

Direct Exchange Report: Columbia University (BA, 2017/2018)

Having recently returned from a year abroad at Columbia University in the City of New York, I would like to share my experience and hopefully provide some useful information to potential exchange students. Before I delve into academic bureaucracy and technicalities of New York City living, I want to firmly state that my overall experience of studying at Columbia University has been invaluable – both on an academic and personal level.

Housing

I chose the option of living on campus in Columbia Housing, which I gladly recommend. I find campus housing advantageous for several reasons. Firstly, as an exchange student from FU, you are guaranteed a place on campus if you apply, and I found this sense of security – knowing that you will arrive having a place to live – comforting amid the stress that inevitably arises from planning and preparing for your stay abroad. Furthermore, considering the distances in New York City and the extensive, yet, at times, unpredictable subway system, I would recommend living close to campus. Campus offers a lot of activities, including social clubs, film nights, guest lectures, the gym, not to mention 24-hour access to the main library, and I experienced that students who lived far from campus were less inclined to participate in campus life. If you, like me and numerous Columbia students, appreciate studying late at the library, you will be grateful for the 5 min walk home at 3 am instead of having to depend on public transportation which runs slow at night.

It is also a possibility to find accommodation in the Morningside Heights area, the neighborhood of Columbia University, without living in Columbia Housing, however, in my experience, the price of rent is similar to or more than the charge of Columbia Housing, and then you have to deal with a lease, a landlord, etc. Moreover, while orientation week and course participation will introduce you to other students and facilitate new friendships, I found campus housing a good opportunity to meet fellow students in a more intimate setting, which I really appreciated, especially in the beginning when you might feel lonely and homesick, or just have a thousand questions that the students in your hall might know the answer to.

Although FU exchange students are guaranteed campus housing, a bit of patience is required in the application process. You will not receive your final housing assignment, informing you of the hall and room in which you will reside, until mid-

August. Columbia Housing offers several different types of accommodation, such as double rooms (sharing a room) and single rooms in dormitories or apartment-style residences. Even though the housing assignment is based on preferences indicated on your housing application, you cannot be certain of the accommodation type, however, being in the third year of your BA, you will more than likely live in a hall with juniors and seniors. I lived in Watt Hall, which is apartment-style, in a small studio by myself with own kitchen and bathroom.

Leisure

While I recommend living on campus, primarily because it is convenient to your academic and, to some extent, social life, I highly advise you to spend some leisure time outside the campus 'bubble.' The city offers an incomparable amount of cultural experiences, including a host of museums to which the CU student ID will grant you free access. Campus provides an interesting academic environment, allowing you to experience an educational and intellectual aspect of American life, however, in order to acquire other 'American' or 'New York' experiences one must explore other areas and neighborhoods of NYC. Besides sightseeing, culinary experiences, attending concerts, sports events and museums, I recommend participating in volunteer work in your local community. Several clubs and organizations at Columbia facilitate opportunities to volunteer, such as the Blue Key Society, America Reads, and the Double Discovery Center, among many more. I volunteered bi-weekly at the Harlem Food Bank, which allowed me to be a part of the local community outside of university life.

Health Insurance and Other Fees

While the direct exchange agreement provides you with a tuition waiver, covering tuition and orientation fees, you will be charged additional mandatory fees:

- Health service fee: \$541 per term (2017/18)
- Medical insurance fee (Gold plan): \$2,991 per year (2017/18)
- Student life aggregate fee: \$811 per term (2017/18)

And if you choose Columbia Housing:

- Housing: \$9,292/year (2017/18)

As an international exchange student, the Columbia health insurance plan is mandatory; although the health insurance is expensive, there is (almost) no way around purchasing it. You can choose between a Gold (less expensive) plan and

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Platinum (more extensive) plan. I was satisfied selecting the Gold plan. Medical appointments are easily arranged via the University's website and the Medical Center is on campus, including Counseling and Psychological Services.

Scholarship and Taxes

I received the BCGS Stipend from Columbia University, which is a stipend in the amount of \$12,000, however, after taxes, I received about \$10,400. You will receive the amount as a check which you can pick up from the financial services after your arrival. I received the check and returned it immediately as payment for my bill (housing, health insurance + semester fees). Thus, there is no need for a bank account to cash the check and make a deposit; you can simply receive and return the check at once. In case you have not received the stipend check before the payment deadline of your Columbia bill, talk to the financial services in advance, and they will allow you to pay late without charging you a late fee (at least they did in my case). Since the stipend amount exceeds the amount you will be charged for the first semester, your Columbia account will have a surplus until the second-semester payments are due.

Since the scholarship you receive is taxed in the U.S., you will have to prepare a federal income tax return. Columbia offers a free software program to help you prepare your tax return and simultaneously create an ITIN application. I recommend starting this process early, because once you have finalized the paperwork, you need to make an appointment with your local IRS office, because you must apply for the ITIN in person (unless you feel comfortable mailing your passport to the IRS who may keep it for up to two months). During 'tax season' (January through April), the offices are busy and may have long waiting times, so schedule your meeting long in advance, and check the availability in the various NYC offices if the Harlem office does not have an available appointment before the deadline to file taxes (mid-April). I went to the IRS office downtown Manhattan.

Courses and Course Work

At Columbia, you will be able to take between 12 and 18 credit points per semester, which translates into 3-6 classes. Courses are typically worth 3-4 points, depending on how they are structured, and be aware that some courses take place 2-3 times a week, and might include an additional mandatory discussion section. I recommend taking the minimum amount of credits (12) the first semester, while you are still figuring out practicalities and familiarizing yourself with the American university

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system, social interactions, and the city. Then, in the second semester, when you have adjusted to being abroad, you could take more credits. Students at CU receive different registration appointments, enabling senior students to register for classes prior to other students, which means that classes might be full before you get a chance to register. Since some classes fill up fast, I advise you to research the professors and courses that you are interested in before the date/time of your first registration appointment, so you are ready to register as soon as possible. If you register for a class and change your mind, you can easily drop the class before finalizing your schedule. While some courses are only available to certain majors, or perhaps only grad students, you can always contact your academic advisor to ask about the possibility of registering for this specific class, email the professor for permission to attend the class, or show up for the first day of class and make your case. In my experience, if you show enthusiasm and the course is not full, the professor will likely accommodate your wish.

Random Facts

Printing. You will receive \$10 at the beginning of each semester, and \$10 weekly during the semester in your printing account, which in my case allowed me to print all my course materials.

Professors. In addition to researching which professors are relevant for your academic interests, and asking other students for recommendations, you can look up classes and professors on <http://culpa.info/>, a website where students share their experiences and evaluate professors.

Phone. Since I was not interested in an annual phone contract, I opted for a plan with MetroPCS, providing me with an American SIM card I could insert in my German phone. For \$40 a month, I had 5GB data, which in addition to free WIFI on campus was enough to sustain regular online communication with friends and family in Europe.

Grocery shopping. While the Westside Market and Morton Williams are decent supermarkets, conveniently located close to campus, they are both on the expensive side, so if you are looking for a cheaper option, I recommend taking the subway 10 mins downtown to Trader Joe's on 72nd street.

Please feel free to contact me through the *Direktaustausch* office if you have any further questions regarding my exchange experience, Columbia University, or New York City.