

## **Exchange year 2021 - Cornell University**

This experience report will take a pragmatic approach to my experiences and advice, in hopes that the next generations might find it useful. In sum, the experience was one of the best experiences of my life (including negative experiences). The report will be structured in three blocks in which I outline my experiences and give some advice at the end. Before I start, I'd like to emphasize that my experiences are specific to my background as a graduate student in biology. Hence, most of my time was invested in research which is a big difference to consider towards undergrad programs.

### **USA: Land of opportunities**

I have found this to be true. There is a plethora of opportunities that one most likely won't find at a German university.

First, during the semester we had one or two guest speakers every week from universities like Harvard, MIT, or Princeton who are leaders in their respective fields. At the beginning of 2021 events took place virtually, but over the summer events started in person. Having access to the forefront of science and listening to world-class researchers was a remarkable opportunity. We also had several symposiums over the year in which we as the students of the grad program had career advice sessions (and lunch) with remarkable scientists and persons.

Second, there is a noticeable difference in funding between German and American universities. You don't need to look up the budget numbers to see this. There is also great effort to make things as pretty as possible (It's hard not to notice when your gym looks like a medieval castle.)

Third, there are many extracurricular events and traditions. Most universities have a gamut of traditions and events which go back > 100 years. Especially the graduation ceremonies are a tradition, which add a lot to the experience. It is quite sad that to my knowledge there are no such ceremonies at most German universities. Furthermore, once per month, there would be an open-air movie night on one of the biggest quads. Cornell also would conduct hackathons, in which you could compete in teams to come up with novel solutions to a challenging problem. Multiple smaller concerts per week (one of which had German traditional songs as a theme). Once per year, Cornell conducts a street festival ('slope day') at which they are inviting a popular artist to perform. Additionally, the students are extremely engaged in creating possibilities in the form of clubs and societies. Most students are actively contributing to campus life through participating and creating the magic around Cornell.

Fourth, regarding the pandemic, it was handled in the best possible way. No expenses were avoided, and real efforts were made in trying to make as many events in person as possible. Once per week, every student had to go to mandatory PCR testing. This allowed close monitoring of the overall

situation on campus and early detection of positive clusters. Furthermore, this allowed keeping the school open entirely in 2021. When I tested positive for COVID, Cornell supported me with coupons to buy food deliveries with during the quarantine time. To my knowledge, no German university implemented a similar program that would have allowed being on campus. Being able to go to classes and being in the laboratory this freely during these challenging times was unbelievably beneficial to me.

### **USA: Land of division**

Besides all these positive experiences and the plethora of opportunities, I do also want to outline an experience that overshadowed many positives. I came to the US expecting a politically divided country, but I did not know to which extent this division progressed. Although I am interested in politics, I did not go to the US for politics, but the science. However, I learned within the first months that you cannot escape politics as it was present during conferences, symposiums, and talks. I also think that the exchange of societal, cultural, and political perspectives would have been meaningful in building intercultural bridges.

I sadly do have to report here that a real exchange in the form of deeper discussions was not possible. While I made the experience in Germany (and Europe in general) that I can discuss any topic with my friends and colleagues (in disregard to their political background), I soon learned that this is very different in the US. I had the impression that on the entire campus there were certain narratives that one was not allowed to challenge or discuss. In the beginning, I conversed with people as I was used to doing it in Europe (i.e. this sometimes included playing the devil's advocate for the sake of thought exercise). On the next day one of my colleagues would tell me that I need to be more careful with my opinions, because otherwise, I would jeopardize my career. Out of these experiences, I stopped participating in discussions for two major reasons. First, I am aware of having a representative function for the FU and being a guest in the country. Second, I did not want to further face any consequences and already felt social repercussions.

From my European perspective, it was especially shocking to me how radicalized certain topics were discussed. What disturbed me the most is that people were categorizing me according to my skin color and gender. Not being perceived as an individual but being perceived as a person belonging to a specific group or class is something that I have not fully digested up to this day. Looking backward, the entire experience feels very Orwellian.

The positive: Being confronted with this very different 'discussion culture' led me to question whether I also have dogmatic opinions that remain unquestioned. Within this process it was revealed to me, how I had certain beliefs for years that seemed unshakable. It allowed me to overcome and let go of

personas that I had enacted. I am therefore very thankful for this confrontation as I am now more competent in gaining perspectives which were enclosed beforehand.

### **Some advice and mistakes to avoid**

**Finding a place to stay:** For the spring term, I lived in a studio that I found on Craigslist. However, I made the wonderful experience of living with a fraternity/Co-op for the fall term and would recommend everyone to also not live by themselves. I became great friends with many people I later used to live with. Personally, I made connections that later allowed me to stay with the frat, but many student organizations also offer 'borders' a stay in Facebook groups. This experience really immersed me in the American culture and helped to improve my language.

Takeaway: Craigslist, Facebook, call apartment agencies, do not fall for scams (visit the property before sending money), join a student organization

**Bureaucracy:** Don't hesitate to contact your school officials when it comes to important questions and deadlines. I recently made the mistake of hesitating here as I was waiting for my tax report forms from my partner university. Since you will receive a stipend, you'll have to file a tax report to the IRS in the following year and to do so you need specific documents. This can also be important when it comes to enrolling in the first place. You shouldn't spam the school officials but sending requests and reminders can show that you really want to come and care about the entire endeavor.

Takeaway: don't shy away from sending mails and also reminders

**Food:** I'd advise enrolling in the university's meal program. During the spring term, I would go grocery shopping and cook for myself, but this just takes too much time away. I did not want to run errands anymore and wanted to rather use the time for activities or to invest them in my studies.

Takeaway: consider enrolling in the school's lunch program, it's expensive but most likely still worth

**Finances:** Generally, the stipend I received was very generous and I could live very well off it. Rent is much more expensive in the US in comparison to even cities like Berlin. A studio in a university city most likely comes at around 1000 \$ / month. Student housing was much cheaper in my case. You will also have to open up a US bank account. I'd recommend a local bank so that you will have someone to talk to directly in case of problems. For international money transfers, I made good experiences using western union.

Takeaway: Be aware of costs, use a local bank, international transfer with for example Western Union