The word student in Arabic comes from the root verb “to ask” (Taliba). During the beginning of my year-long study abroad in Morocco, I feel constantly aware of how much I ask. All day long, my mouth overflows with questions stemming from confusion, necessity, and curiosity. Sometimes the inquiries are simple: How are you (“Bikhayr”)? Where is the taxi stand? Are you sure the camel won’t bite? What do you study at university? Other times, the questions are complex: Why do you wear the hijab? What is your opinion of the American government? How do you feel when men catcall you on the streets? Do you feel safe leaving the house after 9 pm? Even if you don’t pray five times a day, do you still consider yourself a good Muslim? And then there are the questions I’m not even sure I’m allowed to ask: Why do so many Moroccans claim to be French and reject Africa despite the powerful indigenous Berber influence on their culture? Are you still a virgin, and why is the standard of waiting until marriage only applicable to women? How do you really feel about the king Muhammad IV? What was your reaction to the February 20th Movement (Moroccan Arab Spring)? In a country where it’s illegal to convert someone away from Islam, do you truly believe in God?

Truly understanding a culture is next to impossible in a semester, a year, or even a decade. Adventuring often seems easy in a country famous for cheap travel, beautiful landscapes, and extreme hospitality. Attending university in Meknes has been eye opening, especially because so many of my academic questions have been answered. However, I think the most honest questions and answers have come from the people I’ve encountered in Morocco. I’ve noticed the two most repeated questions here are “Where are you from?” and “Where are you going?”. Throughout my time in Morocco, answering these seemingly simple inquiries has proven more and more difficult.

In October, I decided to climb Mt. Toubkal, a mountain south of the eccentric city of Marrakesh. Although it was the tallest mountain in North Africa, my three friends and I were convinced we could reach the summit. On the first day, we spent about eight hours hiking upwards on craggy cliffs and rock formations, assuming we would eventually find the refuge to stay the night. However, as the sun began sinking and a herd of mountain goats shuffled by, we realized that we had taken a different path and ended up on the wrong mountain. While darkness descended, we attempted to scramble down the rocks using a flashlight and mobile phone to light our path. Undoing eight hours of climbing in the dark was difficult; around 10 pm we were exhausted, discouraged, and barely halfway down.

However, suddenly we spotted a moving light far beneath the cliff where we were resting. After the light flashed at us a few times, we realized someone was signaling us. We waited as the light came closer, zigzagging the twisted paths up the side of the mountain. A smiling face appeared around the rock, and we heard the lovely Arabic greeting “As-Salamu alaykum!” (Peace be upon you). The Berber man gestured for us to follow him down a different path, and he laughed as we explained our predicament in broken Arabic. He asked us where we came from, of course, but told us there was no need to worry about where we were going -- he would take us down the mountain to stay the night in his home. That night, he gave us an enormous dinner, beds, and warm blankets for the mountain’s cold. The following morning, he walked with us to the correct path and helped us on our way to the ultimate summit in the Atlas mountains.

My year in Morocco has both frustrated and challenged me, yet at times it has been strikingly beautiful. Learning is a constant process; subconsciously we absorb information, consciously we explore the world around us, and constantly we desire to discover the truth in our experience. Standing on top of Mt. Toubkal’s peak and overlooking a gorgeous mountain range
provided clarity on where I am going and reminded me importance of asking for help. This year, I am gradually realizing that being a student truly does mean “one who asks.”