

Studies at the University of Siegen

I am in the teacher training program at the University of Siegen, majoring in English, Spanish and Educational Sciences. I am in my 12th semester and decided to complete my last bachelor's semester abroad, as that was a requirement for my studies.

Exchange Studies Abroad

Studying English and Spanish, I am required to complete a stay abroad for both languages, each lasting at least three months. I decided to focus on English first and spent the fall semester of 2024 at the University of Tulsa in Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA. The program itself lasted four months, starting on August 19th and the ending on December 19th.

Travel Preparations

Since the US is outside the EU and my stay exceeded 3 months, travel preparations were fairly extensive and required significant pre-planning. For that reason, I partook in several informational events both at my home university and the receiving institution via zoom. These sessions covered administrative matters such as health insurance, housing, vaccinations, enrolment and flights as well as financial resources and academic details like creating a Learning Agreement between the two universities. This agreement ensures financial aid and a transfer of credits after the mobility phase.

The visa application process added to the preparations. I received a J-1 visa application form (student visa) from the University of Tulsa, which allowed me to fill out the necessary information about my upcoming stay online. After completing the form and paying the application fee, I was able to book an appointment at the US Consulate in Frankfurt. During my appointment there, my documents were reviewed again, I answered a few questions, and I was ultimately granted my visa, which I was able to pick up about a week later. Once my visa was secured, I booked my flights to the US and back.

Stay Abroad

Living Situation

Prior to arrival, I had applied to on-campus housing. Therefore, upon arriving in Tulsa after a journey that took approximately 20 hours in total, I was able to move into my dorm room right away, which I shared with another exchange student. Housing costs were about 4,500 dollars per semester, excluding additional expenses. As I was over 21, I was able to opt out of the meal plan, which would have added up to another 3,000 dollars to my expenses. I also kept my German health insurance, waiving the TU health insurance, which saved an additional 1,000 dollars. Being an exchange student, I did not have to pay tuition fees, apart from the 300 euro

semester fee at my German university, which covers things such as transportation and other services.

Overall, the housing costs were significantly higher compared to Germany. Although I was able to partially cover the expenses with my grant, I still had to be supported financially by my mother. I was initially going to pay the housing fees in person with my credit card, but technical (and reoccurring) issues forced my mother to transfer the money manually to my university, incurring a 150-dollar service fee.

I lived in one of the better dorms, sharing a room with another student and the bathroom with her and two others in the adjacent room. Shared rooms are very uncommon in Germany these days, and I had never experienced this before, so it took some time getting used to. Additionally, I faced issues with a persistent bad odor in my room and found it challenging to adapt to some of my roommate's habits. After two months, I successfully requested a room change, as the odor situation had not been resolved despite numerous complaints on my part and I was starting to feel very frustrated with my roommate's refusal to compromise. Moving rooms significantly improved my experience.

Info and Tips on Arrival

For European students, settling in is relatively straightforward. You can use your credit card, even though I ended up opening a bank account with the Bank of America, but I wouldn't say it's necessary. You should get an American phone number to ensure constant internet access; I used an eSIM from Mint. You get a discount for the first three months of being a customer, and it was recommended to me by my exchange coordinator.

Public transportation is always an issue in the US outside of big cities on/ close to the East Coast, and Tulsa is a very car-centric city. For that reason, you can find mostly anything on campus: They have fast food options such as Chick-Fil-A, supermarkets, a post office, a gym, a library, even their own hairdresser. If you want to leave campus, there are a few food options in walking distance, but for anything else, you'll have to take an Uber or find someone with a car that can drive you.

Enrolment, Classes and Credit Transfer

I had completed the enrolment process online before arriving in Tulsa by coordinating with my success coach via email. Together we picked out classes according to my degree and requirements of my home university. She then sent me my schedule. However, you can drop classes or add them within the first two weeks of the semester.

The staff and faculty were incredibly helpful and welcoming, and I encountered no problems at all. It also turned out exceptionally easy to have my credits transferred once back in Germany.

I enjoyed all my classes very much. TU is a private university with about 4,000 students, which fosters a close-knit campus community. Class sizes were small, encouraging engaging discussions with both professors and students. In my opinion, that makes it easier to connect with people and make friends. Overall, all of these factors contributed to a much more engaging

and healthier learning environment that I was able to thrive in academically in ways I had not experienced in Germany.

Orientation

One week prior to classes, I participated in orientation week, which introduced me to other exchange students and the campus. Orientation included showing us around campus to familiarize us with classrooms, food options and other facilities, as well as an introduction to the US educational system and the University of Tulsa's online platforms. They also organized shopping tours to get essential things we hadn't taken with us to the US.

In my opinion, this week proved invaluable, ensuring I did not feel completely lost on my first day of classes. Still, it was very exciting, and I met most of the people I ended up being friends with during that first week.

Leisure Activities and Campus Life

American universities offer a broad variety of leisure activities and extracurriculars. You can go to the gym, join sports or other types of club or join fraternities/ sororities. Next to that, regular events, such as football or soccer games, added to the vibrant campus life. Seasonal events, like Halloween parties and Christmas dinners as organized by my dorm, further enriched my experience. There are numerous events all over campus with free food options throughout the semester, a lot of which I probably missed.

Conclusion

Overall, my semester abroad in the US was a rewarding experience. I got to meet a lot of incredible people – students, professors and others – and felt like being away from home and immersing myself in this new culture allowed me to grow both academically and personally. While it took some time to get used my new environment, I eventually thrived and felt more at home than I ever anticipated.

The exchange gave me insights into American culture and the diverse background of so many people who I met during the exchange, making me more culturally aware and benefitting me immensely. Even when faced with hardships such as my living situation, I was able to overcome them and fend for myself, eventually ending up in a much better situation.

I found the people in Tulsa as well as the US in general to be very warm, welcoming and cooperative, which helped me overcome moments of homesickness and settle into my new environment. While there were hurdles – such as repeated billing issues and a stressful living situation early on – the experience as a whole was invaluable. I grew significantly as a person during my time abroad and would undoubtedly choose to do it again.