



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Summer Reflection Experience Abroad

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I began the summer without sisters and ended it with three. I began with exposure to three West African languages and ended with six. I began having visited six countries, and by the time I returned home, that number had grown to eleven. These numbers, though impressive on their own, only begin to capture what this summer meant to me. To call the summer transformative feels like an understatement. It was an experience that changed me on a fundamental level, filling a void I did not even realize I carried.

Throughout my travels, I kept a photo journal, carefully documenting each step in anticipation of reflecting on what I had gained. Looking back, I realize this summer was not simply about places visited or languages encountered. It was about learning to navigate differences, to bridge gaps through empathy and communication, and to grow into a more adaptable and culturally aware human being.

My first destination was Ghana, where I spent three weeks. Despite its closeness to Nigeria, only a short two-hour flight from Abuja, the cultural differences were striking. Even within Hausa, a language spoken in both countries, there were noticeable divergences. Words I had always taken for granted sounded foreign, and greetings that felt natural at home marked me immediately as an outsider in Accra. This was the first lesson I encountered repeatedly throughout the summer: proximity does not guarantee sameness, and even within shared languages and traditions, cultural identity is layered and distinct.

Living alone in Ghana was perhaps the most tangible milestone of my independence. Although I stayed in a building connected to a host family, I occupied my own apartment, something I had never done before. From figuring out how to heat water for a bucket shower to negotiating for mobile data on the street, every small task became a lesson in self-reliance. Negotiating in local markets forced me to be both confident and respectful, and even small acts like trying fresh coconut water for the first time taught me the value of openness to unfamiliar experiences. At the same time, Ghana was not only about independence but also about connection. Through research visits to schools, I met a wide variety of people, each with their own stories, and slowly the country began to feel less like a foreign place and more like a space of belonging. By the time I left, I was leaving behind not just an apartment but a family I knew I could always return to.

Senegal was a completely different experience. Upon arrival, I was confronted with an immediate challenge: language. Unlike Ghana, where English was commonly spoken, Senegal's linguistic world revolved around French and Wolof. My French skills were shaky at best, and my host family, apart from the father, spoke no English at all. Sharing a room with two sisters who spoke only French forced me into an immersive learning environment. Our conversations were halting and filled with mistakes, yet they were also genuine and full of laughter. In those broken exchanges, I learned that communication is about far more than vocabulary. It is about patience, creativity, and the willingness to meet another person halfway. By the end of my stay, I could navigate daily life in French, sprinkle in bits of Wolof, and connect with my host sisters on a level deeper than words.

Senegal also taught me to embrace new rhythms of life. Meals were communal, eaten together from a single plate on the floor. Prayer was woven into the fabric of daily routines, and I

came to appreciate the grounding power of shared spiritual practice. Even small moments like late-night drives with my host family, laughter in the kitchen, or watching the city unfold from the back of a taxi became profound reminders of the beauty in simplicity. Traveling within Senegal on my own further stretched my resilience. Negotiating with taxi drivers, navigating new cities, and being mistaken for Senegalese all pushed me to think critically about identity and belonging. I was no longer simply a visitor. In small ways, I had become part of the fabric of the community.

Perhaps the most sobering moment of my time in Senegal was visiting Gorée Island, a historic site tied to the transatlantic slave trade. Walking through the “Door of No Return,” I viscerally felt the weight of history. This was not simply a lesson in history but an emotional reckoning with the legacy of displacement, resilience, and survival. It deepened my awareness of the interconnectedness of past and present, and of the responsibility to carry such lessons forward.

Looking back at this summer, I see how each experience contributed to a growing toolkit of cultural competencies that extend far beyond travel. I learned adaptability and resilience through daily challenges such as filling buckets of water for showers in Ghana and negotiating with taxi drivers in Senegal. I learned cross-cultural communication by relying on patience, observation, and creativity to bridge gaps in understanding. I developed cultural humility as I encountered differences in food, language, and daily life that challenged the idea that my way was the only way. I grew in empathy as I built relationships across boundaries, especially with the sisters I gained in Senegal and the family that welcomed me in Ghana. I strengthened my global awareness by visiting schools, engaging with local communities, and standing in places where history still reverberates. Perhaps most importantly, I learned the balance of independence and interdependence, discovering the value of living alone in Ghana while also embracing the shared meals, prayers, and joys of community life in Senegal.

This summer was more than a series of travels. It was a journey into new ways of seeing and being. I gained sisters where I had none before, languages where I had once struggled, and a deeper sense of myself in relation to the world. I left with competencies such as adaptability, communication, humility, empathy, and awareness that will continue to shape how I engage with people and cultures long into the future. The experiences I carried home are not simply memories. They are tools for living as a global citizen, and for that, I am forever grateful.