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Sin gringos al mando: A host-led approach to decolonizing short-term global education

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Abstract

Short-term study abroad often keeps students “on the veranda” (Ogden, 2007)—observing difference from a safe distance. This article examines a four-year collaboration between a U.S. college and a Mexican university that sought to move students off the veranda through a fully host-designed and host-led model. In *Eyewitness to Migration in Mexico*, Mexican faculty design the syllabus, frame the questions, and guide U.S. students through encounters with migrants, indigenous educators, and community practitioners in Chiapas. Drawing on reflections from four cohorts (2022–2025), we analyze how intentional design fosters three outcomes: empathic immersion, epistemological discomfort, and decolonization of knowledge. Empathy arises through proximity and shared labor; discomfort through guided confrontation with privilege; decolonization through the transfer of interpretive authority southward. We situate this model within debates on voluntourism, curriculum export, and Southern epistemologies, arguing that getting off the veranda depends less on duration than on design—on who leads, and who learns.

Abstract in Spanish

Los programas de estudio en el extranjero de corta duración suelen mantener a los estudiantes “en la veranda” (Ogden, 2007), observando la diferencia desde una distancia segura. Este artículo examina una colaboración de cuatro años entre una universidad estadounidense y una universidad mexicana que buscó sacar a los estudiantes de la veranda mediante un modelo completamente diseñado y dirigido por la institución anfitriona. En *Eyewitness to Migration in Mexico*, el profesorado mexicano diseña el programa académico, formula las

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preguntas centrales y guía a los estudiantes estadounidenses a través de encuentros con personas migrantes, educadores indígenas y actores comunitarios en Chiapas. A partir del análisis de las reflexiones escritas por cuatro cohortes (2022–2025), examinamos cómo un diseño intencional favorece tres resultados: inmersión empática, incomodidad epistemológica y descolonización del conocimiento. La empatía surge de la proximidad y el trabajo compartido; la incomodidad, de la confrontación guiada con el privilegio; la descolonización, del desplazamiento de la autoridad interpretativa hacia el Sur. Situamos este modelo en el marco de los debates sobre volunturismo, exportación curricular y epistemologías del Sur, y sostenemos que abandonar la veranda depende menos de la duración que del diseño: de quién dirige y de quién aprende.

Keywords

Cognitive dissonance; decolonizing methodologies; experiential learning; host-led study abroad; migration and mobility; southern epistemologies; transformative learning

Editorial note

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1. Introduction

Short-term study abroad too often leaves students on the veranda; close enough to watch, but far enough to remain unchanged. Ogden's (2007) metaphor names the problem with unsettling clarity—the colonial stance of observing the “other” from a safe distance. This article asks what it takes to move off the veranda in a short-term program and into relationships that change how students feel, reason, and know.

Our answer grows out of four years of practice. Each spring, faculty from the Autonomous University of Chiapas (UNACH), which is not the sending institution, design the pre-trip course, select the readings, frame the guiding questions, and lead students through encounters with migrants, indigenous educators, and local practitioners in Chiapas. In Spanish-language scholarship and legal frameworks, the term *personas en condición de movilidad* (persons in a condition of mobility) has become increasingly preferred. The phrasing emphasizes movement as process rather than status and avoids the stigma sometimes attached to *migrant* (Doughty & Murray, 2016; Schewel, 2020).

Nonetheless, we retain *migrants* for clarity within English-language discourse while remaining mindful of its limits.

Over time, this transfer of design and leadership has changed everything. When authority moves south, so does perspective: students learn to see through the host's eyes rather than observing from afar. The shift is more than administrative—it transforms who defines knowledge and how it is experienced. Decolonial theorists argue that genuine transformation begins when the structures of knowing are rearranged (De Sousa Santos, 2009; Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000; Smith et al., 2018). Our experience confirms that short-term programs achieve their deepest outcomes when the host leads. Host-designed study abroad, grounded in local expertise and relational learning, offers a strong model for cultivating empathy, productive discomfort, and the decolonization of knowledge (Asada, 2019; Clare & Keenan, 2025; Hudson & Morgan, 2019; Ogden, 2007; Waterval et al., 2017).

Our experience also speaks to two central debates in study abroad research. First, short-term programs are often criticized as upgraded tourism that recenters the sending institution's perspective (Clare & Keenan, 2025; Ogden, 2007). Yet evidence shows that gains in global learning depend less on duration than on the quality of engagement with host communities—design matters more than the calendar (Asada, 2019; Hudson & Morgan, 2019). Second, attempts to internationalize curricula can slide into exporting home programs abroad, reinforcing Northern authority (Waterval et al., 2017). Taken together, these critiques point to a simple proposition: leaving the veranda requires transferring curricular authority to the host and privileging place-based expertise.

2. Program background

Prior to collaborating with Alejandro Herran to create the program in Chiapas, Emil Nagengast had taken over 400 Juniata College students on study abroad trips to Germany (once), Vietnam (once), The Gambia (18 times). Nagengast learned through these experiences that the impact of the programs on the students varied significantly. He saw the importance of Ogden's argument about making the students get off the veranda (Ogden, 2007). Nagengast's first several study abroad programs did not require serious cultural immersion. The students observed interesting things, but they rarely engaged. As he gained experience with creating and leading study abroad programs, he incorporated more "locals" into the trips. This meant hiring locals of the same age as the Juniata College students to live with the students throughout the trip. This allowed the students to have constant interaction with people who could help them to understand the things they encountered on our

many site visits. Hiring locals who were embedded in our group made a big difference in the impact of the trips, but this was a difficult step for Nagengast because he had to find people who were reliable, safe and patient. But even after he put together an excellent team of five young Gambians, who worked on the final five of his trips to The Gambia, Nagengast could see the limitations of his program in The Gambia. He created and ran every aspect of the trip. No Gambians were involved in the design of the trip, but he could not hand over control of the program because he did not have anyone on-site who could do it. Research shows that host-institution structures and on-site staff practices can either enable meaningful integration into local communities or constrain it, underscoring the importance of program design that promotes student independence (Asada, 2019).

Nagengast's last trip to The Gambia was in January 2020. COVID prevented him from doing another trip. As he waited for the COVID threat to decrease enough to allow for the return of study abroad, he met Alejandro Herran. Herran was a Visiting Fulbright Professor at Juniata College in the spring semester of 2022. Nagengast and Herran spoke a lot about intercultural education and about the difficulty in getting students to understand other cultures from an internal perspective. Nagengast explained that his trips to The Gambia were impactful, but they lacked a real insider's perspective. These discussions led them to consider starting a new Juniata College program in Mexico. The starting point of their planning was the agreement that the students' experience needed to be as "internal" as possible. Nagengast would recruit Juniata College students and handle all the required administrative aspects of the program, including designing and teaching the pre-trip course, but Herran and his colleagues at UNACH would design and lead the trip.

Empowering the Mexican host institution to design the program embodies core ideas from Latin American decolonial theory and experiential learning in study abroad. Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2009) argue that knowledge is inseparable from history, geography, and power. In most short-term study abroad programs, the experience is framed through the perspectives of the sending institutions. As Tuck and Yang (2012) warn, this can turn decolonization into a symbolic gesture rather than a structural change. Ogden's (2007) influential "veranda" metaphor captures the result: students remain observers.

3. Working with UNACH to organize the trip

Herran understood Nagengast's frustration with the difficulty of having the students interact more directly during the experience abroad. He agreed to lead the Mexican side of the experience using only UNACH's resources. The goal

became to design an experience abroad that plunged students into an issue in such a way to create as much calculated discomfort as possible. Rather than exporting a home curriculum, which carries contextual and reputational risks, we pursued a host-designed model that locates expertise in place (Waterval et al., 2017). UNACH is a state university of Mexico. Chiapas is one of the poorest states in Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2025a). It also has the largest indigenous population in the country, with approximately 1.46 million residents who identify as indigenous (INEGI, 2020), representing about 22% of the state's total population—the third-highest proportion nationwide (INEGI, 2025b).

But perhaps more importantly, Chiapas is the main entry point for migrants trying to get into the United States. Immigration is one of the most important topics for Mexico and the US. Much of the campaign rhetoric used by President Trump relied on the danger of immigration to the US. Mexican and US policies intersect with immigration and its consequences. UNACH is strategically situated to explore this issue, and its faculty has many experts with deep contacts in private and public institutions, obvious advantages for a study abroad experience.

From the beginning, we knew the trip could not be another academic excursion or “poverty safari.” It had to be a human encounter—an education grounded in proximity and reciprocity. We built the program around three interlocking aims. First, empathic immersion: students should come away with a lived sense of the forces that compel migrants to leave home and risk everything. We designed for contact, not consumption—listening, cooking, playing, debriefing—because empathy grows from shared space, not abstract sympathy (Biber, 2021; Chiocca, 2021; Moak, 2020). Within global citizenship frameworks, this is the foundation of social responsibility and moral imagination (Perry et al., 2013). Second, axiological and epistemological discomfort: students' assumptions must be challenged until easy narratives collapse. We wanted them to “sit in the discomfort,” to let cognitive dissonance become a teacher, unsettling certainties and opening humility (Li & Costa, 2022; Mitchell & Paras, 2018; Strange & Gibson, 2017). Reflection was built into every stage—before, during, and after the trip—because when it is intentionally structured, even short-term programs can produce deep critical awareness (Walters et al., 2017). Third, decolonization of knowledge and culture: authority over what counts as knowledge—and how it is taught—had to shift south. Mexican faculty, indigenous educators, and local practitioners led the curriculum and interpretation, embodying the principle that decolonization must be structural, not symbolic (De Sousa Santos, 2009; Smith, 2016; Smith et al., 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

As Ficarra (2025) shows, local educators in study abroad contexts often navigate unequal expectations within the U.S.-dominated systems. Host-led design directly counters that imbalance by centering their expertise and reframing them as architects rather than adjuncts of experience. In this sense, the trip was both classroom and experiment—a test of whether redistributing interpretive power could produce deeper transformation. Together, these aims reflect growing evidence that short-term programs achieve their fullest impact when mentoring, mandated integration, and ethical accountability push students past comfort (Melchor-Bazalar et al., 2022), that a human-rights framing guards against “upgraded tourism” (Villarreal Sosa & Lesniewski, 2021), and that learning with rather than about the host community is both pedagogically sound and politically just (Haeger et al., 2024; Kasun, 2017).

After returning home from his stay at Juniata College, Herran started the work of creating the study abroad program. The first step was to enlist the collaboration of experts in immigration. Because UNACH is located in the southern part of the country, immigration is an important field of study. Herran managed to enlist the help of two experts from UNACH. These colleagues had academic, legal and field experience in immigration as a legal and social issue. With their collaboration it became possible to design the type of activities that fulfill the learning outcomes and that would be normally unavailable to regular visitors or students. The faculty collaborators brought not only deep academic insight into the project, they also provided access to a valuable network of public and private institutions related to immigration, like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office in Mexico, the National Immigration Institute—the federal government agency tasked with managing the issue, the Integral System for the Development of the Family (abbreviated DIF in Spanish)—a State run system that provides social services and care for families and vulnerable groups, as well as NGOs and shelters in Tapachula and other cities. While the incorporation of the faculty experts strengthened the design of the trip, Herran also had to clear administrative hurdles to create the program.

A collaboration of the type dreamed by the Professors required more than the commitment of the people directly involved, it needed support from both institutions. It was evident that UNACH would have to provide services to the visiting students, as well as be responsible for the students’ safety and for running the short-term study-abroad program. And Juniata College would have to collaborate with the Mexican peers to coordinate the schedule and related administrative requirements. Fortunately, both institutions saw the value in the program and invested the effort and resources necessary to support it. Herran was able to help the institutions develop a Memorandum of

Understanding. The MOU set the framework for specific collaborations between the institutions. A major result of the willingness from the institutions was to frame the short-term study-abroad program as an in-kind exchange agreement. With this agreement, all the resources expended by UNACH during the program—such as instruction, transportation, personnel services—would allow Juniata College to accept UNACH students as exchange students and fully waive tuition for a full semester. After much work and math, it came out that for every ten students from Juniata College that took part in the program, UNACH would be able to send one exchange student to Juniata College tuition-free for a full semester. This agreement assured that the goals of the program would extend beyond the program itself, allowing students from UNACH to travel abroad and enjoy all the benefits of a long-term study abroad experience.

4. The pre-trip course

Nagengast took control of the design of the pre-trip course. He had taught over 20 pre-study abroad courses for his trips to Germany, Vietnam and The Gambia and was confident that he could prepare the students for the trip to Chiapas. In the first iteration of the pre-trip course, Nagengast advised Herran to find UNACH students who would represent the Mexican government in a simulated negotiation with the Juniata College Students, who represented the US government. For most of the pre-trip course, the UNACH and Juniata College students met (on Zoom) to negotiate a bi-lateral migration treaty. This was an intense and valuable lesson for all the students, but after the semester, Nagengast and Herran agreed that this exercise had been counterproductive in terms of moving beyond the colonial mindset. Rather than helping the Juniata College students to understand the Mexican side of US-Mexican relations and of migration, the negotiation simulation caused the Juniata College students to become even more entrenched in a pro-US, anti-migration mentality. Herran convinced Nagengast to allow the UNACH team of professors to create a pre-trip course on their own. Rather than taking a combative, negotiation approach, Herran believed it would be more constructive to set the course up in a way that took the Juniata College students into the Mexican mindset.

Herran believed that the pre-trip, semester-long course needed to set the tone of decolonization. He needed to provide the Juniata College students with a Mexican perspective on: Mexican history, US-Mexican relations, Mexico's cultural and legal struggles concerning the indigenous population, and Mexico's approach to people in a condition of mobility. Although Nagengast remained the instructor of record for this Juniata College course, he handed over to Herran and Herran's UNACH colleagues the selection of the readings and of the lecture/discussion topics for each week (the course met once per week for two hours).

In redesigning the pre-trip experience for the Juniata College students, Herran decided to structure the course around the scholarship of several of his UNACH colleagues. Herran brought together experts who each created a 1.5 hour presentation and discussion session (via Zoom). The aim of these sessions was to give the Juniata College students insight into several of the issues that they would encounter during the program in Chiapas. The presentation topics were: the Zapatistas, taught by Professor Lauriano Rodríguez from an indigenous community; the reasons that people leave their homes, taught by Professor Ivonne Alvarez; Mexican and international migration law, taught by Professor Elisa Garcia; early Mexican history, taught by Professor Adriana Flores; Gender, incarceration and migration in Mexico, taught by Professor Corina Giacomello, who works with women that face incarceration and poverty; Mexican perspectives on US foreign policy, taught by Herran; Mexican attitudes about migration, also taught by Herran. In addition to these pre-trip presentations, these professors met with the Juniata College students during the trip in Chiapas. They conducted debriefings with the students, answered the students' questions about the things they experienced, and helped to translate during our many meetings with migrants and indigenous groups. We adopted a structured arc akin to Plan–Learn–Integrate, coupling pre-departure framing, in-country experiential learning, and post-program integration through debriefing (Gren et al., 2020).

Nagengast accepted Herran's advice to assign the book *Enrique's Journey* in the pre-trip course. In this book, Sonia Nazario, an Argentine American journalist, describes the experience of migrants with a focus on some of the shelters in Tapachula, Mexico, that are part of the UNACH-designed trip. Likewise, Herran included two films in the pre-trip course: *Sin Nombre* and *La Jaula de Oro*.

The final piece of the pre-trip course was to help the Juniata College students to learn some basic Spanish. Nagengast brought in a native Spanish speaking student to teach the students greetings and other elementary phrases, but because the pre-trip course met only once per week, we did not have enough time in the semester to include the UNACH lectures, the discussions of *Enrique's Journey*, *Sin Nombre*, *La Jaula de Oro* and the required logistical sessions with Juniata College's Center for International Education and Spanish language lessons.

One of the frustrating flaws in the trip was that many of the Juniata College students could not converse in Spanish. This meant that they had to rely on translators in order to speak with the many migrants that we met. Herran and Nagengast considered restricting the trip to students who had reached at least a basic level of Spanish proficiency, but we decided to keep the trip open

to all students. Including a language proficiency requirement would exclude the students who would benefit the most from this experience. For example, several of the students on our trips were pre-med and pre-law students who had no other international experience while in college. These students were the ones who tended to be the most effusive in their praise of the trip's "life changing impact."

After the counterproductive first pre-trip course (that focused on the combative negotiations between the UNACH and Juniata College students), the newly designed pre-trip course was a success in the following three years. The only complaints we received from the students about the pre-trip courses that Herran and his UNACH colleagues created was that we did not have enough time in the semester to cover even more material.

5. The program in Chiapas

Following the advice of the UNACH faculty, it was decided that the most effective way to achieve learning goals (1) and (2) would be through direct engagement with the lived realities of migration in the region. Taking advantage of their network of contacts, it became possible to design a schedule that would take students directly to the city of Tapachula, and visit shelters, where students would be able to interact firsthand with migrants. Two issues were of utmost importance while designing the experience, that the schedule give as wide an array of experiences as possible, and that the visits themselves be respectful to the people in the shelters.

The schedule was designed considering four or five days of activities in Tapachula, there are different types of shelters that cater to different types of migrants. To expose the students to the widest experience possible the shelters were chosen due to the different political, economic and societal characteristics that they reflected. The shelters chosen consisted of a DIF shelter —State run organization— that only receives young unaccompanied boys (aged 12 to 17). This shelter, although run as a special place created to protect the human rights of unaccompanied boys, in reality it feels more like a State-run juvenile detention center for processing deportations. In direct contrast to this shelter, it was also chosen to take students to "Jesús el Buen Pastor", an open doors shelter run by a woman with a group of volunteers. Jesus el Buen pastor will not turn anybody away, can be overcrowded and is in constant need of resources. To provide a different perspective the designers also chose a shelter called "Hospitalidad y Solidaridad", this shelter receives most of its funding from organizations directly tied to the UNHCR. It is a high-end shelter, when compared to the others, with cleaner facilities and a staff composed of experts and international volunteers. Although "nice", this shelter is restrictive, it only

accepts people that have requested asylum in Mexico and will not take people from the street, only referrals through the appropriate channels. Two other shelters complete the sites chosen, “Belen” is a shelter housed and run by the Diocese of Tapachula, although Catholic in nature the shelter does not discriminate based on religion or any other reason, their organization is peculiar and since they accept people from the street it is typically overcrowded. Finally, “Casa Frida” is a refuge for people of the LGBTQ+ community. They are part of a national organization that supports people of the community. In Tapachula they have specialized in helping migrants that belong to the community. They provided safe spaces, legal aid, economic assistance, and other services. The connections to the administrators of the shelters and the negotiations were conducted with the invaluable help of the UNACH faculty collaborators.

One destination has eluded the project. Each year the organizers have tried to set up a visit to the Federal Government run Migration Station “Siglo XXI” in Tapachula. This facility is probably the largest in the country and is a pivotal piece of the migration phenomenon in Mexico and in the region. Unfortunately, Federal authorities have not given authorization for a visit, yet.

The other main concern for the organizers is the ethical responsibility of the students while visiting the shelters. The most important point is not to exoticize or objectify the people in the shelters. Everybody involved in the design was deeply conscious of the peril of the US students’ visits turning into a sort of exhibition. The image of the veranda was a powerful reminder of how a visit to a shelter, even when organized with the best intentions, could easily become an opportunity to perpetuate the objectification of the other, especially those from the south in the eyes of privileged US students. A human-rights framing is essential to avoid voluntourism and to connect local encounters to broader structures of oppression (Villarreal Sosa & Lesniewski, 2021).

Key decisions were made to try to minimize, as much as possible, the spectator effect. First was general dress and behavior, we decided the students would not look like they were on vacation, students are told to dress appropriately for the events, avoiding shorts, flipflops, tank-tops and resort-wear, in general —this has proven more difficult than anticipated due to the great love of Juniata College students for shorts, mini-skirts and other touristy apparel. Appropriate behavior is addressed during the preparation course before the trip. Students are helped to recognize the same humanity they see in themselves in the people in the shelters.

The language barrier can be a problem because we do not require fluency in Spanish for the trip. Every year a few of the US students speak

Spanish and they help their peers with communication. Also, students are creative in using translating apps on their smartphones to break the language barrier.

The second essential factor to make ethical visits to the shelters is volunteer work. We do not want the students to be passive observers. Embedding critical reflection with service-learning in short-term contexts can yield transformative outcomes and guard against 'upgraded tourism' (Moak, 2020). With the help of the administrators at the shelters we devise activities that the students can participate in, like cooking meals, cleaning, and in general whatever needs to be done. We make sure to allow time for the students to engage with the population without a structure. Students bring soccer balls and art supplies for the children in the shelters, which are excellent icebreakers and allow for contact to start. These rules provide the basic framework that guides the visits to the shelters. As the assessment section will mention, we have found them successful.

With the support of the shelters' administrators and with help of the UNACH Faculty Collaborators it was possible to design an impactful experience for the students. It was decided that the second leg of the program would move from the Guatemalan border to the highlands of Chiapas, a region rich in local original cultures. San Cristobal de Las Casas was chosen as the second base of operations, where students could experience the mix of cultures that is characteristic of Mexico. San Cristóbal is a beautiful colonial city that is almost 500 years old, and the region around it is rich in many of the original cultures that populate the State of Chiapas. People from these communities often learn Spanish as a second language and have retained many of their ancestral customs.

From San Cristóbal, with the help of UNACH professors that come from indigenous communities, it is possible for the students to visit an autonomous trade school that is linked to the Zapatista movement. San Cristóbal was the epicenter of the Zapatista uprising in 1994 and its influence on the city and region has been profound. At this autonomous indigenous trade school students get exposed to a different meaning of teaching and learning; a system that does not use grades or school years, but that preserves the teaching of trades and crafts through practice and experience.

Students are also taken to nearby cities like Chamula and Zinacantán. These are places that have strong cultural roots. Chamula hosts the only Catholic church in the world that is run by people from an indigenous community. The church is famous for its mix of Catholic and Maya rites inside the church, and it is a powerful cultural experience. Zinacantán, on the other

hand, is one of the most representative places for the craft of textile weaving. Culture in Chiapas is strongly tied to weaving, each community has developed its own styles and patterns, with stunning variety and color. The visit to Zinacantán includes a visit to the home of a traditional hand weaver who shares her skills with students through hands-on experience. The students learn the process of weaving from creating thread from wool until the finished product. Several other cultural activities round off the schedule before students fly home.

Moving the trip to San Cristobal was decided to accomplish two important aspects of the learning goals. On one hand, migration, as a phenomenon, is closely related to economic factors. Often it is people from poor backgrounds who decide to leave their homes and communities to try to better their economic situation. In Chiapas, this means that many young people from indigenous communities travel north, toward the United States in search of a better future, the families and communities they leave behind are deeply affected by this. The impact of migration on the economic and cultural realities of Chiapas is something that students can see and hear for themselves through the places we visit and the people they talk to, and even witness a long line of people waiting to receive the precious remittances sent by their loved ones in the U.S. Just by experiencing life in a southern city, in all the sense of the expression, students are exposed to the myriad ways in which migration is related to societal factors. The experience has been described as “eye opening”.

On the other hand, students are also exposed to the clash of cultures happening in Mexico, which is an example of a global phenomenon. Students can see, firsthand, how indigenous communities are struggling to maintain their heritage while incorporating new values and technologies. Modernization, with its western-based values, brings with it a conflict that goes straight to the identity of indigenous communities. The result is a complex system of ebbs and flows in which culture is normally under transformation and is getting scrambled in ways impossible to predict. The consequences are religious, legal, cultural, economic and also deeply personal. Integrating these elements to the program was supported by the concept of “indigenizing the curriculum” an important theme for a program that deals with southern perspectives and culture.

6. The student experience

Assessing the experience has been an important part of the project. We needed to know if the activities were having the desired effect and if our learning goals were being met. Each year, after the trip, we required the students to hand in a ten-page essay in which they reflected on their

experience. We also asked them to provide specific feedback regarding the experience. Their essays taught us much. Some comments have allowed us to improve the trip. A good example of this is inserting a one or two nights stay at a beach resort after the grueling schedule in Tapachula. The relaxed environment after the tough emotional and physical experience provides a great moment for extensive de-briefings and reflection with the students. It rewards their intense commitment and keeps them motivated. Each year we have been pleasantly surprised at the eagerness of the students to discuss and debate a full range of topics related to their shelter visits.

7. Methodology and ethics

This article draws on qualitative analysis of student reflection essays produced across four iterations of the *Eyewitness to Migration in Mexico* program (2022–2025). A total of 58 final essays were collected from participating students. All submitted essays were included in the analysis. For the purposes of this study, analysis focused on the reflective portions of the essays that addressed students' experiences of the program design and its impact; sections devoted primarily to logistical course recommendations were not included.

The essays were re-coded specifically for this project using structured thematic analysis in NVivo. Coding was guided by a small set of predefined categories aligned with the article's central concerns, including expressions of emotional impact, discomfort, and sustained engagement. Illustrative quotations were selected after coding to represent patterns that recurred across cohorts.

This project received institutional ethics review and was determined to be exempt. Participation in the research component was voluntary, students provided informed consent prior to participation, and all identifying information was removed before analysis. The study adhered to the institutional research ethics policies of the sending institution. Student work was evaluated on the quality of reflection and analytical engagement, not on adherence to particular viewpoints. The authors declare no conflicts of interest and received no external funding for this study.

Across four cohorts (2022–2025), the students' reflections converge on some interesting themes: face-to-face encounters produced empathy; discomfort led to learning; host-led framing changed prior assumptions, often yielding a sense of responsibility. In this section, we organize the students' written comments around the three intended learning outcomes.

7.1 Learning goal 1: Empathic immersion

The first learning goal of the program was to foster empathic immersion—to create a learning environment in which students would not only understand migration intellectually but also experience it emotionally, through human connection. The design intentionally placed students in proximity to migrants, community leaders, and host faculty in ways that would collapse abstraction. The objective was to move students from knowing *about* migration to *feeling with* migrants—to understand their stories as human experiences rather than distant geopolitical issues.

One of the strongest expressions of this transformation came from a student in the 2022 cohort, who wrote:

Meeting with migrants in the shelters is the only way to get the best understanding of migrant conditions. These shelters put students directly inside a place where they could never imagine being before. Additionally, students get the opportunity to see what daily life is like for migrants. Students can learn about migration and its threats without going abroad, but students cannot see what each individual day is like without witnessing it firsthand.

This reflection illustrates how proximity and presence achieve what readings and lectures alone cannot. The student identifies the shelters as irreplaceable spaces of experiential learning—sites where empathy is grounded in the senses: sight, sound, and human contact. The phrasing “*could never imagine being before*” captures both estrangement and awakening, marking the threshold moment that the program was designed to provoke. Dialogue with local communities, combined with hermeneutical reflection and emotional disequilibrium, is a documented pathway to perspective transformation in short-term study abroad (Chiocca, 2021).

A similar realization is evident in the words of another 2024 participant:

I realized that despite hearing or reading about people’s experiences in the migration process or living in migrant shelters before visiting Mexico, nothing can truly replicate meeting and empathizing with the migrants, hearing their stories, and then relating to them. I think that the hour I spent playing with the children on the swing set, and drawing with some kids in my notebook had the greatest impact on me during the entire trip.

Here empathy takes on a personal and embodied form—drawing and playing with children rather than observing or interviewing them. This kind of interaction, unmediated and spontaneous, humanizes what had previously

been a topic of study. It transforms the student's role from spectator to participant. The reflection also highlights a central design feature of the program: encounters that are not extractive or performative, but relational and reciprocal. The student's "hour on the swing set" becomes an entry point into the emotional world of migration.

A participant from the 2023 trip described a similar shift, but focused on moral recognition:

When I came home from this trip, I told my father that I did not want to fight about immigration, but I had to tell him my feelings on the matter. I told him that there was not one person I met on the entire trip who did not deserve to be in the United States.

This quote demonstrates the durability of empathic insight. The student is not recounting what they felt during the trip, but how that feeling persisted into the process of re-entry. Empathy here is not sentimental; it has become conviction. Mobility to the Global South often reshapes students' sense of self and 'home,' with (dis)comfort productively structuring re-entry. The encounter has redefined the moral boundaries of "deservingness," a concept at the core of political debates around migration. The power of this statement lies in its simplicity: the student no longer distinguishes between "migrant" and "citizen," but sees only people whose humanity demands recognition.

For many students, empathic immersion was inseparable from a new awareness of privilege. As one 2022 reflection explains:

Throughout the course of the trip, I was made brutally aware of the privilege I hold, as a citizen of the United States, as someone with financial stability, and in ways as simple as someone with immediate family members who are all alive and in contact. I was constantly reminded of how lucky I am to be who I am, where I am. I may feel that I have struggles in my life, but none of my problems will ever compare to being forced to flee the place and people I love as a result of violence, instability, and destitution.

The word "*brutally*" is telling—it captures the discomfort that empathy can entail. This student's encounter with migrants is not one of pity but of moral confrontation. Recognizing privilege becomes a painful but productive form of self-knowledge. The reflection exemplifies what pedagogical theorists of empathy describe as *critical empathy*: an emotion tied to awareness of power and inequality, not just compassion.

Students also reported that the emotional charge of these encounters reshaped how they viewed their own lives and responsibilities. A member of the 2024 cohort wrote:

After seeing first-hand the tattered and torn migrants, most of them with nothing but the clothes on their backs, still conduct themselves with respect and dignity, I realized that I have no right to complain about the things I don't have. Every day I should wake up and be thankful that my bed is warm and I am well fed living under a roof. I will never take what I have for granted anymore.

Here empathy becomes introspection. The student's observation of dignity amid hardship leads to a personal ethical resolution—to live with gratitude and awareness. The quote also underlines a recurrent theme: dignity is reciprocal. Students recognize not only the suffering of migrants but their resilience, strength, and humanity. In doing so, they shift from a charitable stance ("helping the less fortunate") to one of mutual recognition.

Taken together, these reflections show that the program's first learning goal was achieved through the deliberate design of direct, human-scale encounters. Empathic immersion was not an incidental byproduct of exposure but the intended outcome of structured relational experiences: visiting shelters of different kinds, sharing space and labor, and processing those experiences through guided debriefings. Students' words consistently reveal that empathy emerged not from instruction but from contact—from sitting, talking, playing, and listening. As one participant wrote simply, *"These are real people and not just statistics."*

7.2. Learning goal 2: Axiological and epistemological discomfort

The second learning goal of the program was to cultivate axiological and epistemological discomfort—to intentionally challenge students' moral and intellectual frameworks. The design sought to push them beyond emotional empathy toward a confrontation with their own assumptions: about migration, about justice, and about the limits of their knowledge. This discomfort was not incidental; it was the curriculum's central instrument of transformation.

One of the earliest reflections, from the 2022 cohort, captures this process in motion:

I have a lot of difficulty engaging in dialogues about uncomfortable topics, and this trip definitely pushed my limits with that, and taught me to sit in the discomfort. In that zone is where I learned the most. Learning about the suffering that less privileged people endure was a

reminder that someone like me with immense privilege has a duty to do everything in my power to use that privilege to contribute positive change to the system.

This student recognizes discomfort as a pedagogical space, not an obstacle. The phrase “*sit in the discomfort*” has become a signature of reflective learning theory—it marks the moment when one’s values are tested rather than affirmed. The shift from avoidance (“difficulty engaging”) to engagement (“that is where I learned the most”) shows that the discomfort generated by direct experience was processed and transformed into ethical insight. The final sentence demonstrates moral realignment: understanding that privilege entails obligation.

Other students describe the same emotional destabilization but framed as intellectual shock. A 2023 participant wrote: “Because this course was not afraid to punch the students in the face with the significance of this issue, these students quickly understood that their way of thinking was about to be flipped.”

This hyperbolic expression—“punched in the face”—captures the power of collision between preconception and reality. The student’s “flipped” thinking is not merely emotional but epistemological: a moment when the neat categories of classroom debate give way to the messy realities of human suffering. Rather than retreat, the student recognizes the need to remain engaged. The visceral language of impact (“punched,” “flipped”) reminds us that this program does not aim for comfort but for cognitive rupture—an intentional unsettling of prior frameworks to make space for new understanding. As Li and Costa (2022) observe, encounters with profound difference, and the emotional struggle they provoke, can disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions and prepare learners for genuine transformation.

Another student recounts a specific instance of moral confrontation during a shelter visit:

There was one man who seemed very shy and didn’t want to talk. With some persuasion he said in English, ‘I don’t like to do these things because I’m literally running for my life here.’ It took some of the air out of the space... because that is a harsh truth to face for people like us.

Here discomfort becomes existential awareness. The student’s phrase “people like us” quietly names privilege without spelling it out—it acknowledges distance and implication at once. The encounter destabilizes the illusion of safety that frames U.S. students’ worldview. The fact that the speaker was “literally running for [his] life” collapses abstraction; it leaves no rhetorical

distance to hide behind. This discomfort is epistemological because it forces a reevaluation of what counts as “knowledge.” Cognitive dissonance functions as the engine of intercultural learning when students encounter realities that confound prior expectations (Mitchell & Paras, 2018). Hearing the truth directly from those who live it invalidates detached academic discourse. Several reflections connect discomfort with a growing tolerance for complexity. One 2023 participant writes:

This crisis is hard, so I can’t pretend to know what the solution is. Also, we must be realistic and pragmatic, helping the greatest number of people.

This brief statement signals an important intellectual pivot. Where students often enter such programs with ready-made moral positions, exposure to lived complexity replaces certainty with humility. A similar movement appears in another’s reflection: “Migration is not just about national security at the southern border of the U.S. We should consider factors like economic prosperity in Central America, the influence of cartels on towns in Mexico, human rights, and more.”

These excerpts show that discomfort leads to nuance. Students stop looking for singular villains or solutions and begin to articulate multi-causal explanations. The ability to hold competing truths—security, sovereignty, compassion, pragmatism—is a mark of mature ethical reasoning.

Another student noted, *“I will start to become less patient with those who are blatant with their lack of empathy.”* These reactions show that re-entry can itself be an ethical ordeal. Students return to social spaces that have not changed, and the resulting friction confirms that the transformation is genuine. The discomfort, in this sense, persists—not as confusion but as conviction.

In sum, the second learning goal was realized through the strategic introduction of dissonance: encounters that undermined certainty, conversations that required humility, and reflections that demanded moral self-scrutiny. The students’ own words show that discomfort was not a side effect of the program—it was the curriculum itself. By sitting in that discomfort, they began to replace opinion with understanding, and sympathy with responsibility.

7.3. Learning goal 3: Decolonization of knowledge and culture

The program’s third learning goal was to foster the decolonization of knowledge and culture. This meant deliberately shifting epistemic authority from the “sending” institution to the host, allowing students to learn through local frameworks rather than Western-centric interpretations. To that end, UNACH faculty, peer mentors, and community leaders led both the pre-trip

course and the on-site experience. The intention was for students to see how different histories, values, and conceptions of justice shape what counts as knowledge—and to confront the limits of their own cultural lenses. As Smith et al. (2018) emphasize, indigenous and decolonizing studies in education call for re-centering local epistemologies and redistributing interpretive authority. In that spirit, our approach aligns with Mignolo's (2009) call for epistemic disobedience, which rejects the supposed neutrality of Northern knowledge frameworks and insists on plurality in how the world is understood.

The students' reflections indicate that this shift occurred repeatedly, and often with profound self-awareness. A member of the 2022 cohort described the realization as follows:

I used to think that everything that happened in the U.S. was the baseline for all other cultures and regions. I was already growing out of this frame of reference, but this trip helped me move past it to an entirely new level. I know now that migration is not just about national security at the southern border of the U.S. We should consider factors like economic prosperity in Central America, the influence of cartels on towns in Mexico, human rights, and more. Globally, migration has even more complicated and different factors that we should also study and address. I know now that merely a U.S. lens is not enough to understand migration.

This reflection encapsulates the epistemic transformation the program was designed to provoke. The student explicitly names the U.S. as a "baseline"—a term that signals both power and ignorance. By acknowledging and abandoning this baseline, the student begins to see migration as a phenomenon shaped by multiple geographies and histories. The movement from a national security frame to a global and humanitarian one demonstrates that decolonization, in this context, means cognitive decentering—the willingness to see from somewhere else.

Other students connect this epistemic shift directly to the structure of the program and the authority of the host institution. One 2022 participant wrote:

The trip was intellectually challenging. I learned much about the laws that govern entry into Mexico, the rights of migrants once they are in Mexico, and about the processes of both deportation and application for refugee status. The shelter directors and Professors Elisa and Ivonne were fonts of knowledge regarding these topics, and the time they spent discussing everything with us was so enriching.

Here, knowledge flows from local experts—faculty, shelter directors, and field practitioners—rather than from U.S. instructors. The student’s choice of words, “*fonts of knowledge*,” underscores the recognition of authority outside the traditional academic hierarchy (Chiocca, 2021). In practical terms, this is what a host-led model accomplishes: it displaces the notion that expertise must be imported and reframes it as something embedded in place and experience.

The activities led by the faculty during the program had the purpose of guiding students to see how knowledge and life experience that is unfamiliar to them can be a rich source of information. Host-led sessions modeled decolonial ‘repertoires of practice’ that cultivate epistemic disobedience in learners (Domínguez, 2021). Faculty-led discussions were designed to allow students to express their discomfort and experiences while being confronted with the experts or locals’ perspectives; these activities gave students opportunities to explore their values with academic rigor but with empathy.

Some students linked their intellectual transformation to moral and civic consequences. A participant from the 2025 cohort wrote:

This experience has forced me to reconsider what it means to be both knowledgeable and compassionate. I no longer think empathy is sufficient on its own; action is required. I now realize that my responsibility is continuous, whether it means speaking up in discussions that sensationalize or spread false information, advocating for more just laws, or just keeping up with current events. If I am to truly stand by my beliefs, I must use my privilege responsibly as a white woman, a student, a daughter, a friend, a voter, and a citizen of a wealthy nation.

This reflection shows how decolonization in learning does not remain theoretical. Once the student accepts that knowledge is situated and power-laden, understanding leads to accountability. The voice is reflective and self-critical, but it also marks a transition from awareness to agency. The student no longer treats empathy as the endpoint but as the beginning of ethical action—a key indicator that internalized learning has occurred.

For other participants, this epistemic reorientation extended to questions of faith and morality. One student wrote: “I feel strongly that having a pro-immigration attitude in line with the Christian ethic is the direction our nation needs to move in, rather than an exclusionary Pagan ethic.”

While the phrasing is idiosyncratic, it demonstrates an attempt to reconcile religious worldview with a decolonized moral position. Rather than aligning faith with nationalism, the student reframes Christianity as a

universal ethic of inclusion. The reflection is not about Mexico per se—it is about reinterpreting one's own belief system through the lens of another culture's realities. That inversion is itself a decolonial act: the host context becomes the interpretive authority.

Across all cohorts, students repeatedly attribute their reframing to specific features of the host-led design: lectures by Mexican faculty, site visits led by shelter administrators and indigenous leaders, and guided debriefings that contextualized what they saw. These experiences made visible how knowledge is always produced *somewhere* anchored in geography, history, and culture. In their words, decolonization was not an abstract concept but an encounter with different ways of knowing.

Our cohorts have included some students with ancestry from Latin America. Some students are second generation sons and daughters of people who emigrated to the United States. Their roots are in Mexico, Central and South America. The degree of closeness to their heritage varies, but most maintain Spanish as a fluent language and incorporate many cultural elements from Latin America into their lives. Decolonizing study abroad can involve reclaiming identities and heritage, particularly for Latin American students navigating U.S. schooling norms (Kasun et al., 2023).

As one 2024 reflection summarized, *"Hearing about the way that changing asylum laws directly affects the people in the shelters and their decisions connects legislation to actual human impact, which one rarely perceives unless they interact with people affected by it."* This line brings the epistemic and ethical threads together: understanding policy no longer comes from documents but from lived consequence.

Taken as a whole, these reflections show that the program's third learning goal was achieved. Through the transfer of curricular authority to the host institution and the structuring of direct, context-rich encounters, students experienced what it means to learn from the global South—not about it. Their words reveal a deep shift from intellectual sympathy to epistemic humility, from studying "others" to being taught by them. That is the essence of decolonization in practice.

8. Limitations and methodological reflections

Assessing transformation in a short-term, host-led program presents unique methodological challenges. The outcomes we sought—empathy, discomfort, and decolonization—are inherently qualitative. They unfold through emotion and reflection, not standardized metrics. For that reason, our evaluation relied on students' written reflections and end-of-program

discussions collected from 2022 to 2025. These essays and conversations provide vivid insight into how students experienced the program, yet they also reveal the limits of our current capacity to assess—and to enact—our own decolonial aspirations.

Each cohort submitted reflective essays after returning to the United States, describing how the trip shaped their understanding of migration and privilege. The students' final essays, supplemented by group debriefings and faculty field notes, were analyzed inductively. Both authors read and coded the reflections independently, then compared themes corresponding to the three intended learning goals: empathic immersion, axiological and epistemological discomfort, and decolonization of knowledge and culture.

We intentionally chose reflective essays as our principal instrument of assessment because they capture the affective and interpretive dimensions of transformation that are often invisible to quantitative tools. This approach privileges narrative coherence and thematic convergence over numerical measurement, aligning with qualitative traditions in experiential learning and established frameworks for assessing study abroad outcomes that integrate theory, tools, and practice (Savicki & Brewer, 2023). While some studies have demonstrated measurable gains in critical reflection six weeks after program completion (Walters et al., 2017), our essays were collected immediately upon return, allowing us to document the intensity of students' emotional and cognitive engagement at its peak—a moment when transformation is most vividly articulated, if not yet fully assimilated.

These reflections capture *perceived* transformation, expressed at moments of high emotional intensity. They cannot confirm how deeply or permanently students' worldviews have changed. The data are limited to participants who completed and consented to the use of their essays. Their voices may over-represent positive experiences or articulate change more readily than others. Instructor involvement in both design and evaluation introduces further subjectivity, even though anonymity was maintained during analysis.

Language also remains a constraint. Most U.S. participants communicated through interpreters or bilingual peers. While this ensured inclusion, it also mediated the immediacy of dialogue. Students were profoundly moved by the encounters, but their understanding of the stories of the migrants was necessarily filtered through translation. This raises an unresolved question: how can empathy and epistemic humility be deepened when linguistic asymmetry persists?

Program duration may be a factor in limiting the effectiveness of goal achievement. While shorter programs (<18 days) can show lower odds of full perspective transformation, design features—hands-on experiential components and structured reflection—are decisive (Strange & Gibson, 2017). It is therefore essential for short-term programs to fill their activities and components with experiential and service-learning elements, to increase the odds, as much as possible, of achieving lasting impact on students.

Beyond methodological concerns lies a philosophical limitation we cannot ignore. Decolonizing methodologies reminds us that indigenous and marginalized communities must never be treated as objects of study, but as partners in the production of knowledge (Smith, 2016). Host communities, too, experience both rewards and costs from study abroad; designing toward genuine mutualism therefore requires constant attention to their perspectives and priorities (Haeger et al., 2024). Although this program has taken deliberate steps away from the veranda—transferring curricular authority to the host institution, centering local expertise, and designing encounters that confront privilege—we recognize that we are not yet fully beyond it.

The migrants whose lives animate the program remain, for now, participants in conversations and visits, but not in the design or authorship of the curriculum itself. In this sense, they are still positioned as subjects of empathy and analysis rather than as co-producers of knowledge. Scholars caution that unacknowledged privilege and colonial legacies in global health and study abroad can harm host communities; cultural humility and equity-oriented design are essential (Gondwe et al., 2024).

Our reflections as faculty mirror the students' own discomfort. The challenge before us is how to move from *observing* to *collaborating*, from facilitating encounters with migrants to incorporating them as partners and co-educators in the learning process. Only then will the program's decolonial intent reach its logical conclusion: epistemic justice realized not through representation, but through participation.

The methodological humility expressed here is therefore not only about data; it is about design. We continue to search for creative, ethical ways to involve migrants and communities directly in shaping what and how students learn. Doing so would move the program beyond the veranda entirely—toward a form of education in which migrants are no longer the object of empathy, but the architects of a shared, empathic, and decolonized understanding of migration itself.

9. Final reflections

The program described in this article emerged from a shared conviction that study abroad could—and must—be more than observation. The partnership between UNACH and Juniata College was built on an experiment in structural collaboration: what would happen if the host institution not only received students but designed the learning itself? Over four iterations, the answer has been consistent. When authority shifts south, so does understanding. Our three outcomes map onto global citizenship's dimensions—social responsibility, global awareness, and civic engagement (Perry et al., 2013).

Through the deliberate interplay of empathy, discomfort, and epistemic reorientation, the program invited students to inhabit a different moral and intellectual landscape. Encounters in shelters, guided by faculty and community leaders from Chiapas, replaced distant sympathy with embodied awareness. The emotional intensity of these experiences—what students called “humbling,” “brutal,” and “life-changing”—was not an accidental by-product; it was the curriculum. In learning to *sit in the discomfort*, students found the most honest route to comprehension.

As psychologist Lisa Damour (2024, p. 36) reminds us, “[e]motional pain promotes maturation. This is true when it is inspired by arts and literature, and likely even more true when it comes from difficult personal experiences”. The program's pedagogy operates on that same premise: that emotional strain can be a source of intellectual and moral growth. The discomfort students encounter in Chiapas is not punitive—it is formative.

But empathy and discomfort alone are incomplete. The true transformation lies in the reorganization of perspective that occurs when the host's lens becomes the center of interpretation. When UNACH faculty lead discussions on migration law, or indigenous educators explain autonomy and community through their own traditions, U.S. students experience not only new information but new epistemologies. They learn that knowledge itself is plural, situated, and relational.

Building on Ogden's (2007) critique of the “veranda,” we designed the program to move students beyond observation toward ethically structured engagement. In keeping with Tuck and Yang's (2012) warning, we approach decolonization not as metaphor but as the reorganization of authority itself—who designs, who teaches, and who interprets. At its best, this model shows that decolonization in education is not a sentiment but a structure: a redistribution of voice, agency, and meaning. Yet our reflections remind us that this structure is still unfinished. We have stepped away from the veranda, but we are not yet

fully off it. migrants remain narrators of experience rather than co-authors of design, and until they help shape what is taught and how it is taught, the epistemic justice we pursue will remain incomplete.

Even so, the four years of collaboration have shown that a short-term study abroad program can become a site of genuine transformation—for students, for institutions, and for educators. Students return home with a new moral vocabulary: one that combines empathy with responsibility, humility with agency. They begin to see migration not as a crisis or spectacle, but as human continuity; not as a problem to be solved, but as a complex part of reality to be understood.

For us as faculty, these years have also been a process of learning and unlearning. Working together across borders has redefined what partnership means. It has shown us that the most powerful educational experiences occur when neither side controls the narrative—when each does what the other cannot, and when both are willing to be changed in the process. If the veranda once symbolized distance and safety, our task is to keep dismantling it—even knowing we never will.

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Ethical approval

The research protocol underlying the continuing assessment of Emil Nagengast's short-term study-abroad programs was designated Exempt, Category 2B, by the Juniata College Institutional Review Board (protocol 46-2015, December 8, 2015). Juniata College subsequently advised the principal investigator that this exemption continued to apply to the Mexico program as

a continuation of the previously reviewed research. Students were informed that their written reflections might be used for research and publication, that participation in the research component was voluntary, and that they could decline the inclusion of their work without any effect on their course grade. All identifying information was removed before analysis, and no identifying information is reported in this article.

Declaration of competing interests

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

Data availability statement

The qualitative data analyzed in this study are not publicly available because participant consent did not include public data sharing and disclosure could compromise participant confidentiality. De-identified excerpts supporting the findings are included in the article.

CRedit author statement

Alejandro Herrán: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision, Project Administration. **Emil Nagengast:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision, Project Administration.

Statement on AI use

OpenAI's ChatGPT was used solely to assist with spelling, grammar, and language correction. The authors independently developed the manuscript's content, methodology, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions. Alejandro Herrán, who is proficient in both English and Spanish, wrote, reviewed, and substantially revised both language versions and accepts responsibility for the accuracy of the Spanish text. The authors reviewed and approved all AI-assisted corrections and accept full responsibility for the final content.

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