months to discuss various travel-related details, including the course themes, guest lecturers, site visit locations, accommodations, local transportation, cultural events, financial arrangements, and much more. Between video meetings, faculty and staff from both institutions exchanged many emails and WhatsApp messages to facilitate the planning process and logistics.

Once the course themes were finalized, MCC faculty and staff brainstormed a list of local experts who could present lectures on the selected themes and identified sites that would complement these learning exchanges. MCC faculty and staff leveraged their longstanding relationships and partnerships with local community leaders, social workers, and organizations to facilitate rich in-country learning opportunities. The U-M SSW leaders could not have effectively facilitated this part of the course design. During the 2-week course, the study abroad leaders from both institutions connected most evenings to discuss the next day's agenda and make any needed adjustments. Metzger et al. (2023) contend that the intentional development of in-country partnerships is vital to facilitate cultural learning, foster safety, institutional support, and sustainable success of study abroad programs. The strong partnership between the U-M SSW and MCC faculty and staff coordinators, augmented by MCC's long-standing local relationships, resulted in a well-

organized, engaging, and successful course, which will continue in the foreseeable future.

6.3. Supportive faculty, staff, and students to manage program logistics

A considerable strength of this course was the supportive faculty, staff, and students from MCC and U-M SSW who coordinated various logistics before and during the 2-week course. Since the primary MCC faculty coordinator spent five months at U-M SSW in 2022 as a visiting scholar, the two U-M SSW study abroad leaders knew him well, resulting in a strong working relationship. Metzger et al. (2023) note the value of identifying committed faculty champions who can secure necessary resources and garner the support of high-level administrations. This program benefited from three such faculty champions at the two institutions. In addition to the primary three faculty organizers, various individuals across both institutions provided invaluable support during the course planning and on the ground in Chennai, India. For example, a program coordinator from U-M SSW organized and communicated with the U.S.-based students about countless travel details and information, including the initial information session, the application and interview process, directions on how to submit their visa applications, pre-departure meetings, health and safety logistics, and various travel-related concerns. Besides proactively organizing student information, the U-M SSW program coordinator was available to students for drop-in meetings and questions.

Numerous MCC faculty, staff, and students provided invaluable support once the U-M SSW group arrived in Chennai. These individuals included the principal of MCC, the dean of international programs, the head/chair of the department, five faculty members from the department of social work (aided stream), first- and second-year MSW students, and the MCC global student ambassadors. Crucially, two MSW alumnae from MCC were hired as course coordinators for the 2-week course, and their engagement was critical to the success of this program. These coordinators resided at the International Guest House for the duration of the course, managing numerous tasks (e.g., organizing the guest speakers' schedules, providing technology support for lectures, coordinating daily meals and transportation, answering cultural questions from U-M SSW faculty and students, coordinating medical care for students, arranging social and cultural outings in Chennai, finalizing daily schedules, and engaging in a multitude of other logistics). Due to the strong support provided by numerous individuals at MCC, one of the dominant sentiments U-M SSW students shared during the closing activities was a sense of gratitude for the welcoming, hospitable, and well-planned program managed by the MCC community.

6.4. Clear expectations for the students and partners

A primary benefit of the U-M SSW and MCC partnership was the establishment of clear expectations for the course, students, and both institutions. Faculty from both institutions began discussing the idea for this short-term study abroad in detail over the five months an MCC faculty member spent at U-M SSW as a visiting scholar. The extended in-person conversations allowed for in-depth discussions about a feasible program. Over the last several years, the MCC Department of Social Work (aided stream) has hosted numerous social work groups worldwide for similar short-term courses. The course development highlighted here benefited significantly from MCC's expertise and extensive experience developing and hosting short-term study abroad social work opportunities.

A tangible benefit of the MCC faculty's expertise was U-M SSW's ability to communicate clear student expectations throughout the process. Detailed information about what students could expect while in India was shared during the promotion, application, and interview phases, even before students were accepted to the course. For example, the application included a 'Trip Considerations' document detailing what students could expect, including extremely hot and wet weather due to the monsoon season, transportation delays, major time zone differences, cultural differences, and details about the campus accommodations. While the course was designed to be rewarding and educationally stimulating, there would also be physically, emotionally, and intellectually challenging aspects. Further, the students interviewed were asked: "You will likely encounter physical, emotional, and/or intellectual challenges during the India program. Describe a time when you faced a challenging situation. How do you react when facing unforeseen stressors?" By providing detailed information and asking students to consider how they would respond to various challenges and differences, the study abroad leaders prompted students to assess if the program was a good fit for them while setting expectations before selecting participants. Expectation setting was continued during the four months before departure (e.g., during the five-course sessions and three required pre-departure meetings). While this did not result in students avoiding challenges while abroad, it minimized the number of incidences that may have occurred. Moreover, it gave students the confidence to navigate this new experience.

6.5. Critical pedagogy—envisioning international education

The insertion of critical pedagogy into the curriculum gave social work students a framework to unpack the glaring inequality and oppression within U.S. and India contexts. Research suggests that incorporating critical pedagogy in international education activities is essential to advance social justice (Wick

& Willis, 2020). The study abroad leaders facilitated several activities to encourage students to think critically about the course content and community exchanges, such as encouraging the students to question dominant narratives and internalized biases and assumptions about a particular host country. Students were intentionally exposed to diverse perspectives, ideas, and practices to entertain different social realities, challenges, and solutions. Students read texts from authors and scholars from India who could share their lived experiences, critiques, and proposed solutions to pressing issues that directly impact local communities. Students participated in the “Gallery Walk,” responding to prompts posted around the room based on concrete facts associated with India. For this exercise, the study abroad leaders extracted powerful quotes shared by local and academic guest speakers from India who offered critical commentary on social issues in India. Students were encouraged to think critically about these quotes and how they relate to or depart from social problems within a U.S. context. Students were required to engage in daily reflective journal writing as an exercise to jot down their observations, thoughts, and lingering questions about social issues and the overall social work profession in India. This activity prompted students to engage in deep introspection and guided critical self-reflection as an important feature of a transformative learning experience.

7. Implementation: Potential challenges and future considerations

Despite the strengths discussed above, we encountered challenges organizing and implementing the course in India. This section elaborates on some of these challenges, offers potential solutions, and notes issues for consideration for those designing similar study abroad experiences. Some logistical obstacles occurred before departure, while others arose once the group arrived in India.

7.1. Pre-departure challenges and considerations

The first significant logistical hurdle involved visa uncertainties and delays. Staying at the MCC International Guest House was integral to the program’s success because it allowed the U-M SSW students easy access to the MCC campus. However, it required students to obtain an S-1 visa—a student visa for those engaging in higher education activities in India. Applying for a visa was a new process for many students, including those with limited international travel experience. Additionally, unfamiliarity with visa application processes was due to the travel privilege of U.S. citizenship (Mau et al., 2015; Whyte, 2008), which the study abroad course leaders discussed and reflected on with students. The two faculty members and 11 of the 13 chosen students were U.S. citizens, with one student having Chinese citizenship and the other having Indian

citizenship. Unfortunately, the Chinese citizen student did not receive a visa decision before the departure date, even after repeated follow-up inquiries with India's consulate; thus, the student was forced to withdraw from the course. We surmise the lack of decision was due to political tensions between India and China (Gokhale, 2022; Marsi, 2024; Verma, 2024). Although the consulate did not provide details, Fidler et al. (2023) discuss the influence of political factors on international student mobility. Given the ongoing tensions between India and China, it is reasonable to surmise that the lack of a decision was politically motivated. Several studies (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Aydin et al., 2021) further support this potential challenge, demonstrating that political tensions and restrictive government policies can influence student movement, particularly when countries experiencing strained diplomatic relations are involved. Therefore, we recommend beginning the visa process as early as possible, which will be especially important for students who are non-U.S. citizens and may encounter additional requirements or delays. It is also important for study abroad leaders to research current geo-political issues relevant to the host country. In addition to informing the course content and student preparation, this information can be used to advise students who might have difficulties obtaining a visa for a specific country or may be received negatively by local communities.

Beyond this specific situation, the numerous application requirements, including obtaining passport photographs, filling out complex online forms, and securing courier services to mail the passport to the consulate, coupled with the unspecified waiting period, were stressful for students who wanted to purchase plane tickets before prices increased. As previously discussed, we recommend beginning the visa process as early as possible, which will be especially important for students who are not U.S. citizens and may encounter additional requirements or delays. Secondly, we recommend hosting optional visa application sessions where students can seek support and clarification from program staff. After students encountered initial frustrations with the visa process, we hosted a drop-in session, which helped normalize the application process, answer specific questions, and reduce student anxiety overall. We also offered one-on-one support to students with additional questions extending beyond the drop-in session.

Another challenge for some students was the course costs for the two weeks in India. In addition to personal spending, the students spent around \$2,400 each to cover international plane tickets, visa fees, vaccinations, and a program deposit. The U-M SSW covered the remaining course costs, including in-country housing, transportation, most meals, community site visit fees, cultural activities, sightseeing excursions, and need-based scholarships. In addition to paying the lead faculty teaching salary, the U-M SSW spent around

\$32,000 to offer the course, which included \$5,000 in need-based financial aid. Nine students received scholarships ranging from \$250 to \$750, depending on their financial needs. Despite this considerable financial investment, one student dropped the course three weeks before departure due to an unforeseen personal financial challenge. When designing study abroad courses, institutions must be mindful of supporting students with considerable financial barriers with need-based scholarships, offering grants to cover the cost of obtaining a first passport, and providing advice for students with financial concerns (Mowreader, 2014). Additional financial support can ensure that these programs are more inclusive and manageable for students from various socio-economic backgrounds. Another financial issue was the differential monetary resources at U-M SSW and MCC. We encountered delays with the payments to MCC due to recent changes in India's governmental regulations on private educational institutions receiving money from international entities.

7.2. In-country challenges and considerations

Even though the course ran smoothly, we encountered some environmental and logistical challenges in India. First, there were issues about the course dates and weather-related conditions. Due to the U-M SSW academic calendar, the course was limited to 14 days in August to correspond with a break between semesters. While not the hottest month of the year, the weather in Chennai during August was considerably hotter than it would have been if we had traveled between December and February. While the group was able to manage the heat, it did impact participants' energy levels, and the length of time students could comfortably and actively engage during afternoon community visits. Additionally, MCC faculty recommended the course last three weeks to maximize student learning and exposure to India's social work issues. However, given the U-M SSW academic calendar and the grading deadline for three participants graduating in late August, two weeks was the longest possible course duration. Due to these time constraints, the daily schedule was full of long 10–12-hour days. Students were sometimes fatigued and over-stimulated, which meant they were not always as attentive and engaged during course activities. Relatedly, some planned evening reflection sessions were shortened or abandoned to facilitate students getting adequate rest.

Finally, the course included a weekend sightseeing excursion to New Delhi and Agra. While students immensely enjoyed the experience and benefited from an introduction to India, this trip resulted in less time for students to familiarize themselves with the local context and independently explore Chennai. This weekend excursion, combined with the long program days, meant students had limited time to complete course readings and assignments. The balance between academic, cultural, and leisure activities and pedagogical and personal outcomes must be continually negotiated during

study abroad courses (Hall et al., 2016). We recommend limiting weekend excursions to nearby locations that do not require air travel to ensure that participants have more time to work on their course-related assignments and engage in the local community. This approach would also reduce the course's carbon footprint, aligning with study abroad initiatives like the American Institute for Foreign Studies Green Initiative and the Stay Local Pledge, both of which aim to minimize the environmental impact of studying abroad in support of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (American Institute for Foreign Study, n.d.; Stay Local Abroad, 2025).

Finally, as noted by Niendorf and Alberts (2017), the impact of short-term study abroad courses on student development remains debated, with extended duration and increased experiential learning opportunities potentially leading to a greater impact (Strange & Gibson, 2017). Thus, it is challenging to gauge the long-term impacts of this specific FLSTSA on participant's social work practice. During the final course assignment, U-M SSW students gave a presentation describing and reflecting on how they plan to apply what they learned from the two courses to their professional, academic, and personal goals. However, without planned formal opportunities to observe or check in with participants in the future, the course organizers will not be able to assess the long-term impact.

8. Conclusion

Within graduate education, study abroad programs hold immense potential to integrate transformative learning practices and global education, equipping graduate students to develop the knowledge and skills to address these global challenges effectively. Faculty-led, short-term study abroad (FLSTSA) programs offer a distinct advantage by combining professional development and personalized learning experiences. The specific program designed by U-M SSW and MCC faculty aimed to facilitate students' engagement in exploring the commonalities and differences between social work in India and the U.S., offering an intensive introduction to the organization of the social work profession, key issues facing vulnerable populations, and cross-cultural comparisons.

Key strengths of this program included the faculty leaders' prior travel abroad experience, strong local partnerships, consistent communication among stakeholders, and the deliberate incorporation of critical pedagogy and reflection practices, drawing parallels and distinctions between India and U.S. cultures. Critical challenges included logistical setbacks related to uncertainty and delays in obtaining the required visas, programmatic fees associated with the trip, and environmental issues related to students adjusting to India's context. Despite these challenges, the program was successful based on

students' favorable feedback and an invitation for the U-M SSW to co-develop this course again in subsequent years. To maximize the potential of such programs, institutions must continue to expand and refine them, ensuring accessibility, diversity, and alignment with the needs of graduate students and global communities alike. These efforts will enhance graduate students' international connections, fostering career opportunities, promoting a global mindset, and cultivating empathy and cultural understanding.

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Author Biography

Dr. Ashley Cureton is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor. As a forced migration scholar, she examines the educational, environmental, and social-emotional needs of refugee and migrant youth and families. Her research spans the U.S. and global contexts like South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, and Turkey. She also integrates international perspectives and study abroad experiences into graduate social work curricula.

Dr. Kathleen Lopez is an adjunct clinical associate professor and director of the Office of Global Activities at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor School of Social Work. She administers the office's study abroad programs, international student services, and exchange visitor initiatives. Additionally, she serves as field faculty for students completing international placements and incoming exchange students in Michigan.

Dr. Prince Solomon Devadass is an associate professor, fieldwork coordinator, and hall warden at Madras Christian College in Chennai, India. With over 26 years of experience training postgraduate students, his expertise spans social work, community development, Indigenous development, and qualitative research methods.

Zachary Sessa is a recent alumnus of the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor School of Social Work and a current graduate student at the University of Oxford Refugee Studies Centre. He identifies as a bilingual social worker and a former Fulbright Scholar who is committed to advancing migrant, refugee, and asylum justice through direct services, policy research, and community advocacy.