Transcript: Experiences Summary.

“Hello, my name is Leah and I was fortunate enough to become a wildflower girl by participating on the Study USA scholarship programme for the academic year 2014/2015. I can’t really believe my year had concluded and I am back home, but what a year it really has been. I was placed at the wonderfully friendly and welcoming Coe College in Iowa which truly became my second home.

This is just a podcast to try and convey to you my thoroughly amazing year and by illustrating the experiences, opportunities and challenges that I faced and think about the skills I have gained and what I have learnt. It’s just to reinforce how fantastic the experience was – I already miss America!

First and foremost: academics. Coe is a private, liberal-arts educational institution. Liberal-arts is a pathway which isn’t adopted here in Ireland or in the UK. With this approach, you are not confined to one area of studies or a sole degree pathway; you can choose a variety of classes across your four-year degree so you may say to yourself, for example, ‘I want to be a Chemistry major’ but you could find yourself also studying theatre, literature, history and a language at various stages of your degree. Liberal-arts essentially states the premise that all areas of life are inter-related and areas of study overlap each other. I think it’s a really worthwhile experience to study in this way, especially for myself as I study Law at Queen’s University in Belfast and for the past two years I have been confined to studying legal modules – which you know, makes sense as I seek a Qualifying Law Degree and wish to become a lawyer. I went to Coe on a Business scholarship, having never studied Business before but in a liberal-arts environment I was able to study a module in Political Violence and take a Public Relations class and legal classes as well – which were fantastic and enabled me to gain a footing in and a understanding of US Business law.

Even the academic language is different: I would normally say ‘modules’ but in America it is ‘classes’. In Queen’s I would say I am completing ‘coursework assignments’ but at Coe it’s ‘turning in papers’.

Class size is smaller, maybe 16 people on average and a maximum of 20 for the oversubscribed classes, but in Queen’s it is lecture-style, so perhaps the entire year of 200 students are in the one hall and then there are the smaller tutorial classes for in-depth study. I think the smaller classes really allowed for more one-to-one interaction with the professors, which I found useful because I had never studied Business prior to this year. I thought it was great to have more class interaction too, to share my ideas and opinions and engage in class discussions and debates – so you learnt from both your professors and your peers.

Also in terms of the means of assessment: at Queen’s we have end of semester examinations only, maybe some coursework to submit, you would not be expected to complete weekly tests or exams or submit weekly papers as you are assessed purely at the end of the semester. In America, quelle surprise, it is not like that at all. For me, it was almost akin to being back in secondary school: tests every week, mini exams and surprise ‘pop quizes’, papers to hand in, and then you had to sit ‘finals’ which are the important exams at the end of the semester, which could perhaps move you up a grade or cause you to drop a grade. And for me that was really different, because it had been a while since I had to take so many classes, have all the homework each night, due to my schedule at university. It wasn’t so much that the work was difficult, it was the time management aspect and planning which was essential so I could get everything completed on a daily basis.

Considering I had never studied Business before and it had been a long time since I was regularly was using a calculator and actively completing Maths I was quite apprehensive commencing classes in the summer. I opted to take an Accounting module; I hadn’t really calculated Maths frequently since GCSE Maths or A-Level Biology, so it was challenging but I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed learning new skills and new topics across different classes and I wanted to keep challenging myself so I took an Entrepreneurship class, so I had to devise a product to market, undergo product and market research, pitch my idea to outside investors – it was rewarding at the end when I received an A grade from my professor. I enjoyed the legal modules obviously, it was interesting for myself as a law student to see the American legal perspective and practice, how the jurisdictions differ, the case law differs or is similar. I took Business Law in my final semester, and Environmental Law in my first semester – I really enjoyed both, especially Business Law due to having already studied Contract , Tort and Obligations, so I could safely answer questions in class, which may have frustrated my class mates – apologies to all for that. Environmental Law was… Yeah. Quite dry. Very dry. But I had successfully prevailed with Contract and Land Law in my second year of Law, and with those victories under my belt I knew I could survive Environmental Law.

I also developed a passion for PR after studying it in my final semester; it was very interesting and full of practical application, such as writing speeches and press releases whilst also studying the history and development of PR over time.

Do not even get me started on multiple choice questions though – it is more like multiple means to continuously doubt your own instinct, but I managed to ensure all such exams, mercifully.

Regarding student life outside the classroom: Coe is a residential campus, so we lived on campus, I had roommates, floor-mates, I was able to see a very thriving and welcoming student community which I enjoyed being a part of. The campus was essentially a mini village of sorts, you know there was a cafeteria we ate at, a library to study at, a building called ‘the Pub’ which for all of us European students was not an alcoholic-serving public establishment but rather a place to eat, grab coffee and purchase snacks when pulling all-nighters. You basically interacted with everyone every day, you lived and breathed the student life alongside other students, which for me as I had never lived from home before was different but it meant there was always something to do and someone to do it with.

I was also involved with campus life – I was involved with Greek life, I was in a sorority, I was volunteering, going to and from my internship at a downtown firm before rushing to student organisations and their meetings then studying in the library or hanging out in other people’s rooms. I was constantly busy, constantly interacting with other students which let me become immersed in US life and culture really, which was something I really wanted to participate in whilst being on the Study USA programme. I think it meant I was always learning, about topics, other people, their backgrounds – it was really fulfilling.

Interning at the local law firm was a dream come true and something I am proud of achieving, considering how I aspire to become a lawyer. It was just fascinating to see how a US law firm operates compared to other ones I have worked in and the differences in the legal profession generally. For example, we have barristers and solicitors yet in America they are almost merged together to make attorneys. Getting the opportunity to attend court was and to sit in on meetings with clients was just amazing; it has definitely confirmed that this is the career I wish to pursue.

I think I can say with conviction that I was learning in and outside of the classroom. I’ve been able to gain new skills and enhance skills I already had, such as public-speaking, teamwork, leadership, research, report-writing and persuasive arguments which are all essential to a legal career. I can also now operate Mac computers, and Apple software, I deserve a certificate for that!

This programme has been a really worthwhile and valuable experience; I don’t think I can stress that enough. It was initially daunting to consider having to leave my family and friends, the degree and university I was comfortable with behind and study abroad on my own for a year – I had never even set foot in America until this year – but I think it has been a wonderful year of fun, friendship and definitely memories.

It goes to show that challenging yourself, stepping outside your comfort zone, pays dividends in your personal and professional development. It emphasised to me that as students, we perhaps do not consider the balance between academics and socialising - this year has put that into perspective for me and reinforced the necessity of achieving that balance.

That’s all because of Study USA, and I cannot thank the British Council or Coe College enough for this opportunity. It’s a programme I would strongly encourage penultimate year students to think about because trust me: it is a brilliant year and you will never, ever forget it.