

SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENT

About The Department

Student Information

Sociology Major – 2006 Summer Research Scholar in Niger, West Africa

Sociology major, Kia Alston, had an exciting summer, 2006. When her application to be a summer research scholar was approved, she suspected that she was in for the experience of a lifetime. Kia accompanied Professor Pearl Robinson (Political Science) to Niger, West Africa, as her summer research scholar. Working in the field for the first time can be an exhilarating experience for a young researcher, but the location and culture made this an unbelievable experience. The fieldwork activity involved interviews with Muslim women who are engaged in community work such as promoting literacy and education for village children and operating small scale businesses.



Kia Alston (center) sitting with local women

Sociological definitions of culture and cultural differences took on clear meanings in Niger. The women's clothing, language, and organizing activities demanded Kia's attention and enhanced her observational skills. Cultural differences can cause complications too. In her role as participant observer, she could not speak or understand any of the women's native dialects or French, the official language in which the majority of the women and Professor Robinson conversed. She waited patiently for Professor Robinson's versions of daily events and together they sat up long into the night going over notes and analyzing each day's field notes, observations and interviews.

Kia and the participating women did not let language deter them from communicating with each other. Some of the women in the study took it upon themselves to watch over Kia and accept her as a Muslim, while other women declared that she resembled various members of their families. Kia returned to Tufts much wiser and very interested in doing more research. Way to go Kia, thanks Professor Robinson!