

Reflection draft 1 : Studying abroad

America is often said to be the greatest country in the world, with unmatched military, economic, and cultural power. It is a country known for providing one of the best education systems globally, attracting people from all over the world to benefit from it. My name is Joel Tchouke, and I am from Cameroon. I am one of the many who were drawn to the promise of "America" to pursue my education. I migrated from my country to America for the opportunity to receive an education reputed to be among the best in the world. In this essay, I will share my experience since coming here to pursue my academic journey.

I still remember the day I received my acceptance letter. I was in my room when my dad received an email containing the letter. He sat on the edge of my bed and showed me. I was probably one of the happiest men alive. We called my mom and siblings, and together we rejoiced. That was the beginning of one of the experiences that changed my life the most. After that, I received my I-20 and scheduled an appointment at the embassy for my VISA. By the grace of God, the next thing I knew, I was in New York at my grandma's house. I made it. I was in the USA.

It was a wonder to see buildings of a ridiculous size standing in front of my eyes. People spoke English like in the movies. I felt like I was in a dream. I made it. Soon after, I found myself in New Jersey, then Virginia, and finally in Minnesota, where my academic journey would begin at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I arrived exactly on January 2, 2022, one day before the start of classes. It was so cold. I had never experienced cold at such a level. I can still remember the temperature that day—it was -23 degrees Celsius outside, like being in a freezer. To make things worse, my dad, who accompanied me, and I didn't know how to use the bus system, so we walked in the snow to get to places like the school. My hands were terribly cold and hurt, but we made it.

On the first day of school, I toured the campus and thought the university was beautiful. The rumors were true standards of education in the U.S. are on another level. I kept wishing my country had facilities like these, but it was too late for those thoughts; I had made it to the university. I then registered for classes and started my program in the Intensive English Program. I spent a whole

semester improving my communication skills in English. That semester was one of the best times of my life. I met absolutely wonderful people and found communities that truly cared about me. Despite my poor English, where I would sound foolish every time I spoke, people accepted and welcomed me. I had friends that felt like family. After completing the English program in one semester, I was honored to speak at the stole ceremony on behalf of the entire Intensive English Program department, in front of the university president and other administrators. This was where my experience as a regular student on campus began.

Beyond the academic aspect, one of the greatest lessons I've learned since coming here is about intercultural engagement. Interacting with so many students from around the world opened my eyes to how diverse cultures are, but also how much we share in common. I realized that while Africans may share many cultural values, each country has its own unique identity. When I first met students from Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana, I was surprised by the subtle differences in how we approach family traditions. For instance, one of my Nigerian friends told me about a unique tradition in his family where they hold a large gathering of extended family members every December to celebrate the elders. This was quite different from my own experience in Cameroon, where family gatherings are often smaller, more frequent, and centered around immediate family members. The idea of saving celebrations for a specific time felt new to me, as our traditions involve weekly family dinners, where we reflect on the week together.

At first, these differences puzzled me. Growing up, I had always assumed African cultures were more or less the same, but my time abroad revealed a deeper complexity. I hadn't anticipated that even within Africa, we would have so many distinct cultural practices. But it was during these conversations, especially as we shared our stories and laughed over how we interpreted "family values," that I realized these differences weren't barriers but windows into understanding each other more fully. These similarities and differences enriched my understanding of both my own culture and theirs.

However, my journey wasn't without challenges. There were times when I struggled to adjust to cultural differences, especially regarding communication styles. In my culture, feedback is often given indirectly, and people tend to be more reserved. But in the U.S., I encountered much more direct communication, especially in academic and work settings. At first, it was overwhelming and even felt rude at times. But over time, I learned to adapt, appreciating the efficiency and clarity

that comes with this style, while also learning to balance it with the more indirect approach I was used to. These small but significant lessons helped me grow in ways I never expected.

Another culture shock I had to adapt to was the food. Foods and styles of eating in America are completely different from what I was used to in Cameroon. Meals are much quicker and often involve a lot of processed food. In Cameroon, meals are more leisurely and tend to be centered around home-cooked dishes. I was accustomed to rich flavors, spicy food, and communal eating, where we shared meals together. In America, I had to adjust to faster-paced dining, different flavors, and portion sizes that were either much larger or much smaller than what I was used to. At first, I missed the warmth and comfort of traditional Cameroonian dishes, but over time, I adapted. I learned to appreciate American food, even though it was very different from what I grew up with. This change helped me become more open-minded and flexible when it came to food, which was another lesson in cultural adaptation.

Another shock was the American sense of time. Everything here is scheduled to the minute, and people expect punctuality, which felt overly strict compared to the more relaxed sense of time I grew up with. However, this new perspective on time management was one I grew to appreciate, especially when balancing school, work, and extracurricular activities. Learning to integrate my more flexible view of time with the American emphasis on punctuality taught me how to manage my responsibilities more efficiently, a skill I know will serve me well in the future.

Now that I'm in my third year of college, I see things differently compared to when I was a freshman. Back then, everything seemed overwhelming—there were so many unknowns, and I wasn't confident in my ability to fit in. My understanding of cultural differences was limited, and I viewed things mostly from my own perspective, which is common when someone first arrives in a new country. I had a more ethnocentric view, where I tended to evaluate other cultures through the lens of my own. But over time, through deep engagement with diverse groups and experiences, I've developed more of an ethnorelative perspective. I've learned to see things from other cultural viewpoints and appreciate the richness that each one brings. My interactions with people from different backgrounds have not only made me more adaptable but have also expanded my view of the world.

This personal growth didn't happen overnight. It was gradual and was influenced by several factors. For one, my involvement in multicultural student organizations helped broaden my perspective.

Conversations that began casually about food, family, and traditions often turned into deep reflections on what it means to live between two worlds. I distinctly remember one discussion during an African Student Association meeting that made me question my own cultural assumptions. One of the members pointed out how, as immigrants, we tend to hold tightly to our traditions because they remind us of home, but this can sometimes close us off to the new world we're living in. That idea stuck with me and helped me grow more open to embracing new ways of thinking.

Ethnocentrism, which is the belief in the superiority of one's own culture, was something I had to overcome. I realized early on that holding on too tightly to my own cultural expectations limited my ability to truly engage with others. On the other hand, moving toward ethnorelativism—recognizing that no culture is inherently superior or inferior, just different—was a key part of my personal growth. For example, I used to struggle with understanding the direct communication style of Americans. At first, I felt it was too abrupt compared to the more indirect way we communicate back home. I also found it unusual how Americans often prioritize personal space and physical boundaries, whereas in Cameroon, we tend to be more physically affectionate and close-knit in our interactions. Additionally, I was surprised by the emphasis on individualism in American culture, which contrasted with the communal mindset I grew up with, where collective well-being is prioritized. But now, I see the value in both direct communication and the need for personal space, and I've come to balance these styles in my own interactions. This shift in perspective has helped me thrive not only in academic and social settings but also as a leader on campus.

After graduating from the Intensive English Program, I made it one of my life's missions to develop my leadership skills and become an important student figure on campus. I wanted to use the opportunity to study in the U.S. and take advantage of the facilities available to build my character and shape the future I wanted. I began volunteering and participating in many on-campus events and organizations. The first one I remember was African Night. It was the first time I had even heard of such an event, so I decided to get involved and participate. That was the first time I saw such a diverse African community—people from Africa, like me, but from so many different places. I didn't have the chance to experience this while in the Intensive English Program. I got to hear the perspectives of people from the same continent but different countries. One thing I can say is that we understood each other on many points. I participated in African Night by playing

the guitar and representing my country. After that, I wanted not only to participate but also to help organize the event by becoming a board member for the African Student Association, but that's another story.

After that memorable event, I got to experience the diversity on campus more deeply. I'm not only referring to the white community, which constitutes the majority of the population in the U.S., but all the communities around the world. I started attending events organized by other associations, and it was truly amazing. It felt like traveling the world and meeting people from every continent without leaving campus. I worked and collaborated with so many people that it became natural for me to welcome other cultures into my life. I became very open-minded about many things, from food to socio-cultural habits. For example, before I arrived in the U.S., I had certain ideas about how meals should be eaten or how people should greet one another, based on my Cameroonian background. However, meeting students from other countries, I realized there was no one "correct" way. This openness helped me appreciate other people's ways of living and communicating without feeling the need to compare them to my own. My understanding of the world broadened even more when I started working as an enrollment assistant for the International Office at MNSU. I finally had the power to help my peers and make an impact on a broader scale. During orientation periods, people from countries like Australia, Norway, and Gambia would come up to me and thank me for my help. Me—the new student who barely knew how to speak English or anything about America—was now assisting people from around the world.

My experiences with different cultures and as a leader have made me a better person, and I am proud of my journey as a student studying abroad in the USA. Going forward, I plan to apply these lessons in both my personal and professional life. Understanding different cultural perspectives has made me more empathetic and adaptable, which I believe will help me in a globalized workplace. Whether leading diverse teams or working with people from different backgrounds, I am confident that my experiences at MNSU will serve me well.

Intercultural engagement has also taught me valuable leadership skills. I've learned to navigate differences diplomatically, mediating conflicts that arose from cultural misunderstandings, especially in group settings where diverse perspectives sometimes clashed. For instance, in my role with the International Office, I often helped new students from various backgrounds adjust to life in the U.S., drawing on my own experiences to guide them. I had to learn how to communicate

in ways that resonated with them while being mindful of their cultural sensitivities. This adaptability is something I plan to carry into my future career.

The intercultural skills I've developed will be incredibly useful in a variety of situations, particularly in team settings and global collaborations. For instance, in a work environment where team members come from diverse cultural backgrounds, my ability to navigate different communication styles will foster more effective collaboration. This skill will be crucial during team projects where misunderstandings can arise from differing cultural perspectives on feedback and decision-making processes.

Additionally, my experience in mediating conflicts that stem from cultural misunderstandings has equipped me with the ability to facilitate discussions and find common ground among team members. This is particularly important in leadership roles, where team cohesion can significantly impact project outcomes. For example, if I were to lead an international project, my understanding of various cultural norms around hierarchy and collaboration would help me create an inclusive environment where all voices are heard, enhancing creativity and innovation.

Furthermore, I've learned to be adaptable, which is essential in the fast-paced and ever-changing nature of today's work environments. Flexibility allows me to adjust my strategies to fit the needs of different team members and situations. This adaptability will serve me well in careers that involve frequent interactions with clients or stakeholders from various cultural backgrounds, such as in international business or global project management.

Looking ahead, I hope to work in a global environment, in technology, where collaboration across cultures is essential. For instance, if I find myself leading an international tech team, the ability to appreciate diverse perspectives will not only foster a positive team culture but also enhance the quality of our products by integrating varied insights and solutions. My experiences have taught me that understanding and valuing different cultural approaches can lead to more innovative and effective outcomes in any professional setting.

In conclusion, my journey of studying abroad has been a profound transformation, shaping not only my academic pursuits but also my personal growth. Through my experiences in intercultural engagement, I have gained invaluable skills that extend far beyond the classroom. I have learned

to navigate the complexities of diverse perspectives, embrace adaptability, and foster inclusivity in various settings. These lessons have enriched my understanding of both my own cultural identity and those of others, allowing me to bridge gaps and build meaningful connections. As I look to the future, I am excited to apply these skills in a global career, where I can contribute to innovative solutions and collaborate with individuals from around the world. My time at Minnesota State University has not only prepared me academically but has also equipped me with the empathy and cultural awareness necessary to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. I am proud of my journey and eager to continue embracing the beauty of cultural diversity as I forge my path forward.