Arrival/overseas and orientation

Orientation took place after the first day of class, and we were given an overview of activities in the area. They did a good job of highlighting both sightseeing opportunities such as museums, along with social opportunities like weekly soccer games. It was quite easy to get settled, and since we had been staying with our host families for a couple of days already, it was a perfect time to introduce us to the various social opportunities in the area.

Academics

Class took place every weekday from 8:30 am to 1:30 pm. We were given a lunch break and a 5-minute break during the class session to socialize and get food. The schedule gave us tons of time in the afternoon to get together with friends and go see the city.

Having had no experience with German prior to this study abroad, I was placed in an introductory class. We probably spent about 50% of the time listening to the professor, with the remaining time spent in small groups. The setup made for a good balance of instruction and practice—I feel like I learned very quickly in the immersive environment.

We had a few different teachers over the course of the 8 weeks, all of whom were extremely kind and intelligent. They all did an incredible job of making everyone feel as though they were completely capable of learning the new language, and encouraged everyone to participate. They all seemed to really enjoy teaching, and because of that, they were very good at it.

Grading was most heavily dependent on participation, but a final exam was given at the end of the course to determine written skill. Evaluation was explained well and seemed fair.

The main office was able to quickly answer any questions and direct us to help if we needed it. They were also very good about updating us on local events and helping us buy tickets to events such as the orchestra. The institute also had a nice computer lounge and selection of materials for furthering our German learning. Overall the Goethe Institute was a comfortable, well-maintained environment.

Though I am studying mechanical engineering, this study abroad helped me to finish out my VLPA requirements. The experience was not directly related to my major, but I believe that it was a great way of rounding out my college education. Especially in majors like engineering, it is easy to fall into a (boring) preset path, and this study abroad was an incredible opportunity to shake things up. I have highly recommended the program to many of my friends.
Housing
Housing was arranged through the Goethe Institute, and was with a host family. Housing was available on the first day of classes, but special arrangements could be made with host families for earlier accommodation. My friend had arranged to stay with his host family for the two days prior to our classes, and they were nice enough to let me stay for the two days as well.
My host family was not around most of the time since they worked in the film industry, but when they were home they were very warm and welcoming.

Program and Exchange site
The Goethe Institute was centrally located on one of the main subway lines in Berlin. The subways were absolutely incredible and made travelling extremely easy. It took around 20 minutes for me to get from my host family to the institute. Other people’s houses were equally easy to get to, and I think for the most part nobody I talked to had an outrageous commute.

Health and Safety:
Health and safety were never a concern – the city and institute were well maintained and clean.

Cultural Aspects
Every week we met up with a number of other students in the program to play soccer on a small field. It was a great opportunity to meet other people in the program most of whom were from non English speaking countries. This gave us a good excuse to use what little German we did know to communicate. There was also a weekly “stammtisch” at a local bar, where we would meet up and have a few drinks.
Germans in general were quite friendly and easy to talk to (most spoke excellent English). Since my German was nowhere near conversational, this made meeting new people much easier. In general German people tended to be quite polite but on the surface seemed slightly shy. I think that my friend’s host mom described it well – she said that German’s have a small list of people with whom they are extremely close, and a large number of acquaintances. She said, at least in her experience, it takes a long time to get to know someone new, but after that they usually very loyal friends.

Financial
There were a large number of ATM’s from which I could withdraw money. As far as a budget went, I planned on spending an average of 30 euros a day for food, social events.

Program/student type
The program is probably best people who are more self-motivated, and enjoy having a bit more freedom to do what they want. There are definitely a lot of opportunities that Goethe presents to students, and it is mostly up to them to take
advantage of them. Overall I think it offered me a great opportunity to really be on my own and explore a new city.

**Overall experience**

I had a blast! I would definitely do it again, and as I have said, I continue to recommend it to friends. I explored a new place, met a lot of new friends with whom I still talk, and got to absorb a different culture. I honestly think that everyone who can should make every effort to go abroad during college, even if it’s just for one quarter.

Goethe also provided an environment where someone who literally doesn’t know a word of German, can quickly pick it up and begin using it practically. I think that the best part of the experience was realizing what a rewarding experience travel is. I have recently accepted a job that involves a lot of travel, in part because of how much I loved seeing Germany!
Arrival overseas/on-site orientation:

The orientation occurred on the first day after classes and taught us about the area and recommended certain areas to check out. They also offered various tours/activities on most days after classes for students to participate in, some of which were free, some of which cost a little bit, maybe 5 to 15 euro.

Academics:

I received about 25 hours of German language instruction per week. My classes were from approximately 8:30 – 1:30 every weekday, which left plenty of time for exploring the city in the afternoons/evenings.

I was in the introductory (first level) German class. My class had about 20 people in it, and we would often form groups of 4 people or so to complete in-class tasks. We would stay in the same classroom all day, with a 30 minute break for lunch and a 15 minute break in the morning.

The teachers are very friendly and helpful. My relationship with my teacher there was great, he would always make jokes and make everyone feel comfortable.

Grading was very fair, and well explained. We would be graded on our participation and on one or two exams.

The administration was well organized and answered all my questions quickly and effectively.

The library/computer facilities were fine. In the basement there were a lot of books about learning german, and several computers for students to use, either for learning German through programs, or for recreational use during breaks.

The quality of instruction was fantastic – the course moved along at a reasonable pace and it was presented in a way such that everyone was learning very quickly.

My coursework abroad did not relate very closely to my UW education (mechanical engineering and computer science), except in that it will help fulfill my VLPA requirements. I enjoyed it thoroughly, and consider it an important part of my overall education.

Housing:

The Goethe Institute has a housing program where students are hosted by people living in Berlin, living in extra/guest rooms of their houses/apartments. The housing only starts the day the program starts, however, so you may want to coordinate with your host person/family before arrival so that you will have a place to stay if you arrive in Germany before the program starts. Your host person will email you well before the program starts (they are give your email address by the institute).
Program/exchange site:

The campus is located in a fairly central area of the city. Easily accessible by subway (buy a student monthly subway pass – impossible to get around without one!). There is a cool outdoor market nearby, that is especially busy on fridays, with lots of food and crafts vendors.

Health and safety:

There were no health or safety concerns that I can remember. Everything seemed very sanitary and safe.

Cultural aspects:

We had a weekly “stammtisch” (regularly scheduled social meeting at a bar) with other students, and we would meet locals there too. We would go watch soccer games at bars, and we would travel to the beach, go to cafes, nightclubs, etc.

German people speak in a very direct manner, which may appear rude to people used to the way Americas speak. For example, a German person might issue a request in a tone (or with phrasing) that would seem very commanding, like: “you must always do this.” They don't mean to come across as forceful, they just mean that they (english translation) “would like it if you would do something this way.” Other than that, there weren't many challenging social differences. German people are very nice, if slightly reserved at first.

Financial:

Access money from ATMs. They're everywhere (especially in train/subway stations). Spending money per month: 18 euro per day (food + tours + activities + clubbing) * 30 days per month = 540 euro per month. Rent not included.

Administration:

The administration was fine, they answered all of my questions promptly. Signing up was online and easy.

Program/student type:

Students who are capable of exploring on their own, who don't require a ton of structure. Being able to meet people is a plus, but that's probably a plus for any type of program. Goethe offers plenty of activities, but the most fun and interesting experiences I had were ones where I was off exploring with people I met in the program and in Berlin.

Overall Experience:

My overall experience was great, I'd do it again in a heartbeat. I was expecting to have a great time, to learn a lot of German, and to learn a lot about a new culture. I didn't know exactly what it was going to be like, and that was exciting. I feel like my expectations were met.
Berlin, Germany

Winter 2011

Arrival Overseas/On-site Orientation: There wasn’t much of an orientation, but I don’t think one was necessary as you really just needed to show up for the first day of class. Everything was fairly self-explanatory.

Academics: I was impressed with the class I took at the Goethe Institute. The classes were small, 15 max, but usually closer to 10, making group work very easy and giving the instructor enough time to help each student individually. We had a test every Monday which helped determine if you retained the previous week’s lessons. There was a library at the school with a computer lab and multimedia to use for extra studying material. I liked checking out German films, as they had no English subtitles. It was fun to listen and find out how much I could understand.

Our instructor was a great choice for a beginning level. He was good at providing animated descriptions of new words and concepts without resorting to just telling us in English. I’m still shocked by how much I was able to learn in such a short time. I took this course to fulfill my language requirement for my B.A. To be able to focus on language class instead of just fitting it in with a full time class schedule and a part time job made learning a foreign language far more achievable for me than if I had taken 3 quarters of class here in Seattle. I would highly recommend the Goethe Institute to future study abroad students.

Housing: I would recommend getting a host family. I chose not to and ended up living in a hostel that had no kitchen for three weeks before I was able to find roommates to rent a room from. I had never had roommates and have been living on my own for almost ten years, so I thought living with a host family would be about as bad as moving back in with my parents. I was wrong about that. All of the students I befriended who did get host families had great host families who didn’t treat them like children at all. Although in the end, the roommates I did find were great and I became friends with the gal whose room I was renting.

Program/Exchange Site: The Goethe Institute in Berlin is located in the down town area and is incredibly easy to get to by public transit. The campus was just a few floors of a building in a commercial district. I don’t think there were more than a couple hundred students total.

Health and Safety: Winter in Berlin means everyone will get a cold. During the last week of class, all but one student and the instructor had a cold. The worst part about this is that you really don’t want to miss classes when so much information is covered, so everybody shows up sick, pretty much guaranteeing that everyone else will get sick.

My tandem partner was a Berlin native and thought that I lived in the ghetto. Which is funny because I thought I lived in the neighborhood that most reminded me of Capitol Hill. I’m used to homeless people
and junkies hitting me up for change so I thought nothing of it. I lived in Neukolin, and loved it over there. The only safety issue would be hanging out at the Hermanplatz U-bahn station at night. It's a little bit sketchy, but really not that bad. I walked home (a 20 min walk) from that station many nights and had no problems, it was just creepy because there were so few people out.

Cultural Aspects: It was difficult to go out and about at first because it was so cold and the sun set at 3pm. But as the weather got better and my language improved it became easier to explore and talk to vendors at the farmer and flea markets. Most of the German people I met, I met through other students at Goethe or through my roommates.

Financial: I was lucky enough to have a Pell grant which covered tuition and most of my airfare. Housing would have been cheap if I hadn't forked so much over for switching from a shared to private room at the hostel. Food is cheap, rent for a WG shouldn't be more than 350 a month and a month transit pass was less than 80 euro.

Program/Exchange Administration: I thought the IPE was helpful in helping me choose the program that was best for me. I had originally planned on learning Czech in Prague, but it turned out you had to apply a year in advance so whoever it was in the IPE office helped me chose this program in Berlin and I'm super happy about it.

Program/Student Type: This program is best for students who have traveled on their own before. I liked it better than my previous study abroad experience because I was not living with the same students that were in my class. This program would not be good for people who need a lot of structure with their time or who get home sick easily because you have to make all the effort to meet friends and plan activities in your free time.

Overall Experience: I am so happy to have had the opportunity to live in Berlin. I was really doubtful about learning a language that I was so unfamiliar with, which makes passing the course feel like that much more of an accomplishment.
1. Arrival

I utilized a hostel when I first arrived in Berlin. The hostel I stayed at was called Baxpax in Kreuzberg and I really enjoyed it. After staying there a few nights, I moved into my homestay where I was for the rest of the time there.

There was no real orientation to speak of with my program.

2. Academics

I thought the German teaching program there was very good. My class was a bit smaller than the classes I took at UW so it was nice to have more individual attention. That being said, I believe I was placed into a class that was a bit easier than I would have liked. There was ample instruction during the day and plenty of time to practice speaking outside of the class. I thought the facilities of the institute were very good and had everything I needed.

The content of the course, as I said, was a little bit of review for me when I first arrived. After that, though, the course material became more interesting and new and proved more challenging.

I would recommend taking German at Goethe as they have very good and experienced teachers and you are learning the language in the midst of Germany.

Going to Goethe in Berlin vastly improved my conversational German and confidence in speaking the language. After taking German for 1 year at UW, going there really helped cement it.

3. Housing

I stayed with a homestay in Kreuzberg, a neighborhood of Berlin. Other than staying with a homestay, I could have rented an apartment for a few months, but I liked having someone there to chat and connect with. I would recommend staying in a homestay or at least with people you know during a study abroad. Native speakers will improve your language so much.

4. Program Site

The campus for Goethe was right in the center of Berlin. It was easy to get there from where I was staying, just a short U-Bahn trip away. There was plenty of places to eat and shop and had nearly everything I could have needed. Berlin is a very diverse and metropolitan city, so it had pretty much everything.

5. Health and Safety

I had no problems with theft or really any other medical issues other than some indigestion. Naturally, going to a new place that has completely different
cuisine from what your stomach is used to will give you troubles at the start. Eventually I got used to the food and everything was ok.

6. Cultural Aspects
   I met a lot of local Berliners through a couple rock-climbing gyms there. I was an avid rock-climber before I went to Germany, so it was really nice to have a hobby that I could meet people through. The beauty of climbing is that it's community crosses international borders really easily. Also, there were tons of bars/pubs to go drink excellent German beer at with friends.
   I didn't notice too many strong cultural differences between myself and the people I met there. Everyone I met was really nice.

7. Financial
   It is really easy to withdraw money there from a U.S. bank account. Just talk to your bank before you go and let them know you will be in Germany for X months and then you can access your account from any ATM in the city.
   Food is pretty inexpensive in Germany and that was my primary expense other than rent, so I didn't need a whole lot of spending money while I was there. Maybe 400-500 Euro a month other than rent.

8. Program Administration
   The IP&E did administer this for me. I thought that Goethe did a fantastic job with my coursework. I wouldn't change any service.

9. Student Type
   I think anyone with an interest in the German language should go to Goethe in Berlin. The class time was spot on and the city was fantastic.

10. Overall Experience
   I truly enjoyed the time I spend in Berlin. Academically, I believe it could have been a little bit better had I been placed in a higher level, but the program and people were still fantastic. Berlin is a beautiful city with so much to offer and I highly recommend spending time there.
1. Ensure that you absolutely have found a place to live. There are numerous websites that will direct international students to a Wohngemeinschaft to live in. If you’ve not found a place yet (as I hadn’t), the RixPax Hostel on Alexanderstrasse in Neukoeln was fairly inexpensive and a reasonably nice place to stay.

There was an orientation that offered some information about what clubs one might join and classes offered at later dates to help you adjust to the German school system.

2. Classes are either seminars or lectures, similar to UDUB classes. Seminars are more personal with more teacher/student interaction. They will also generally require a presentation to the class and a final essay. Often they go a bit easier on foreign students for the essay if you put a good effort into the presentation. They cover a large amount of material because it is over the course of 12 weeks, and finals may be held any time in the following two months (so be sure you don’t have return tickets before your finals). Classes are generally 2 hours once a week, or 4 hours every other week. These generally equate to five UW credits, so don’t get overzealous and take TOO many courses or you’ll find yourself bogged down. Getting meetings with administration can often take up to two weeks because of office hours and scheduling, so plan ahead. And libraries are nice, abundant, well-stocked, and provide all the goods of the UDUB libraries.

The quality and content of the classes was good. I was often kept interested in the material and learning the material from a combination of your peers and your teachers gives different insights to subjects. I would recommend, assuming that most people going to a German school are interested in German, taking German literature courses, because you get a different insight as to how the literature effects them and their history, more than just reading the stories. I personally finished a German minor there, relating the coursework closely to my UDUB studies.

3. Housing options include dorms, apartments, and Wohngemeinschafts (WGs). I heard UNIVERSALLY that the dorms in Berlin are some of the most depressing places that study abroad participants or domestic Germans have ever experienced. Apartments were also often boring because they will be singles and, therefore, you won’t feel compelled to interact with others. WGs put you right in with clusters of friends, interest groups, or perhaps groups of entirely different people who are all often students. They are shared, communal living spaces where chores, rent, and rooms are shared. This leads to a very REAL experience of Berlin life and provides the social ties and student advice that any study abroad participant needs.
4. The campus was located at the heart of the historical district of Berlin. The buildings are mostly very old and beautiful, with increasing numbers of new structures. Also, the surroundings include many, MANY sights that many people travel to Berlin just to see, like the Brandenburger Tor and the Museum Insel. It is also about a 3 minute ride to the largest shopping and tourist districts, and easily accessible (as I did) by a 20 minute commute via subway.

5. There are a few unsafe districts, such as Kreuzberg. It also happens to be one of the most eclectic and fascinating districts. I personally had my locker broken into at the gym there and all my savings spent making my first few weeks very difficult. Furthermore, during Maifest, a friend was assaulted by a group of Turks during an outdoor party without provocation, hospitalizing him. Many people in Berlin immediately disrespect Americans, thinking that we’re ignorant, so it’s safest to stay with locals and establish that you have an understanding of the German language and culture.

6. I integrated by living in WGs, befriending my roommates, and friends of theirs. I also regularly attended bars, clubs, Erasmus parties, and went to the weekly flea market which is a large cultural gathering at a place similar to the UDUB’s quad.

There were a few different cultural problems I encountered: the first thing to ensure is that you have a comfortable grasp of the language. Understanding German is one thing, speaking it confidently is a very different thing. Also, there are heated tensions between Turks and many other races in Berlin because they feel like transplanted outsiders with a very different and backwards culture. This makes them, in some cases, dangerous to foreigners. It is best to try to get along with everyone and be courteous in public. Also do not hesitate long in crowded places or you draw attention to the fact that you are a foreigner and can make yourself a target for crime in some areas. Again, it is often best late at night to stay in groups that have locals in them.

7. I opened a German bank account at Sparkasse (this is necessary for many schools). I then used my American debit card to withdraw most of my savings as euros, then put it all into my German account to only incur the “out of country withdrawal” fee once. Living in Germany is fairly cheap. Groceries ran about 50-60 euro a week (for a lot of food). Nights at clubs generally took another 10-20 euro (once or twice a week). And a gym membership through “McFit” was a simple 16,90 a month (VERY inexpensive by comparison to all other gyms).

8. My program left me flying to Germany fairly blind. I had never heard of a Wohngemeinschaft until I heard from a friend a week before leaving so I was forced to simply show up and look desperately. I finally found a place through a friend of a friend after crashing at a few short-term spots. Also, it was not made AT ALL clear how the Modul system worked. A higher Modul (I, II, or III) is more difficult and the letters pertaining to them (Ia, Ib, Ic) denote different elements of the department. This left me taking essentially 400 level courses in German, the amount of work for which I was not prepared to do, but got by playing my American naivete. Also it was not made clear that I would absolutely need to get European health insurance to attend my school, which was about another 60 euro a month, I believe.

9. This program is intended for someone who is highly independent, outgoing, and well-educated in the German language. In Berlin it is also fairly important to be culturally conscious of differences there and open to different social groups (having lived in the gay district incidentally,
there were a few bars, parades, and street fairs that had some more than shocking things occurring at them because of Germany's loose social liberalism.

10. I definitely thought that the program would be much easier than it was. I was however misled by the amount of work i would need to do. Along the lines between America and Europe the standards for credit transfer have NOT been articulated well. I was told at orientation that 30 European credits would transfer to around 15 american credits. Needing only 10, I figured I should be safe and take 25 European credits, which then transferred to 25 American credits. Also, it did make it difficult to get officially enrolled in school not having a place to live the first five weeks. It is mandatory to have a permanent residence in order to 1) get health insurance, 2) enroll, 3) receive your semester ticket (saying that you are a student and to ride the public transportation for free). So I felt a bit as though I went into the whole thing blindly. Hopefully my experience will set a standard for information that SHOULD be spoon-fed to students. I understand that there were two other students who did the same program as I did at the same time (one even in Berlin). They, however, are not student athletes whose time was consumed by sports, and were therefore more adept at finding all of this information out personally and independently through their own hard work.
I. ARRIVAL OVERSEAS/ONSITE ORIENTATION
There are many hostels/cheap hotel options in Berlin. I did not use one on my arrival since I was previously in Vienna at IKI and had reserved a room in a WG apartment through a housing agency that is affiliated with the Goethe Institut. There are no on-site orientations with the Institut.

II. ACADEMICS
Since I had taken the B2 Conversation Course, there was only emphasis on reading and discussion of texts, articles and any material the students themselves wanted to discuss. My instructor, Koch was very helpful and led discussions in the class. The Goethe Institut has a Mediothek, which is a library with computer access that includes many sources designed to help German language students such as books, periodicals and media.

III. HOUSING
In terms of housing, the Goethe Institut offers homestays or a referral to Fine & Mine, which is a housing agency located on the ground floor of the school. I chose to use the housing agency since I was looking for an apartment from Vienna and it became my only option. Although the fees are very high (50% of monthly rent plus tax) it was convenient since I had a place secured upon my arrival. My room was in a WG in the working-class borough of Neukölln. When you look for housing, I would recommend those in the boroughs of Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg or Friedrichshain, though they tend to be pricier and are far more desired.

IV. PROGRAM/EXCHANGE SITE
The Goethe Institut is very centrally located near the Hackescher Markt in Mitte and is surrounded by upscale shopping. It is also close to Alexanderplatz and attractions such as the Fernsehturm.

V. HEALTH AND SAFETY
Although mostly safe during the day, there are many unsafe areas in Berlin at night. Eastern suburbs (such as Marzahn-Hellersdorf) should be avoided as well as in inner boroughs on Neukölln’s Sonnenallee and Karl-Marx Straße and Kreuzberg’s Kottbusser Tor since violent crimes are common. Always be aware of those around you when walking home at night alone (or try to walk with a friend). Also be aware of pickpocketing in crowded places such as on the U-Bahn. The U7 (Rathaus Spandau-Rudow) is notorious for crime late at night as well.

VI. CULTURAL ASPECTS
I was able to meet people from my class as we planned to go out once or a few times per week, such as to bars or (since I was there in December), to numerous Christmas Markets throughout the city which offer many traditional Christmas foods, mulled wine and crafts. Since there was a CHID study abroad group in Berlin the same time I was there, I knew someone from UW and we often would go out to bars or clubs together, where we had the opportunity to socialize with people in German.

VII. FINANCIAL
Berlin is a very cheap city when compared to others in Europe, however, was still expensive for me because of the weakness of the US Dollar. I would plan on spending approximately $600 per month, excluding rent. Cheap food and drink (up to €5) is plentiful in the city, especially in Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg. The well-known Berlin-Turkish döner kebab is a cheap option available everywhere. A monthly transit pass (€70, valid on all BVG and DB lines within city limits) is essential since Berlin is very spread-out and not very walkable.

VIII. PROGRAM/EXCHANGE ADMINISTRATION
Most information is available online (IPE website and its links) and was very helpful in preparing for my study abroad.

IX. PROGRAM/STUDENT TYPE
The conversation course is definitely a course that should be used as a supplement to your learning of German language. Prior to my course in Berlin, I had taken 2 months of courses at the Internationales Kulturinstitut in Vienna, which is much cheaper than the equivalent (Intensivkurs 4 or 8) at Goethe Institut.

X. OVERALL EXPERIENCE
I was satisfied with my taking of the conversation course at Goethe Institut as it definitely helped in building confidence of speaking skills, however, wish that the Institut offered options for dorms in the city (as IKI in Vienna did) so as to make it easier to make very close friends with classmates.