

SEP 25 2015

IPE Office

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Program Evaluation

This physics department's direct exchange with the University of Gießen allows students to live in the dormitories, so unless otherwise desired, there is no need to find other accommodation. However, many of my international student friends chose to arrive before the beginning of their programs and were able to stay rather cheaply for short periods in hostels or Airbnb type accommodation. I found German dorm life much less constricting than that in the US; the lack of RAs, single rooms with sinks, full kitchens, and other differences made the accommodation feel almost apartment like and much more independent. Many students stayed in the dorms for long periods and at different levels of their education.

The university at which I studied offered an international summer course of instruction in the German language. This was an incredibly useful offering which I would highly recommend to anyone participating in this exchange in the future. From immediately after arrival, the program mentors were an invaluable help. They greeted us at the train station in German or English according to our preference and delivered us to our dormitories. They helped us apply for visas, procure health insurance, and navigate other layers of the German bureaucracy which would have been incredibly more difficult on our own. The summer course provided a good mix within the instruction of a certain amount of rigor conducive to the learning of the language and fun activities to help us get to know each other, the city and university, and Germany better. Many of my best friends during my yearlong exchange were students I first met in the summer

course, and we all looked back on our first month as one of the best times of our study abroad experiences.

The academic situation in Germany was sufficiently different that at the beginning it proved to be a source of moderate consternation, but after adjusting to the differences, I found it to be equally, if not more, rewarding as its American counterpart. For me, the key was accepting that I would not be able to duplicate my American life in Germany, but I would be able to build an equally satisfying one. An early source of frustration was the German library. Although books are encoded with the same theft preventing magnetic strips as in the US, the further measure of forbidding bags and coats within the library was employed. Anyone entering was required to leave their belongings hanging on coat racks or deposit them in lockers with 2€ deposits. I at first found this incredibly frustrating and stupid and honestly still do not fully understand it, but coming back to the US, I missed having the option of storing my back somewhere secure and being able to go for a walk without my heavy belongings. The classrooms and instructions were relatively similar to what one would find in the US with certain small differences. The classes were listed as running two hours, the first beginning at 8:00am and the last ending at 8:00pm, but were actually only an hour and a half, usually beginning fifteen minutes after the hour and ending ninety minutes later at a quarter till. This could also be adjusted at the instructors' discretion; an 8:15-9:45 class of mine was changed to 8:30-10:00 to allow for more sleep. Another interesting but minor difference was the German practice of recognizing their instructor at the end of the period; after every lecture, the class would tap their tables or desks with their fists as a form of applause. The structure of the courses with regard to grading seemed more uniform than in the US. Every class seemed to be graded almost entirely by a final examination, paper, or project with minimal or no contribution from homework or any

regular work throughout the semester. I would advise any future students to be aware that just because there are no quizzes or homework does not mean that you should not be doing work or studying on your own; waiting till the end of the semester to begin studying is much, much less feasible than it was in the US.

I needed a rather minimal amount of course work to transfer directly back to UW and was able to plan accordingly and get the credit I needed to graduate upon return. I would advise any prospective physics students interested in this program to talk with Margot and Dr. Van Dyck to ensure that this program will not conflict with any of their academic plans. If a student requires very specific courses, I would advise them to have a plan for how to get them while abroad. Our program was small and well known within the physics department at my host university, and the broader university was very geared towards attracting international and exchange students and making them feel welcome while there. I had no major problems with professors or bureaucracy.

As mentioned above, I had a very positive experience in my dormitory; it was clean, cheap, and close to the science campus and two bus lines. Any prospective physics students interested in this program, should request to live in the Unterhof dormitory. However, every floor is different in terms of cleanliness and group dynamic. Many of my friends at other dormitories found living outside of student housing to be a better option. I would advise prospective students to first move into the dorms and then move out if they find the accommodation unsatisfactory. The lease with the student housing office can be terminated with minimal penalty if notice is given sufficiently far in advance. Among my friends who moved out of student housing, the rule seemed to be that a good sized room could be rented in a shared

apartments for approximately what one would pay in the dorms, and for moderately more, rather extravagantly sized rooms or even entire single person apartments could be rented.

Rather than have a single campus with the vast majority of offices, buildings, and departments in one place, the university owned buildings and campuses throughout the city. This could occasionally make getting between classes difficult as one needed to ride the bus to get between the science and humanities campuses. A university provided bus pass and the half hour breaks between classes meant that this was not an impossibility, but it would not be an afterthought as in the US. The different campuses each had their own atmospheres and facilities enabling anyone to find the perfect study or work atmosphere to suit their personality or even their mood. Cafes, cafeterias, and libraries at all of the main campuses rounded out the student atmosphere.

My description of safety and security in Europe is that I was never once afraid for the safety of my person but I was generally more conscious of my belongings. That is to say that violent crime is much rarer but petty theft is a concern. Simply being aware of one's surroundings and taking reasonable steps to protect one's belongings should be sufficient. None of my property was ever stolen, but friends of mine had bikes or unattended bags stolen.

My best friends were other international students. This was wonderful; I made friends from every corner of the globe, but it was to a certain extent unfortunate as English was the common language among us. This meant that I never had to speak German unless I really wanted to. That is not to say that it was impossible to learn German, but the omnipresence of English and near nonexistence of monolingual German speakers made it easy to use English as a sort of crutch. Making a point to read or watch something in German every day and to keep speaking in German even when it became difficult or when I knew I was not expressing myself

as well as in English helped me improve my German. Making a point of being polite and considerate was generally sufficient to avoid any gross breaches of etiquette upon arrival, and the general similarity of German and American culture made it easy to pick up on any finer points as one went along. I would advise, however, not to use the German equivalent of "how are you?" as a greeting and to not be offended if it is not offered as one. It is generally considered a bit impertinent unless one actually seeks to inquire after the wellbeing of the other person.

The program was generally rather well administered; all parties were more or less reachable by email and were polite and helpful both by email and in person. I would advise though that a nine hour time difference can slow communication to a crawl and to plan to get any intense communication done while on the same continent as the other parties.

I consider this exchange one of the best experiences of my undergraduate carrier. I would highly recommend it to anyone interested. Any student up for a challenge in both physics and language would be ideally suited for this program. Through this exchange, I was able to complete my academic goal of graduating on time with a physics degree but also my personal goals of studying abroad in Europe and learning another language. I feel that my horizons have been broadened and that I have grown immeasurably as a person thanks to this program. I will never forget the experiences I had or the friends I made.