

### Study Abroad – Intercultural Engagement (Application)

Surprisingly, moving to the U.S. wasn't as difficult for me as it often is for many international students. I was lucky to be welcomed by some kind seniors who were friends of my cousin. But my story actually starts on the plane from Ethiopia to New Jersey. Normally, I'm introverted and don't introduce myself first but that day I felt bold enough to talk to another Habesha guy sitting nearby. His name was Tebibu, and when I asked where he was headed, he told me "MNSU." I couldn't believe the coincidence, since the flight wasn't even going to MSP. He mentioned he knew a few people and gave me his number. Today, he's still one of my best friends. When I arrived in Minnesota, I stayed at my cousin's friends' house, and it turned out they were the same seniors Tebibu had mentioned. We became close right away, and that was the start of my friend circle here.

After two weeks, I moved into the dorms, which was my first real challenge. I was nervous about who my roommate would be, but it turned out to be one of the best surprises I met Amlake, who has remained one of my closest friends and even my roommate to this day. Dorm life also exposed me to American dining culture. The university dining hall food was very different from what I was used to at home less spicy, often bland compared to the flavorful dishes of Ethiopia like injera, shiro, or doro wot. It felt like something small, but food carries so much of our identity, and I missed that comfort. Over time, I shared Ethiopian meals with friends and even explained the meaning behind them. I learned that food itself can be a cultural exchange, a way to connect with people beyond words. In the beginning, I thought American food wasn't good simply because it wasn't what I grew up with, that was me being a little ethnocentric without realizing it. Later, I understood that it's not about better or worse, just different. That shift helped me appreciate variety more and also respect my own food traditions at the same time.

Another thing that surprised me was how people here always smile and hold doors for each other. Back home, that's not really a habit, so it felt unusual at first. I can't even count the number of times I pushed a door the wrong way because I was used to doors opening inward, not outward. Those little moments made me realize how even the smallest daily interactions reflect culture, and they reminded me to stay observant and open-minded in adapting to a new environment.

Then came winter. Growing up in Ethiopia, where the climate is tropical, I had no idea what it really meant to live through below-zero temperatures. My first snowfall was exciting, but soon I discovered the challenges of icy sidewalks, endless layers of clothing, and short daylight hours. What seemed like a burden at first turned into a lesson in resilience. I also realized that winter traditions sharing hot drinks, celebrating holidays like Thanksgiving, or even sledding were ways that my American friends bonded. Being included in those moments helped me appreciate how people find joy even in difficult conditions.

In the dorms, in addition to our weekly meetings with our Community Advisor (CA), we used to hang out a lot doing homework together, watching movies, and teaming up whenever there was a floor competition. We were actually pretty good at it and built a strong sense of community. One thing that surprised me at first was that McElroy G Hall had both men and women on the same floor. Coming from a different background, that felt unusual at first, but over time I grew to appreciate it. It made the environment feel more balanced and taught me to be comfortable living and working alongside people from different perspectives.

Academics brought another layer of cultural adjustment. Back home, education was more theory-based, with less focus on application. At MNSU, I was suddenly immersed in hands-on labs, design projects, and group work that pushed me out of my comfort zone. At first, it was intimidating, but it also gave me confidence and skills that go beyond textbooks. Another big difference was the

classroom culture. In Ethiopia, we rarely question our professors directly. Here, I quickly learned that professors expect students to ask questions, challenge ideas, and actively participate. At first, that felt uncomfortable because I wasn't used to speaking up and worried about saying something wrong. What helped me adjust was watching how my classmates asked questions freely and how professors responded with encouragement rather than criticism. I started small, by asking one question in class each week, and gradually realized that curiosity mattered more than always having the perfect answer. Over time, this practice helped me find my voice, contribute more in discussions, and become more engaged in my own learning. I also noticed how the power dynamics in the classroom felt different, professors here acted more like mentors than authority figures, which gave me the confidence to approach them directly. That was new for me, because back home the professor's word was final, but here I learned that challenging ideas respectfully is part of the learning process.

Language was another adjustment I didn't expect to be so important. Even though English is taught in Ethiopia, using it daily in casual settings was very different. Sometimes I struggled to catch jokes or slang my American friends used, and I worried about sounding "off" when I spoke. But over time, I realized that asking what a phrase meant or even teaching my friends Amharic words became part of the exchange. It showed me how language and culture are connected, you're not just learning words, you're learning the values and humor behind them.

Another area where I experienced cultural differences was through religion. Back home, I usually went to church on Sundays and during the monthly or annual holidays celebrated by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). Here, it was harder to find a church, especially during my freshman year since most of us didn't have cars. What helped was discovering a small religious gathering every Thursday night at the CSU after 8:30 p.m. I started attending regularly, met new friends, and deepened my Bible knowledge since we all took turns preparing lessons and

leading discussions. Over time, I became one of the five board members, and together we officially started an EOTC student organization on campus, the first of its kind. I now manage our social media and have helped grow attendance from just five members to more than thirty. Whenever I have time on Sundays or on holidays, I also attend services at one of the Ethiopian churches in the Twin Cities or Rochester. These experiences have helped me stay connected to my roots while also learning how faith can create community across cultures.

Looking back, studying abroad has been more than just an academic journey, it has been a deep intercultural experience that shaped how I see myself and others. I've learned to adapt, whether it's to food, weather, or classroom expectations, but more importantly, I've learned to value the small cultural exchanges that build community. Moving forward, I want to carry these lessons into my future career in engineering, where I know I'll be working with people from many different backgrounds. My study abroad experience has given me the confidence to engage openly, communicate across differences, and create connections that go beyond borders.