Haley Evenson, Summer 2026, Prague Study Abroad Reflection

> *Haley Evenson is in her second year at NC State and is a member of the Caldwell Fellows Class of 2029. She is pursuing majors in Nuclear Engineering and Science, Technology, and Society, and a minor in French, and is looking to build a career in the nuclear energy industry.*

This past summer, I studied abroad in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, as part of NC State's Summer E101 Engineering Program. It was a season of such transformative personal growth, magical sights, and unique experiences that I'll be telling stories from for many years to come. Living and learning in Europe for a month and a half taught me more about myself and the world around me than I'd ever expected. Though I couldn't possibly express the entirety of what this experience did for me in one mere paper, here are a few of the best stories I lived and lessons I learned that I'd love to share.

1. Your professors are cool people.

Whether it's by engaging during class, asking questions after a lecture, attending office hours, or asking them about their weekend, make intentional efforts to connect with your professors. My friends and I made "family dinners" every night while in Prague, and one day we invited our engineering professor – the one and only Dr. Laura Bottomley – to be our special guest at dinner. It was such a cool experience to build a genuine relationship with an amazing educator outside of class, and to get to learn from her experience in the engineering field and beyond. Not only that, but she approved of the poke bowls and key lime pie, so we got our cooking skills endorsed by an NC State professor. Huge plus.



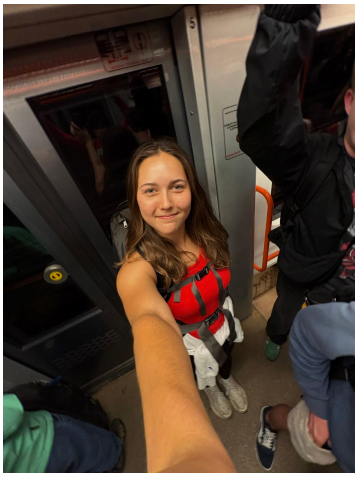




2. Engineering isn't nearly as much about finding the right answer as creating the best solution for an individual environment.

I loved math and science as a kid because there was always only one right answer. I didn't have to take anything other than the numbers into account, and I never had to spend time explaining my reasoning – it was simple and straightforward. But that's not what engineering is like. Yes,

there is raw data to crunch and objective facts to consider, but the best engineers look at holistic, nuanced gray areas when building the best answers to complex problems. Studying engineering in a foreign environment, against the backdrop of living through culture shock, showed me that very few solutions are universal. Driving was necessary back home, but here I took public transit everywhere. Yet each method of transportation was the best solution for each individual environment. This lived experience showed me anew the importance of holistic engineering approaches, where a multidisciplinary knowledge of society and engineering allows for mutualistic relationships to thrive. Living in a completely different environment, where the solutions for daily problems were different from my previous experiences, taught me to expand my perspective and look across cultural boundaries when approaching challenges – sometimes the unfamiliar solves our familiar problems.









3. Principled reflection is a MUST!

As Caldwell Fellows, we are well acquainted with the benefits of principled reflection, but it was through my time abroad that I realized its true vitality. Not only was I spending most of my day with others, often desperately in need of some “introvert time,” but there was so much going on that I needed to take the time to pause and actually engage with everything I was seeing and feeling. Ferris Bueller was right; “Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once

in a while, you could miss it.” Our capacity to experience is determined by our intentionality in reflection – our dedication to living in the moment and then revisiting those memories with a critical eye. And reflection doesn’t require a grand, European experience, but should be practiced daily, amidst the bustle of the ordinary, to cultivate depth in our capacity to experience every bit of life that we live. Continuous introspection allows us to learn invaluable lessons from seemingly mundane experiences, showing constant growth as leaders and learners.





4. Build monuments that reflect your convictions.

One of my favorite parts of my time abroad – and the enemy of my iPhone storage – was visiting the most breathtaking churches and cathedrals all throughout Europe. As a Catholic Christian, it was so beautiful to experience not only the stunning architecture of these historic buildings, but to connect on a deeper level with what they represented. Yet the city of Prague – despite its huge churches on each square, religious statues on every corner, and the enormous St. Vitus’ Cathedral crowning the hilltop of the city within Prague Castle – has today a majority secular population. There was a huge distance between the visible structures of the city, and what the city itself held on to. As I continue to grow as a leader, I’m reminded to ensure the monuments of my own life point towards what I actually believe.

