

## NARRATIVE STUDY OF FULBRIGHT FLTAS' EXPERIENCES AT A U.S. UNIVERSITY

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### Abstract

Transnational mobility programs, such as Fulbright scholarships, offer unique opportunities for academics to engage in scholarly collaboration and gain insights into diverse cultural perspectives. In recent years, more attention has been directed towards the internationalization of education, prompting educators to develop competencies needed to skillfully navigate culturally diverse learning environments. This research is a qualitative inquiry into the multifaceted experiences of nine (9) Fulbright scholars from the 2022-2023 cohorts during their Foreign Language Teaching Assistantship (FLTA) at a private university in the United States of America. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over video teleconferencing, wherein participants narrated the rewarding and challenging aspects of their experiences during the programs. Transcripts were then subjected to thematic analysis to identify emergent patterns and themes among the participants' experiences. The findings reveal that the participants viewed student engagement and success, a renewed sense of nationalism, enhanced pedagogical skills, professional growth and impact, and heightened intercultural competence as the rewarding aspects of their experience abroad. However, the participants identified role ambiguity, restricted access to the host university's resources, and culture shock as the challenges they experienced throughout the duration of the program. These findings emphasize the need for mobility program coordinators and host institutions to strengthen support systems and improve program structures to enhance the quality of international academic experiences. Addressing these issues would allow mobility participants to have more meaningful and impactful engagements, thereby reinforcing the success and ensuring the continuity of transnational academic programs.

**Keywords:** *Foreign language; International education; Language instruction; Professional development.*

## 1. Introduction

Academic mobility opportunities allow teachers to refine their pedagogical skills, stay abreast of innovations in education, and gain a more comprehensive understanding of diverse academic landscapes. One such opportunity is the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) program, a nine-month, non-degree program that provides promising educators worldwide with the chance to enhance their pedagogical skills, develop intercultural competence, and serve as cultural ambassadors in U.S. academic institutions. Despite the increasing availability of literature on international students and faculty experiences, the hybrid nature of the FLTA program—where scholars function both as educators and learners—remains an underexplored area. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the multifaceted experiences and personal narratives of FLTAs by answering the following research questions:

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the rewarding aspects of the foreign language teaching assistantship experience at a private U.S. university for the Fulbright scholars?
2. What are the challenging aspects of the foreign language teaching assistantship at a private U.S. university for the Fulbright scholars?

This study aims to gain insight on the rewarding and challenging aspects of the Fulbright FLTA 2022-2023 cohort's experience during their program. By considering the perspectives of academic sojourners, the findings of this study may help academic institutions and international program coordinators establish informed policies and guidelines that further enrich the cross-cultural experiences of international scholars.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Benefits of Academic Mobility

Academic mobility programs are defined as the cross-border movement of faculty, researchers, and students for academic purposes, with the overarching goal of enhancing the quality and accessibility of education (Shen, Xu & Wang, 2022; Slipchuk et al., 2021). Engaging in these programs presents a wide range of benefits for educators. Several studies highlight improvements in cultural awareness (Roskvist et al., 2017), cultural sensitivity, foreign language acquisition (Alemu, 2020), professional development, ICT proficiency (Pachocki, 2020), and network expansion and mentorship from global experts (Serpa et al., 2020). Furthermore, international exposure allows teachers to enhance their teaching skills and research capacity (Ding, Yuan & Curtis, 2022; Çiftçi & Karaman, 2019) while also providing access to state-of-the-art resources relevant to their teaching practice (Roskvist et al., 2017). Furthermore, mobility programs offer educators an opportunity to develop a decolonized perspective on education (Cook, 2009), challenge preconceived cultural assumptions, and foster global citizenship among students (Freed, Benavides & Huffling, 2019).

### 2.2 Institutional Gains

Beyond individual benefits, institutions that engage in transnational mobility demonstrate a strong commitment to internationalization, leading to mutual benefits for both sending and receiving institutions. It also fosters global citizenship among members of

the academic community, which is defined as “global consciousness”, or an awareness of international perspectives and issues that allows individuals to envision themselves as part of a global community (Schippling, 2020). International faculty contribute unique cultural insights that broaden students’ worldviews and enhance intercultural awareness (Alemu, 2022). Additionally, their presence strengthens cross-cultural collaborations (Ding, Yuan & Curtis, 2022), which, in turn, supports international research initiatives and academic partnerships. From a strategic standpoint, the positive experiences of international faculty often translate into favorable recommendations within alumni networks and referral channels, which are particularly beneficial for institutions with limited marketing budgets. These organic endorsements help establish a global reputation for universities (International Association of Language Centers, 2018).

### **2.3 Challenges in Transnational Teaching Roles**

While international mobility offers significant advantages, it also presents challenges. Returning scholars are expected to effectively apply their newly gained experiences and perspectives to fit the context of their home institutions; a process that requires extensive institutional support (Zhang & Wang, 2022). To facilitate this, universities must provide a nurturing environment that encourages the integration of innovative teaching practices and cross-cultural insights acquired abroad. Moreover, continuous support for academic mobility programs depends in part on scholars' satisfaction with their experiences abroad, as this influences future funding and program expansion. Governments and sponsoring organizations closely monitor scholar satisfaction to ensure the sustainability of these initiatives (Smith, 2020). Therefore, school administrators and policymakers must consider how to enhance the quality of international experiences to attract and retain foreign students and faculty.

### **2.4 Previous Studies on FLTA Experience**

The Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) Program is a non-degree grant under the Fulbright Program, administered by the Institute for International Education (IIE) and sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State. During this program, FLTAs take on dual roles as both teaching assistants (or primary instructors) and students, engaging in coursework that deepens their understanding of the U.S. educational system and culture. Recent studies on the experiences of FLTAs explore a diverse range of experiences during the program, and examining these narratives provides perspectives on the overall experiences of academics during their academic pursuits abroad. In previous research, FLTAs describe their experience as improving their English communication skills and refining their teaching practices (Velásquez-Hoyos & Martínez-Burgos, 2023). To others, the program provided platforms for global and cultural involvement and self-growth, as well as opportunities to meaningfully contribute towards addressing global issues (Perreault and Dimitrova, 2022). However, some FLTAs noted experiencing struggles teaching foreign students. They described adjusting their teaching styles to accommodate the needs and preferences of their students. They also noted the perceived lack of support and restricted access to the host university’s learning resources (Aperocho et al., 2023).

While there is existing literature shedding light on the experiences of Fulbright FLTAs, research remains scarce. Hence, this study examines the experiences of Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistants (FLTAs), exploring the rewards and challenges they encounter while simultaneously navigating the roles of student and educator in a foreign environment. Understanding their perspectives will contribute to the development of policies that improve the cross-cultural experiences of future international scholars.

### 3. Research Method

#### 3.1 Context and Participants

This narrative research takes into account the experiences of the 2022-2023 cohort of Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistants who assisted in the teaching of their native languages and cultures during the Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 semesters at a private university in the United States. The narrative research design allows researchers to collect and interpret meanings that individuals attribute to certain experiences through the narration of their personal accounts. Through stories, this approach enables people to share and reflect upon the complexities of their personal experiences, and enables the researcher to see the world from their subjects' own perspectives (Ntinda, 2020). In the context of this study, all nine participants came from different cultural backgrounds and collectively experienced the same foreign environment for the first time. Hence, their varying perspectives is a compelling area for exploration.

Purposive sampling was used to identify the nine participants of the study, who were all Fulbright FLTA grantees from diverse backgrounds, such as Indonesia, Russia, South Africa, Senegal, Türkiye, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Peru. Guided by the selection criteria of the FLTA scholarship grant, all the participants are native speakers of their languages and are teachers by profession.

This study further takes into account the participants' length of teaching experience prior to their Fulbright stint, travels to the US, whether they have teaching experience in a US environment, and their role in their respective foreign language instruction classes. These factors and characteristics were considered to infer possible influences on the participants' FLTA experiences. One participant has already traveled to the U.S. prior to selection for the program. Meanwhile, the rest were first-time sojourners in the country. Despite a slight variation in travel experiences, all the participants were teaching and studying in a US academic environment for the first time during their FLTA stint.

In terms of their roles in the classroom, one functioned as the primary instructor. This implies that they were solely responsible for the instruction of their native language at the university. Meanwhile, the rest served as teaching assistants who performed supporting functions for an already existent language instructor at the university.

**Table 1.**

*Participant information*

Participant	Country of Origin	Language taught	Role in the classroom	Length of teaching experience prior to grant	First time traveling to the US?	First time teaching in the US?
1	Indonesia	Indonesian	Teaching assistant	10 years	Yes	Yes
2	Russia	Russian	Teaching assistant	4 years	Yes	Yes
3	Thailand	Thai	Primary instructor	4 years, 8 mos	No	Yes

4	Senegal	Wolof	Teaching assistant	8 years	Yes	Yes
5	Türkiye	Turkish	Teaching assistant	6 years	Yes	Yes
6	Philippines	Filipino	Teaching assistant	5 years	Yes	Yes
7	South Africa	Zulu	Teaching assistant	4 years	Yes	Yes
8	Vietnam	Vietnamese	Teaching assistant	6 years	Yes	Yes
9	Peru	Quechua	Teaching assistant	1 year	Yes	Yes

### 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured, non-directive and open-ended interviews wherein the participants freely narrated their rewarding and challenging experiences as FLTAs throughout the duration of the program. The interviews were conducted via Zoom video teleconferencing over a span of approximately 4–5 weeks to accommodate all the participants' preferred interview schedules. All the interviews were recorded, and all individual exchanges were manually transcribed.

The data analysis involved a thorough process of coding and identifying recurring themes and sub-themes from the interviews. Firstly, the verbatim transcriptions from the interviews were thoroughly reread to gain familiarity with the research data. Initial notes were carefully documented in researcher memos. Following this phase, the researchers conducted manual coding, identifying segments of texts relating to the participants' experiences. The identified codes were then classified into superordinate themes, subordinate themes, and sub-themes based on conceptual similarities, and interpreted in the context of the research questions and related literature.

To ensure the credibility of the research findings, both the interview recordings and the transcripts generated afterward were shared with the participants for verification of the accuracy of their narratives. Moreover, the initial emerging themes and patterns were discussed among the researchers to reach consensus on potentially varying interpretations and to minimize potential biases. This collaborative process ensured that the findings remained grounded in the participants' accounts and reflective of their experiences during the program.

### 3.3 Ethical Consideration

Prior to the conduct of this study, consent to participate was sought through an informed consent form which detailed the nature and purpose of the study. They were assured that the data to be collected shall be used solely for research and academic purposes. The participants were also provided the opportunity to opt-out of the study at any point during its conduct. Moreover, the participants were also requested to review the manuscript prior to publication to address any concerns regarding confidentiality and misrepresentation. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was waived as per the policies of the concerned institution; however, all protocols for voluntary participation and confidentiality were strictly observed. It must also be emphasized that the findings reflect the personal experiences of the participants and should not be taken as a generalization of experiences by all Fulbright FLTA scholars deployed at the private university, or to any US university in general.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the accounts of the participants in the Foreign Language Teaching Assistantship experience at a private U.S. university. The findings will be presented in two categories: the rewarding aspects and the challenging aspects of their FLTA experience, and organized into superordinate and subordinate themes.

### 4.1 Rewarding Aspects of the FLTA Program

**Table 2.**

*Superordinate themes and subordinate themes on the rewarding aspects of the participants' FLTA experiences*

No.	Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
1.	Student engagement and success	Students displaying interest and initiative Students achieving language learning goals
2.	Renewed sense of nationalism	
3.	Enhanced pedagogical skills	Gaining new pedagogical perspectives Adopting new teaching techniques
4.	Professional growth and impact	Expanding professional network Making impactful contributions to host university
5.	Heightened intercultural competence	Developing intercultural awareness and communication skills Gaining a comparative understanding of the differences in academic settings Improved understanding of linguistic differences between English and native language

### 4.2 Student Engagement and Success

A sense of fulfillment in their students' interest and academic success in their foreign language classes was among the superordinate themes that emerged from the participants' accounts of rewarding experiences. The participants found satisfaction with students' active engagement in learning activities within and beyond the classroom. As previously stated, FLTAs are encouraged to organize activities to promote their native language within their host university. In this regard, Participant 2 conveyed a sense of satisfaction from their students making an effort to participate in extracurricular activities that they organized.

*"I distinctly recall the moment when my students and the participants of this "Russian Tea" club inquired about the feasibility of conducting our gathering twice a week, not due to scheduling conflicts but rather owing to their rising interest."*

The participants also feel a sense of pride when their students demonstrate the ability to use their newly-acquired foreign language skills to achieve their learning objectives in class. For example, Participant 4 stated:

*"I was very proud the first day one my students, born in the US but from Senegalese parents who was not able to speak the language of her parents,*

*made a PowerPoint presentation of her family in front of the class in Wolof. That was such a pleasant and fulfilling moment for me and for her."*

The feeling of satisfaction over knowing that their students are able to use their newfound language skills in real-life contexts were also noted among the findings. Participant 3, for example, expressed a feeling of fulfillment over helping one of her students communicate with native speakers of Thai:

*"One of the students went to Thailand to visit her grandmother. She told me she was really happy this time because she could use all the daily conversations, especially those lessons she learned in class to talk to her grandmother. "*

Some of the participants felt that their classes helped promote interest in their native language and culture among their students. Apart from students enrolling in the courses to fulfill their language requirements at the university, some of the participants' students enrolled out of genuine interest in their country and culture. Moreover, there were first-generation immigrants among their students who desired to learn the language spoken by their families. Participant 6 shared:

*"Majority of my students are children of Filipino immigrants who moved to the US either before they were born or when they were very young. So, they had very limited knowledge of Filipino language and culture, which led them to sign up for my class in an effort to reconnect to their Pinoy roots."*

The presence of a foreign instructor in the classroom awakens among learners a curiosity about their teacher's cultural backgrounds and perspectives. These findings were aligned with those by Taşdemir and Gümüşok (2022) with their study on the reflections of an EFL teacher's experience as a foreign instructor in Türkiye, and her students' insights with her as their teacher. Wherein, a survey revealed that having an international teacher piqued their interest in her native culture. Similar results were also noted in a 2024 study by Zhou, Huck & Houdyshell on the impact of foreign Fulbright educators on their host institutions. Students expressed excitement not only about exploring their foreign teachers' cultures, but also the world beyond.

#### **4.3 Renewed Sense of Nationalism**

Another rewarding aspect of the program was that it provided the participants a renewed sense of pride for their native language and culture. Participant 9 stated:

*"Coming to this welcoming environment, where I was teaching the language and I was teaching the culture where before I was discriminated for in my country, has been an empowering and healing, because I was given the opportunity to look deeper into my culture and with that, gain a lot of reflection and perspective."*

For Participant 9, the program served as a way to heal from personal experiences of racial discrimination, and helped her gain a deeper appreciation for her cultural identity. This

highlights that not only do exchange programs cultivate understanding of other cultures, but enhances one's appreciation for their own culture as well.

These findings are supported by Sakharova et al. (2017), who state that participation in transnational mobility programs often fosters intercultural sensitivity by providing scholars with opportunities to appreciate both other cultures and their own.

#### **4.4 Enhanced Pedagogical Skills**

One of the main objectives of the FLTA program is enhance the pedagogical skills of its scholars. Receiving mentorship from their primary instructors and from their professors allowed the participants to gain new teaching perspectives, as stated by Participant 2:

*"Currently, I am implementing the innovative methodologies and approaches acquired throughout the program into my own teaching with a heightened focus on the socio-cultural dimensions of language instruction."*

These findings are similar to Okken, Jansen, and Hofman (2019) which detailed a change in educational philosophies and values as part of teachers' international experiences. Adopting new teaching methods was also among the emerging subordinate themes. While all of the participants came to the host university with relative teaching experience, they also learned to adopt new pedagogical techniques throughout the duration of the grant. Participant 2 shared:

*"The Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) program provided me with a unique opportunity to not only immerse myself in the historical citadel of the United States but also to glean linguistic knowledge and the best pedagogical techniques from the outstanding professors."*

Aside from the mentorship received from their primary instructors and professors, the host university also provided the participants with training opportunities to keep them adept with the latest innovations in pedagogy, as expressed by Participant 7.

*"The administration also presented to us the opportunity to join the "Artificial Intelligence through Education" event. In a way, I was taught more about artificial intelligence. Most important is me coming back to South Africa and implementing it to my own teaching space."*

This shows that the professional development offered by the program extends beyond teaching assistantship and formal learning, but also in training and seminars provided by the host institution as well.

Similar findings are reflected in a study by Oubit and El Farahi (2024), in which educators who participated in international exchange programs reported that the experience contributed to their professional development, particularly by enhancing their teaching skills.

#### **4.5 Professional Growth and Impact**

Another noteworthy finding is the professional growth and impact that the participants gained from the grant which manifested through the expansion of their professional network. Participant 9 expressed:



*"Well, I think all of the FLTAs agree that it has been a wonderful opportunity to collaborate with professionals of this amount of experience and expertise."*

Opportunities to make an impactful contribution to the host university were also deemed rewarding by the participants, more specifically when their expertise were sought in foreign language-related projects. Participant 5, for instance, describe their sense of accomplishment over being asked to translate a document on behalf of the university.

*"To be given an opportunity to translate a text from English to Zulu...that meant a lot to me. And I was able to do that. It wasn't easy, it really was difficult but I was able to complete it and we sent it to the museum. That was an accomplishment for me."*

The ability to provide service to the host university beyond mere instruction allowed the participants to feel like they are playing a more vital role in the university setting during their FLTA stint.

The potential of transnational academic mobility programs to foster professional growth was likewise mirrored in the study of Oubit and El Farahi (2024), where international exchange participants were noted to have developed language awareness, techniques and strategies in teaching, leadership, soft skills and cultural competence from their training abroad.

#### **4.6 Heightened Intercultural Competence**

One of the key objectives of the FLTA program was to develop among the scholars a heightened level of intercultural competence. Interacting with students, colleagues, professors, and supervisors within a foreign environment enabled the participants to adapt to varying cultural practices and perspectives. In this regard, similar sentiments were expressed by Participants 4 and 5 on how the FLTA experience helped develop their intercultural awareness and communication skills.

Participant 4:

*"Personally, I was very proud of being able to connect with so many people from different backgrounds and learn so much about their habits and traditions. It helped me personally develop my language skills, my tolerance and understanding, and my ability to adapt in a different setting from what I am used to."*

Participant 5:

*"Every time I met a new person, I learned something new inevitably. Every week a cultural event was held on campus so that I could immerse the culture with interacting with the people. "*

These findings imply that the participants' consistent interactions with people within international settings helped them form globally-informed perspectives that would help them skillfully navigate through culturally diverse environments. These closely mirror the findings in a separate study on Fulbright scholars from the Dominican Republic (De La Cruz,

2021), wherein the scholars' exposure to diverse viewpoints challenged their preconceived notions and sparked a cultural transformation within them.

Another subordinate theme that emerged was gaining a comparative understanding between the participants' home educational culture and the host educational culture, particularly with regard to teacher-student dynamics in the classroom. Participant 1 shared:

*"Unlike the Asian study culture that applies vertical relationship, American students have more freedom in showing what they expect to learn from the course, challenging their instructor's opinion, which I think is healthy, including telling the professor how they want to learn their material or design of the class."*

Gaining a comparative perspective on the home community and host community is common and anticipated by sojourners (Çiftçi & Karaman, 2019). In fact, there is a likelihood that scholars take what they perceive as desirable aspects from the host community to adopt upon return to their home countries, as was similarly observed by Marquiz (2018) in their study on the re-entry experiences of North and South African Fulbright FLTA scholars.

The FLTA experience also allowed the opportunity for the participants to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic differences between their native language and English. Participant 2 stated:

*"One of the most intriguing facts I encountered during my tenure as a teaching assistant was my generally better understanding of the English language system and its nuances compared to my mother tongue. I urgently delved into the detailed examination of the Russian language etymology, phonetics and syntax to possess better explanations of the language peculiarities for the American students."*

Similar to the preceding subordinate theme, Participant 2 also developed comparative perspectives between an aspect of their home culture and the host culture. The constant use of a foreign language in a foreign environment not only improved Participant 2's competence and understanding of English, but also allowed for a reflection of its structural differences with their native language.

These findings relate to that of Sakharova et al. (2017), which also highlight how active engagement of participants within diverse cultural environments fostered heightened intercultural competence among participants. Similarly, the study notes that extended interactions with individuals from the host institution and country notably improve the participants' sense of intercultural competence.

#### 4.7 Challenging Aspects of the FLTA Program

**Table 3.**

*Superordinate themes and subordinate themes on the challenging aspects of the participants' FLTA experiences*

No.	Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
1	Role ambiguity	Difficulty engaging with students
		Confusion on participant's role in language classroom alongside primary instructor
2	Insufficient or restricted access to	Lack of available language teaching materials for

3	resources	their native languages
		Limited access to university resources
		Concerns over safety
3	Culture shock	Difficulty securing accommodation
		Homesickness

#### 4.8 Role Ambiguity

The hybrid role of the FLTA program enabled the scholars to simultaneously perform both student and teacher functions at their host university. However, this also presented itself as a challenge to the participants. One shared their struggles to engage with students because of the ambiguous nature of their status. Participant 2 expressed:

*"Finding a balance at the boundary of a student status and that of a faculty member was sometimes challenging. It was hard to get comprehensive experience in either role. My attempts to engage with most student organizations were met with resistance, as they perceived me solely as a teacher, precluding my entry."*

One participant who performed the teaching assistant function in the language instruction classes also conveyed a feeling of confusion while working alongside their primary instructor. Participant 8 stated:

*"I think as for my teaching experience, I didn't really have any bad experience but could be a little bit frustrated. My supervisor...this was the first time she had a Vietnamese FLTA, so she wasn't sure what to do. I don't think the university had any prior, like, talk to her. Maybe the administration only said like, okay, here's an FLTA. But she wasn't sure what to do."*

These findings closely align to those made by Ding, Yuan and Curtis (2022) in their study of the experiences of Chinese educators who embarked on academic visits abroad. Educators, who were expected to perform varied roles, reported struggling to balance their identities and manage the different expectations associated with each role. On a similar note, Thomas (2019) determined in their phenomenological study on the teaching experiences of American educators abroad that a sense of structure and the establishment of clear expectations were deemed as crucial factors in fostering a healthy and positive teaching environment.

#### 4.9 Insufficient or Restricted Access to Resources

The lack of teaching materials and restricted access to available resources were also reported by the participants to have caused them difficulty during their FLTA stint. Role ambiguity seems to have played a role in the emergence of one subordinate theme, which is restricted access to the host university's resources. Their hybrid status at the university meant that the participants were not always granted full access to certain courses or training opportunities, as expressed by Participant 2:

*"Certain professors regarded me as a non-priority member in the classroom, thereby declining my access to desired courses. Similarly, some*

*events exclusively designated for the faculty members were beyond my reach."*

Participant 2 illustrated feelings of being unprioritized in classes at the host university, which mirrors the findings made by Stegall (2021) on the experiences of international students in a foreign language immersion program in the US, reported feelings of being unwanted or being invisible.

Insufficient resources also posed as a challenge to the participants. With no instructional materials readily available in the host university for some of the foreign languages, some of the participants were compelled to develop the resources on their own. Participants 4 and 9 expressed initially struggling in this regard:

Participant 4:

*"My main frustrations at the university came from the fact that at the beginning, I didn't have any available teaching resources for my language. I was obliged to create some of them from scratch and some others with the help of mainly other former FLTAS, my instructor and the administration."*

Participant 9:

*There are not many resources for indigenous languages, so I had to develop them on my own, which was challenging in the first few weeks.*

The lack of available teaching resources for some language programs at the host university posed a great challenge for some of the participants in the beginning, especially as they found out about the lack of materials shortly before the classes were scheduled to begin. Similar results were reported by Rex and Cabildas (2023) in their study on the international experiences of Filipino teachers in Thailand, wherein insufficient materials and restricted access to resources posed a struggle for international teachers.

#### **4.10 Culture Shock**

Transitioning through different stages of acculturation is anticipated upon arrival in a foreign country, and culture shock is a common experience for sojourners. The term "culture shock" describes the experiences of people who are uprooted from their usual environment and immersed in foreign settings. Sojourners go through four stages in the acculturation process: the honeymoon stage, regression stage, adjustment stage, and recovery. The process begins fairly positively, with sojourners feeling a sense of awe and amazement for their new environment. However, as their unfamiliarity with the new environment gradually causes inconveniences and difficulties, they develop feelings of confusion, anxiety, and even suspicion before ultimately adapting to the new environment.

Prior to arrival in the US and during the first few months of their FLTA stint, some of the participants recall having negative experiences in adjusting to their host community. For instance, Participant 8 expressed a constant feeling of unsafety during their first weeks in the host community.

*"I think in the city, at the beginning, I feel a little bit difficult because all the warnings of the people of how dangerous the neighborhood could be. So, I wasn't...I didn't really go out. I don't even feel safe to go out."*

Meanwhile, one of the participants expressed having struggled to secure accommodation prior to moving into their new community, stating that the available housing options online were either beyond their budget or did not accommodate short-term tenants. Moreover, they expressed fear over being in constant risk of falling victims to scams. For example, Participant 5 shared:

*"The housing website of the university was not useful for us since the prices on that website was above my budget or they do not want nine-month contract. Another source was Facebook groups, which were full of scam listings. If you are lucky, you can find a room for your budget after long stressful days."*

These difficulties in adjusting to the host environment were also observed in the study by Macapagong, Geroso, and Maguate (2023), wherein international teachers reported having struggled to adapt to contrasting ways of life in the foreign community. Mental health was also among the factors that the participants struggled with. Participants reported feeling homesick from the first few days to months during the program. Participant 9 shared:

*"In the first days, I felt homesickness. I remember...yeah, I just tried to learn step by step, to take it easy and eventually that was not any more a big deal unlike the first days."*

Similar feelings of homesickness were reported by Participant 6, who experienced homesickness months after arriving in the United States.

*"I have to say I was very surprised to feel the homesickness literally two months after arriving to the US. I thought those things happen earlier and it just hit me out of nowhere. I felt overwhelmed with feelings of missing my loved ones back home."*

These findings mirror that of Deguma (2022), wherein it was found that foreign teachers experience feelings of homesickness during the initial stages of their mobility programs, which eventually lessened over time, and by constant contact with faraway loved ones through online platforms.

Through an analysis of the participants' narratives, five superordinate themes emerged as rewarding, while three were identified as challenging. One of the most fulfilling aspects of the FLTA experience was student engagement and academic success. The active participation and strong performance of their students provided the participants with a sense of accomplishment. Moreover, the students' genuine curiosity about the scholars' native cultures reinforced their roles as cultural ambassadors, aligning with existing research on how international faculty enrich learning environments with unique cultural perspectives (Taşdemir & Gümüşok, 2022; Zhou, Huck & Houdyshell, 2024). In addition, the scholars' exposure to a foreign academic environment fostered a renewed appreciation for their own culture. For some, teaching their native language and culture abroad became a healing experience, helping them overcome past encounters with racial discrimination. Similar studies highlight that international experiences allow scholars to reflect on their cultural heritage and identity, reinforcing national pride (Cook, 2009; Maharaja, 2009).

On a professional level, the FLTA program provides valuable opportunities for network expansion and professional growth. Frequent interactions with esteemed professors and colleagues facilitated meaningful academic collaborations (Greek & Jonsmoen, 2021). The scholars also felt a strong sense of purpose and validation when involved in university projects, recognizing their contributions as impactful to their host institution. Intercultural competence also emerged as a significant reward. Constant engagement with diverse populations heightened the participants' intercultural awareness and communication skills. They gained a comparative understanding of the American educational system and identified contrasts with their home countries' education systems. Additionally, exposure to linguistic differences between English and their native languages further enriched their knowledge, supporting research on the transformative impact of academic mobility programs (Wang et al., 2018). Despite these positive aspects, the FLTA scholars also faced significant challenges. One major difficulty was role ambiguity, as the hybrid nature of the FLTA program made it difficult for them to navigate their dual roles as both students and educators. Some participants reported a lack of interaction with students because they were perceived as faculty members, while others struggled with unclear responsibilities due to the absence of an orientation for primary instructors. These conflicting identities have been shown to cause academic sojourners to experience uncertainty and stress when fulfilling multiple roles (Ding, Yuan & Curtis, 2022). Providing a clear structure and orientation could help scholars adapt more effectively to their responsibilities (Thomas, 2019). Another major challenge was insufficient access to institutional resources. The scholars' ambiguous status as part-time faculty members and part-time students often restricted their access to certain courses, events, and facilities. Furthermore, many struggled with developing their teaching materials upon arrival, as they were given little time to prepare before classes began. Lastly, adjusting to their host community posed initial difficulties. Some participants felt unsafe in their new environment, while others encountered challenges in securing accommodation. Feelings of homesickness were also prevalent during the early stages of the program. However, as time passed, many found these difficulties easier to navigate.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide meaningful insights into both the benefits and challenges experienced by Fulbright FLTA scholars, offering implications for individuals engaged in transnational mobility programs as well as for sending and receiving institutions. The rewarding aspects of the FLTA experience highlight the significant personal, cultural, and professional growth that international scholars undergo. Their experiences reinforced the value of cultural exchange, academic collaboration, and intercultural competence. At the same time, the challenges they faced—such as role ambiguity, limited resource access, and adjustment difficulties—emphasize the need for institutions to provide better support structures, clearer role definitions, and improved access to resources to ensure a more seamless transition for scholars.

By addressing these challenges, academic institutions and international program coordinators can enhance the quality of international experiences, thereby encouraging greater participation in mobility initiatives. From the findings of this research, more attention may be directed towards the onboarding process upon the participants' arrival in the host country. Comprehensive orientations that clearly outline responsibilities and

resources would prevent future instances of role confusion or frustration over inaccessibility. Given that scholar satisfaction directly influences the continuity and global reputation of transnational programs, universities must take proactive measures to foster an enriching and supportive environment for future academic sojourners.

Since this current research provides insight into Fulbright FLTAs' experiences at one private university in the United States, the research findings may not fully represent the multitude of experiences among participants. Hence, future research may adopt a multi-campus scope to capture a broader and more diverse range of experiences. Furthermore, longitudinal studies may also be carried out to monitor the long-term impact of participation in the program, with particular interest in how knowledge, skills, and networks gained during the program shaped career trajectories over time.

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