

Direct exchange with Cornell University during Spring Term 2022

I had the great privilege of spending the spring term at Cornell and for everyone considering, I'd like to share my experiences and many tips. Here goes:

Application process

The direct exchange offers only a spot for Grad school students, therefore beware that it is inevitably going to be a bit of a mess. Unlike the Undergrad programs, there is no central organizational office through which all Grad students are tended to, because many schools take care of their own candidates and a great few are slumped together in The Graduate School. Regardless of what the FU process says, you are going to need an advisor at your specific department for your stay. This is crucial and it does not come with your offer letter for the exchange spot and nobody told me beforehand how critical this is, so I'm telling you now. In my case the faculty members I mentioned in my letter of intent were asked for the job by the Cornell Global Office without my knowing, but both professors declined due to scheduling conflicts. Luckily another professor at my department as well as the head of the German department were kind enough to split the responsibility. The student awarded the spot the year after me also had the exact same problem, which is why I am stressing that without an advisor's signature you do not get to go. My advice therefore is: As soon as you accept the offered spot by the FU, kindly ask the exchange office for the contact person at the Global Office at Cornell, which in my case was lovely Kristen, a supportive supervisor. She will tell you that the BA students get processed first and I recommend that you at this point already (should be about February/March) let her know you'll be contacting faculty members anyway, asking if they're willing to take you on as advisors. Filter through your department's faculty page, see who fits your research interests and kindly introduce yourself and how your research aligns with theirs, when you'll be coming and that you need a faculty member to sign off on your application papers - if they'd be willing to take on that duty. If somebody agrees, send their contact information to Kristen, and let her take it from there. These are not official instructions, but that signature is so important and finding someone willing might take a while, so I'd recommend stepping outside standard procedure here to secure you smooth processing.

Getting there

The American public transportation system is pretty bad, so simply hopping on a train to get to Ithaca, NY is not going to work. Surprisingly enough, your best bet's a long-distance bus service like Greyhound, OurBus or Flixbus. There's not only a direct connection to NYC by those means, but there are also routes that travel between Rochester, Buffalo and Syracuse airport to Seneca Street in Ithaca. Around breaks and the beginnings/endings of terms they even increase their frequency. The county's own Tompkins Regional Airport is technically also an option, but flights there can get costly. Furthermore, you'll be needing the Uber/Lyft app, trust me.

Living in Ithaca

Ithaca is a rather small city, though during the term lively with students, since not only Cornell is located there, but Ithaca College as well.

The cost of living is high, in my estimate. Not only are groceries expensive, but for a flat share in Collegetown with three other people (that was by no means luxurious) I paid \$950 per month, utilities included. University housing is around \$1.100, and you can only sign 1-year leases with those. Living around the Commons is probably the cheapest area for people without cars, but Collegetown's proximity to campus without the bigger seclusion of the areas around North or West Campus is a considerable advantage. Generally, the biggest centers of community (restaurants, shops, ...) outside of campus are in Collegetown and around the Commons.

With the advisor-issue delaying my visa process delaying my departure, I arrived in Ithaca, having missed orientation, on the very first day of classes. Therefore, I was on a tight schedule for finding a home. There are real estate agencies with which you can consult for individual housing, but I succeeded in finding a sublease for a flat share (and swiftly!) by posting a request in the Cornell housing Facebook group. It was nerve wracking to make this work within the one week I had a hotel booked for and I had to really put myself out there, but thankfully I succeeded. I do recommend heeding the warning that signing a lease room unseen is a terrible idea and do not pay a deposit before departure to the States (though the US banking system will be an obstacle anyway, more on that further down).

One of the first challenges I faced was linked to the fact that I did not own a car - and wasn't going to buy one for just half a year. Besides one Deli Shoppe, a 7/11 (24h supermarket, great thing) and one fantastic yet remarkably expensive organic supermarket (all located in Collegetown), the big stores are on the outskirts of town, as is the Farmers Market. Target, Walmart, Trader Joe's, an Asian Supermarket, etc. can all be reached by bus, but just be mindful of how much you can carry and that you're early enough for a bus to go back as well. Some of the chain stores offer a membership where groceries can be home delivered though – comes in very handy if you want to stack up on drinks or have caught Covid.

The bus system is better than in many places in the US, but it runs rather sparingly and not always late. For your first year at Cornell the university provides you with a free bus pass though, which is pretty cool. A lot can be done by foot, but many Americans will be gobsmacked by the idea (I'm serious, my roommate's friend took an Uber for a 700m trip downhill). Ithaca is very hilly, as in Buffalo Street has a 45° slope at some point, which is a lot during the winter months, when temperatures reach -25° Celsius, so pack shoes accordingly. The trails along the Gorges as well as Ithaca, Triphammer and Buttermilk Falls are beautiful, so is Cayuga Lake - some more robust shoes will serve you well. Ithaca is located on the land of the Cayuga Nation and I can only recommend engaging with the indigenous presence around you there, there was a lot to learn for me.

Ithaca is officially 'Food Capital' of the US, based on restaurants per capita, which shouldn't get your hopes up too much, but there are many restaurants to explore and some of them are even good ^^ (CTB has amazing bagels, getting nothing but a

pack of cream cheese with those is wonderful. The Fusia Bento Bar has pretty sweet meal deals and there's several enjoyable Ramen places in town. Poke Lava is amazing takeaway and at Cinemapolis you can try a whole assortment of popcorn toppings!) I would also like to recommend Alley Cat, a queer friendly cat café where the drinks are amazing and you can book slots in the cat rooms, which is easily the best thing ever. Cinemapolis is the indie cinema at the Commons and there's a Regal Movie Theatre in Ithaca Mall, which is all the way out in Lansing. Wine or Cheese tastings also come highly recommended, because after Napa Valley the Finger Lakes Region is the biggest wine producer in the US.

Typing this I realize I want to write down all the things, but just let me make one last point: Ithaca is a blue-voting dot in a red state and as much as it shouldn't be *this* eminent, it totally is. Especially having talked with other returning direct exchange students by now I realize what a safe and caring place it was to be in (speaking as a *white*, queer, chronically ill person – I cannot speak for all experiences, of course). Naturally, there is still a lot to be desired, but people in central Ithaca don't lock their houses, which is truly astonishing considering other places in the country it's recommend having pepper spray on your person.

Cornell

The Cornell campus is pretty spectacular. For one, it's huge and green and big parts of the architecture clearly wish to imitate the old British universities, but in spring when the cherry blossom trees are in bloom? They kinda succeed. Secondly, the eating opportunities are fantastic. If you can afford the meal plan and live close to/on campus (and that's a big if), you'll be golden. If not, you can pay for single meal entries as well. Definitely invest in Morrison Hall sometime (it's \$17, but all you can eat, once you are inside): From a Kosher, a Halal and a Pasta/Pizza counter to the salad bar and an entire desert paradise, it's worth paying admittance at lunch, do your homework there and get dinner thereafter – as long as you don't leave the hall, you won't have to re-pay, just saying. One visit to the Dairy Bar is also mandatory, if you can: Ithaca is big in dairy farming and they sell the most indulgent ice cream there (one scoop will be enough, I assure you – Dairy Bar ice cream can only be sold on campus, because per state law it would technically be considered butter, so no selling that stuff outside the university's restriction :D). 104West! is a kosher dining hall, in Statler the hotel school students sell their cooking class food (which is great), for affordable caffeine emergencies consider the Green Dragon, the food at Willard Straight Hall, the café in The Cornell Store, One Stop Bagel, Trillium and the truck behind the Fine Arts Building is great too.

At the beginning of each term you can engage with all university groups at Club Fest and find a regular hobby. For one-time commitments checking the bulletin boards, newsletters, and the events on Student Activities is fruitful, you'll come across workshops, guest lectures, performances, ... so much so that it's a little overwhelming to navigate sometimes, but there is absolutely no way to get bored, if you want to engage with the university community. The library offers useful classes, students exhibit their work at the Johnson Museum, there are several resource

centers (LGBTQ, AAPI, Latine, BIPOC, first generation students) with rich programs, Cornell Outdoor Education lends out skis and sleds during the snowy season, the list goes on. If you crave a piece of home, the German institute hosts a weekly Sprachcafé where everyone will be delighted to have a native speaker to talk to. When it comes to studying, there's a plethora of libraries on campus and they foster different learning environments (you can even book individual study rooms), therefore I suggest testing a few out before settling on the one that will carry you through finals week.

Studying at Cornell/in the States

Since getting an advisor is such a crucial step, prepare yourself for advisory meetings with them once the term starts. I thought it was amazing, even though it felt very foreign coming from the German system. Advisors meet up with you monthly, sometimes weekly, to talk through general problems you might have, how your classes are going, about your research interests beyond coursework, and, in my case, I shamelessly quizzed them on resources for my MA thesis. It is much more personalized than any meeting with a professor in Germany I've ever been to, not least because everyone is on a first name basis. But even if you don't make much use of it, it's a security net in place should shit hit the fan.

Booking classes across departments is easy most of the time and I highly recommend it. As a grad student you can even take undergrad classes (they earn you less credits though if that's of importance to you). In the US you have midterms as well as finals, which is a considerable amount of added stress. Some professors opt for more regular, but shorter essays to submit. Additionally, in the humanities there's a lot of weekly reading, while the sciences get assigned weekly problem sets. Having been in the humanities, I mean A LOT of reading: most weeks I've ended up with 300-400 pages to read. A big head's up goes to final papers in the humanities: unlike in Germany, where we have months between terms to focus on our papers, in the US they must be done by the end of finals week. Which is 1 ½ weeks after classes end, so thinking about a topic, meeting with your professors about it and building a bibliography I recommend doing as soon as possible! (There's a library service to help you with referencing keywords against the available literature to find possible texts for your papers, it's incredibly convenient!) You might also consider utilizing the university's archives for your research, there's quite a few. Especially the Human Sexuality Collection was fascinating to explore!

More generally I can also say that the classes I've taken made a lot more room for current affairs and your own associative input is much more appreciated than in German classrooms. So, with the way I was used to, while there's more assignments throughout a term, it felt easier to meaningfully participate in class discussions.

Miscellaneous

- If you want to rent (or buy) a car during your stay, in some states that's not possible with the German driver's license. You can get an International

Driver's License at the Bürgeramt though, with that it shouldn't be a problem either way.

- American tap water tastes of Chlorine, so you might want to consider buying a Britta filter.
- The American Banking system was designed to frustrate me. You'll be needing a credit card for your stay, debit cards won't cut it, but you'll also be needing to set up an American account with an American card, because the stipend can only be deposited into US accounts. Different US banks need you to bring different documents to set up an account (some need a proof of lodging on US turf, for example) and depending on the bank, keeping it filled is in your interest, because once my balance went under a certain amount, Chase Bank charged me extra 'service' fees (they are crooks, really, punishing the poor, but that account was easy to set up with my papers and it is a national bank, which is more useful than a local bank should you travel around the country just the tiniest bit). My experience has been that German online banking doesn't do direct deposits into US accounts though, so the gymnastics of shifting around money was bothersome. Additionally, Venmo is a very commonly used service, but without a Social Security Number they don't deem you verifiable as living in the US and only allow you to move \$300 per week, so using this to pay rent for example wasn't an option.
- Added to Spring Break Cornell has February Break, which is an extended weekend holiday, basically. They have it because the suicide rate goes up that time of year. For one, as an Ivy League school, it can be a high-pressure environment, and secondly the winter does get very cold and very dark. It's not a nice fact, but I think you should be aware of this before going. The university tries to be mindful of struggling students and there's quite a few mental health counsellors, but only one psychiatrist for the entire student body, so some measures can't be swiftly taken through the university health care system when an emergency arises. Take care of yourself!
- Regarding money, let me be frank with you: Over the entirety of my stay, I have spent more than \$10.000. While I was there the Euro/Dollar exchange rate was basically 1:1. That feels like an obscene amount of money to me. For context, I have treated myself to a trip during Feb-Break, Spring Break and almost a month of travel after classes and I was mindful, but not restrictive in my spending on groceries, the extensive eating-out culture, leisure costs, etc. Without my stipends I could not have afforded this. I went with savings, but without my stipends it would've been a struggle, even if I had scrapped all trips and budgeted. And all things considered I haven't faced a small or big catastrophe, I didn't need to go to the hospital, nothing was stolen from me, I didn't cause an accident or any of the like. The university stipend you get with this spot is amazing. That I was able to do all these things is fantastic and I am grateful, and I wish you all that you get to have a similar experience. But if you want to go to the US don't forget to make sure of a financial security net.
- A word on going abroad as a chronically ill student: If there are medications, medical equipment, or assistive technologies you're likely to need over six/twelve months' time? Bring them from home. Arranging this with German insurance companies is a nightmare, especially if you are kassenversichert, because your stay exceeds the quarterly time limit they set for prescriptions. (Assuming flying to Germany over the first weekend in April, getting all your

stuff and flying back isn't an option.) Whoever you need to wear down, whichever doctor you must convince – I'd say do it. I know one of my disabilities, type 1 diabetes, is a particularly gnarly one in the US system, but if my insulin costs \$1.200 instead of 130€, then other medications might not be as easily obtainable as they are here either (or insurance might not cover them). You have the option of going through Cornell Health, having to get an appointment each time you need a prescription, assuming they'll be giving you one, but if you depend on a certain brand/model/type of medication/item, be sure that it's available in the US (specific chemical components or hormones and all), covered by the university's *aetna* insurance, and that you have the paperwork you need to prove you actually need this. When it came to customs, they were pretty chill about my giant medical bag that needed allowance as a third piece of hand luggage (you'll have to contact the airlines and their disability help desks to get a permit for that). Over the counter medications also often came with other active substances, so consulting the pharmacists and doing my research how what reacts with my running medical care was necessary as well.

I am aware there were some cautionary words here too, but don't get me wrong: The exchange was the most enriching experience I've had, maybe ever. I met amazing people, I rejoiced over new tastes, smells, sights and customs and not just personally, but academically, this half year impacted me deeply. I think Cornell may not be the ideal university for everyone's needs, but if the things I've shared here sound intriguing to you, you might have expectations of what is to come of this exchange close to mine and this might be just The Thing for you too!