1. Academic Study Reflections:

Studying in Belfast has definitely been an enlightening experience, not that it differs completely from my studies at college in the U.S.

At West Virginia Wesleyan, we are accustomed to calling our tutors: professor, Dr. (if appropriate), or maybe by their last names if we are lucky. At St. Mary’s, however, it’s out of the ordinary if one doesn’t call the professors by their first names. This struck me as very odd initially, because compared to many of my European peers, I usually feel that the Americans are much more casual about most things, this however is clearly not one of them.

Also, in the United States, we are used to being required to turn in homework regularly, but this seems to only be the case with certain classes in Northern Ireland. I’m currently enrolled in two literature classes, a history course, and a few of the classes specific to international students, and I have found that the only work to be turned in to the teacher are perhaps an essay or two, and an exam to be taken near the close of the semester. Similar literature and history courses in the U.S. have require students to turn in
almost weekly assignments and take periodic quizzes and/or exams during duration of the semester, which means that this semester has been a welcome break from the usual barrage of assignments I have been accustomed to at my home institution.

A less significant difference that I’ve noticed is the appearance of the students on a daily basis. In America, it would nothing to see a student in class in their pajamas, dressed completely in sweat-pants, or sport clothes; it does seem, however, that to see that in Belfast would be completely unprecedented. People, generally speaking of course, seem to dress-up much more for school at St. Mary’s than the common population of West Virginia Wesleyan, though admittedly it wouldn’t be odd to see people looking smart at Wesleyan, either. I just think it’s interesting that while students at St. Mary’s are used to calling their professors by their first names, they would think it strange to see a fellow student wearing their bed clothes, or sweats to class.

The campus of West Virginia Wesleyan is very different than that of St. Mary’s and many of the colleges I’ve seen since I’ve been studying abroad. Though WVWC is admittedly on the smallest colleges I know of, being a private institution, the campus is more of it’s own little world. A student need never really leave, because unless they commute from home, or own their own residence they live, as well as study, on campus. There is a post office, convenience store, small restaurant, and fitness facility, as well as a dining center in the main campus building.

Other than those few distinctions, college is college, no matter the country. Some teachers talk at you, some talk to you, and some engage you in discussions, but it depends more on the person than it does on the country, in my opinion.

2. Cultural Program Reflections:

We had a good number of cultural activities organized by the college for us to take part in, this semester. My personal favorite though, was definitely the trip to Donegal, which was conveniently the same weekend as my birthday and ended up being the best birthday of my life!
We stayed in a really nice hostel located extremely close to Errigal, which we climbed on Saturday Oct. 17th, my Birthday! We heard traditional Irish music the Friday night we arrived in Donegal, and at midnight the band gave me quite a shock when they broke into “Happy Birthday.” Sunday in Donegal a few of us went to mass, where most of the service was given in Irish, and later about half of our number attempted to learn to surf while the others milled around the beach and explored. It was definitely an amazing trip and I can only hope that future groups will get to have such an amazing time there!

We were also taken on a pub tour through Belfast, and have since revisited some of the great places we were introduced to that night including (but not limited to) The Morning Star, Bittle’s Bar, and Kelly’s Cellar. These places tend to be more endeared to
Another favorite cultural activity was our visit to the Giant’s Causeway and Bushmills Whiskey Distillery. The Causeway was breathtaking! I hated how none of the countless pictures could ever really capture what I saw that day. The Distillery was of particular interest to me, since I had previously visited the Guinness Storehouse in Dublin and was quite let down by it. But, since I appreciate whiskey far more than Guinness at any rate, I was very excited to learn all about the nature of it’s artful creation, especially since I consider Bushmills to be the only whiskey of distinction, in the world. I learned so much that day!

Other than these activities, we were given many other opportunities through the college, and on our own we found different cultural activities to take part in, but I’m very glad to have had help from St. Mary’s in seeing so many things during my stay here!

3. Social Program Reflection:

While studying at St. Mary’s, my fellow international students and I have taken the opportunity to explore the city and surrounding areas. We have spent nights taking in films at the Odeon Theatre in Victoria’s square, playing volleyball or working out in the fitness center of St. Mary’s, exploring the collection of pubs in Belfast, and sometimes even going to clubs to dance. We’ve always had a lot of fun at the St. Mary’s hosted
parties like the Fresher’s Ball at Scratch, the Pink Party at the Bot., and the Halloween Ball at Scratch. For these special parties we’ll usually get together before hand to play games, and generally just hang out, before calling the taxis and leaving all together for the main event.

On occasion, though, we get really creative and plan private parties at one of the international houses. These can be simple get-togethers before going out, or can take up an entire evening. Some nights we’ve made extra-large meals to share with everyone who wishes to come, including: American hamburger night, American-style Italian food, homemade soup-night, and others. We’ve also had simple-theme parties like the recent Pajama party, a few surprise birthday parties, and movie nights, which are always a big hit. We’ve grown pretty close as a group and it’s always fun to get together. It’s been a great experience, making friends from other parts of the world while spending time at university.
At home, I’m too young to get into most clubs or bars, which differ greatly from the atmosphere in most of the pubs we’ve spend time in Belfast, since I’m only 20, but since I don’t especially like alcohol in any great quantity, it doesn’t change the nature of my usual form of entertainment. At home my friends and I enjoy private get-togethers usually including card and/or board games, lots of music supplied by our computers, usually our pajamas since we all live on campus together, and the occasional movie. Honestly, a fun night for me in Belfast doesn’t differ that much from how I have fun in the United States, except that at home, more of us refrain from having alcohol at our parties.

4. Guidelines for Future Students:

There are a few things I think would be really helpful to know as a new resident of Belfast:

#1. If you’re an American and/or do not receive regular amounts of money from a grant during your stay in the U.K., make sure you have a large sum of money in your bank account, since the exchange rate of currency is not currently in your favor, and spend wisely.

#2. Also, if you’re American, travel as much as your expenses and class schedule will allow! It is much too convenient to travel once you’re already in Europe, to not take advantage of the opportunity!

#3. Know your limits! whether it’s traveling, studying, partying, or otherwise, you’re in a new place, and you should always be responsible for yourself, no matter the situation. Just use common sense.

#4. Recognize that you are not at home anymore and things are going to be different, so make sure you consider that and try to adapt to new conditions and situations accordingly.

#5. As long as you don’t have Verizon, your phone will use a SIM card and you can get an international one to use while abroad, or get a cheap O2 phone, this will make life easier for you, unless you have a great international plan that your parents are paying for.

#6. Program the numbers of two or more taxi companies into your phone and always carry a spare 5 pounds or so just in case you need an emergency cab-ride. Take the black
taxis, they’re pretty convenient most of the time, and before 10 or so they’re always the same price of 1.30.

#7. Talk to the cab drivers, and feel free to ask them questions. It’s always an interesting conversation, plus they know loads about the city, and you might even learn to understand the thickest of Northern Irish accents!

#8. Have culinary adventures: Fish and chips, Ulster Fry, Guinness, etc...

#9. Learn the language, you’re not in Kansas anymore:
Chips = Fries, crisps = chips, biscuits = cookies, pants = underwear, queue up = get in line, craic = fun, call = come over, ring = call you on the phone, etc..

#10. Enjoy the time you have in Belfast, it’ll go by really fast, and then you’ll miss all the great people you met while studying at St. Mary’s!

5. Overall Reflection:

Overall, I would have to say that my time in Belfast has been enlightening. It was hard for me, before coming here, to be excited because I really had no idea what to expect. Even though I spoke to many people who had spent time in this city, I was never able to get a clear picture of what it must be like. As a result, I feel that I was very unprepared when I arrived in Belfast, though this was a good lesson in adapting to various, sometimes difficult situations.

I had expected St. Mary’s to be much more like my home institution, because when I researched the school online, I was attracted by the same things that had attracted me to West Virginia Wesleyan College: a small, liberal arts college, which would no doubt allow for easy interaction with not only other students but also with professors.
What I found upon arrival, was that despite being a small liberal arts college, St. Mary’s is somehow even smaller than West Virginia Wesleyan, although this is probably because at WVWC almost all students have housing on campus. I am glad that I got the opportunity to live so near the historically rich Falls Road, and in a residential area among native residents of the city.

I had a hard time coping with living in a city at different points during my semester in Belfast, because I like, and am accustomed to, living on back roads in West Virginia, far enough away from even the rural towns of my home state. Not that I didn’t have fun with the new experience of city-living, but I have to admit that many of the best times I had were spent outside city limits. I love that I’ve had the opportunity to do something as far outside of my comfort zone as living in a city, because I feel that it has made my time here a particularly rich learning experience. I think everyone should jump at the prospect of learning how to live somewhere, or do something entirely different than what they are accustomed to, and I would certainly recommend it to anyone thinking about spending time outside of their native country.

In my classes, I have learned a lot of things not only about Irish history, but about recent events, culture and literature from a Irish perspective. Pop culture, politics, and religion have been topics of some of my most interesting conversations during my time in Northern Ireland, and most of the time the discussions have managed to avoid any hint of argument or even debate, which always makes the experience more enjoyable. In general, I would say that I and the people I have spoken to from Northern Ireland as well as other parts of Europe, have always managed to maintain a high level of respect and diplomacy when speaking, even critically, of other countries’ governments, and as a result I have sincerely enjoyed the social interactions I have had the opportunity to take part in.
I would recommend spending time, studying, working, and/or living abroad to anyone, because I think it is important to learn about another country and culture first hand. If I had stayed at my home institution I never would have met so many diverse groups of people or had the experience of travelling to so many different countries in such a short period of time. I feel that my time in Northern Ireland has taught me so much, not only about history and life in this place, but about myself. I think I have grown a lot in three months and I know that it is only through this experience that this change has been made possible.