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Person to Person in Senegal

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Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in Senegal

A fellow classmate and I discussed some of the interesting differences between Senegal and the United States. The biggest difference, we agreed, has to do with the Senegalese personality. Men are more direct with what they want from women especially, my fellow classmate shared that she expected to be a target for a bit of sexual harassment, but while in the States you get cat calls, here men just ask you to marry them or tell you that they love you. Another big difference between the States and Senegal is the manner in which people will try to sell you things. In Senegal, people will come up to you and start showing you things or ask you to come into their shop. They will try to sell you things even if you have expressly told them “no.” And prices are not fixed, so becoming comfortable with telling people that the price they are asking for is too much is a far cry from shops in America. While these may sound like really negative experiences, it really forces you to become comfortable and confident in yourself. On the plus side, the forwardness extends to relationships as well. People you pass by, often will tell you hello and ask how you are doing every time you see them. They even will have you stop and talk for a bit. These relationships are carefully maintained here and this becomes part of a social safety network of sorts. You can ask virtually anyone to help you find where you are going and more often than not they will even walk you there.

My classmate and I agreed that our perceptions of the United States have definitely changed since being here as well. People take their time in Senegal, they tease you and you tease back, they take a break in the middle of the day that lasts more than the typical thirty minute lunch break in America. One of the professors here told us about how his son one day asked him to stay home and not go to work, so he called his job and told them he could not come in that day that he needed to spend time with his family. This really speaks of how rushed we are in the U.S. When we first arrived we were rushing everywhere and stressing out when we weren't on time

for something. It took me less than a week and more than one tardy professor to realize that rushing isn't a thing here. I knew that "Americans always rush everything" as my host-mother says, but it took really immersing myself in a culture that is laid back and without the hang-ups of someone being late to really understand what that meant.

Interviewed: Kalamazoo College student October 27, 2013