

# **Report Direct Exchange 2022/2023 FU Berlin > Dartmouth College**

## **About me**

Hi all, I am MA-student of Comparative Literature at FU Berlin. Right after having started my first semester as an MA-student, I realized that the FU Berlin offers every year a chance to make a direct exchange towards Northern America, in pretty good universities and colleges! Hence, I decided to apply and put Dartmouth College as my first option, because it would have given me a get change a second master in addition to the first one at Fu... and I got accepted. It is as simple as that!

One fundamental prerequisite for this exchange is that you are a MA-student of literature. This is because you will not be the “tradition” exchange student who can freely select programs from several departments and then have them recognized in your home university. In fact, because you will be aiming at a MA-degree, you will be treated as a regular student, for in the end you will be a regular student on all matters. Hence, since your Master at Dartmouth will be one in comparative literature, you need to be a student of literature or, I assume, a student of some other subject with at least a focus on literature.

## **Pre-Arrival**

First thing to do is to understand what motivates you at doing this exchange and have an idea of a project you would like to develop for your master thesis there. The fact you need to know this is because you should specify that in your letter of academic purpose that you send with your application. During my virtual interview, I was asked to provide a short explanation of my research project. Then, of course, you need either TOEFL or IELTS scores. I made TOEFL, it went great and received scores within less than 10 days, so it very convenient.

One prerequisite that I would add is that you need to be native in German or speak it at an upper high level, because you will be involved as a TA and tutor in the German department (information below). I am not a native speaker, so I can grant you that you can make this exchange even without being one.

Should you be accepted for the exchange (congratulations!!), you will need to formally replicate the same process on the website of the Comparative Literature department at Dartmouth, in my case by mid-January. The reason behind this is that, because you will be treated as a regular student, they need to have you in their database. This was a bit annoying to me because you need to submit a few documents that are not required for the application at the FU: a writing sample of 15 pages in English, a third letter of recommendation, a few additional statements. The moment you are notified that you made it, you should be in contact with the director of the Complit department, Liz Cassell, who will guide you towards this process. Again, it is just a formality, because you are already in the program.

Once you are done with it, you will be free for a long while from organisational and bureaucratic tasks. Around the end of March, I got an automatic message that guided me towards opening a Dartmouth-account. In April, we had a call with all the future members of the program, Liz and the director of the Graduate Program (who changes every year), in which they exchanged information about the visa process and the program.

## **Visa**

You will apply for a F-1 visa, which is the type of visa for regular students. Unfortunately, an US-student visa is a relatively hefty price to pay: in total the cost is 500\$ between application fee and Sevis fee, which is a tax you need to pay in order to be registered as a student in any US-university. The college will not reimburse that, and the FU has no fellowships that would cover the cost. One suggestion is to deal with this issue as soon as you get the I-20 document from Dartmouth, without which you cannot apply for a visa. Also, you need to demonstrate that you have enough savings on

your bank account on order to receive an American visa. Sometimes embassies have very busy schedules, it was a mess during Covid but maybe now it is a bit better. I had my appointment on July 1<sup>st</sup> and, after a few weeks, I received the passport with the visa stamped on it.

## **Journey and Transport**

Dartmouth is a bit in the middle of nowhere, in New Hampshire and right at boundary of Vermont, 3 hours above Boston and 3 hours below Montréal. My suggestion is to fly either to Boston (preferably) or to New York. From the Boston international airport, Dartmouth buses carry people through New Hampshire straight to Hanover. Coaches come every hour; last ride is at 9 pm. There is a Dartmouth Coach also departing from Manhattan that would bring you to Hanover in 5 hours, but in case you want to fly to New York you have to get from the airport to the bus station in order to get on the Dartmouth coach. Also, there are only two rides a day happening, both in the morning. All in all, even if there are fewer flights going there, I would suggest flying to Boston rather than to NY.

As for other sources of transportation, you may consider to purchase a car in Hanover, since it is such a beautiful area in the fall and in the spring to go hike and it is much more convenient even just to go out for dinner or travel around, since you might feel a bit secluded in Hanover. However, as I will stress in the part that regards the program, you will not have that much free time because the program is incredibly intense and requires a lot of energies and time, which force you to work even during most parts of the weekend in order to keep up with all the tasks. There are a few Ubers going around in the area and the buses going through the area are free. Unfortunately, they do not work over the weekend. The college has a good system for car rentals, for which you need a driving license. Bear in mind that Europeans are allowed to use their driving licence for a maximum of 60 days, after which you should go to Concord and schedule a test to to get an American driving licence.

Anyway, the person who is accepted for this exchange will have housing on campus, so you don't need a car to move around the spaces where you will work and study. In case you fear isolation on campus and need some fresh air out of it which is not just that of Boston or New York, where you can easily get with a Dartmouth coach, you may then actually consider purchasing a car. One good reason to do that is also to explore the natural sightseeing of Vermont and New Hampshire, that you do not reach by public transportation. I personally had friends with a car and, even if I somehow regret not having explored the area enough, I had so little free time and was so focused on studying that the idea of buying a car never came to my mind.

## **Study Program**

As I said, the program is incredibly intense. Dartmouth has a quarter-system instead of semesters, which makes it very fast-paced. In total, you will be there for 3 terms (fall, winter and spring). One very positive feature of the program is the incredible support you receive from all the faculty members. I was meeting every 2 weeks with my advisors in order to discuss texts together and discuss the work to be done towards the completion of the master thesis. Needless to say, it was a very formative experience and thanks to it I feel I gained some great expertise that would eventually help me become a professional scholar. So, despite its intensity, there is no doubt I would do it again, don't get me wrong! I would mainly suggest this exchange for those who are very determined in making a PhD, as the program is meant to be a preparation for the US graduate school and is in fact very much oriented towards research. But since the program is so interdisciplinary and intellectually stimulating, I am sure that even a person who is not planning a career in academia would take benefit from it. Btw. the members of the program are usually maximum 12, so the environment gets somewhat close-knit between all its members, including faculty.

Since we are talking about a program in comparative literature, there is not a clear focus, everyone brings in their own expertise and it also varies very much according to which professors will lead classes. In the US, comparative literature intersects very much more than in Germany with translation

practice and theory. Otherwise, you will have total freedom about the decision of your research topic, and you will freely choose your advisors from any department. You will need two in total. One suggestion is to start looking for them quite beforehand, already in August, since you will have to hand in an abstract of your research project before the end of August, so right after or before your departure. Also, I had two advisors who were more or less aware of the topic, but not for sure experts about it. So, you won't have to tailor your topic according to the research interests of your advisors. Often, they will be very excited by the idea of working on a topic that revolves around their research interests, but they have never dealt with. Moreover, literary departments tend to be very interdisciplinary and open for external influences in the US, so that even "German Studies" is not as specifically oriented towards German speaking literature as it would be in Germany, because it works across disciplines and boundaries.

I will now make a list of what every term requires in terms of courses and work for the master thesis.

- Fall term: this was the toughest term for me, without a doubt. The reason is this I started to adapt to the new academic system in this time. It was not that much a matter of cultural shock, as I felt welcomed in the college and by all the people from the very first moment. Also, I was still so excited by this experience that I did not have any regret of being there or homesickness, despite its intensity. COLT 100, the class on cultural theory, demands a lot of reading, but it was one of the most inspiring and formative classes I have ever taken. There will be also a short class about the ethical conduct of research, with no exam needed in the end. Then, one extra class will need to be taken from other departments, which means from undergraduate programs because the MA in Complit is the main program of humanities at Dartmouth. In the end, you will have to write two papers: one for COLT 100 and one for the elective class. As graduate students, we were often asked to write more than the undergraduates in the elective classes. The timing is very tough: papers must normally be handed in no later than one week after classes end and they are usually between 5000 and 7000 words long. Again, because I never had to face such a challenge, the first term was quite traumatic, but after that I got used to it and, even now, I realize that I am a much faster and more organized writer than I used to be before being exposed to this, frankly speaking, stressful situation. As for the master thesis, in this term you should meet regularly with your advisor to read texts you might need and develop ideas. December, while there are no classes, is the right moment to dig in deeper in the readings and start point out ideas/sketches that might be reused for the thesis.
- Winter term: there are three classes to be taken. This was also a tough term, possibly even because of winter, but because I had learnt how to organize myself during the first term, I did not feel particularly overwhelmed. COLT 101 is a graduate class in which, through a topic selected by the professor, you look at texts in a comparative way. So, it is a class meant to be a practical training of the discipline. Then, again, you will have to select one elective class. COLT 103 is in addition a seminar without final exam in which you discuss academic materials and talk about the state of your project with your colleagues and the professor leading the class, who is typically the director of the program. So, two papers have to be handed in also in this term. Ideally, you will have already started to write some part of your master thesis by the end of the term.

One suggestion before proceeding with the last term: a few professors often allow you to write a portion of your master thesis for their final papers, especially if you take a class led by one of the two advisors. Btw. since it is a nine and a half months program, you will not write a master thesis as long as a German one. The word count should in fact stay between 7500 and 9000 words, so it is basically the length of an academic article.

- Spring term: COLT 105 is a workshop in which you will work with all the other members of the cohort at the finalization of your master thesis. In it, you also work on the oral presentation of your project that you will send at the end of the term. The master thesis is basically the final

exam you give for this class. On top of that, there are two elective in which you will register, which means that you will hand in again two final papers at the end of the term, plus the master thesis, that you must send around the middle-May.

It is a lot exactly as it seems, but trust me, you grow and learn rapidly in alliance with the rapidity of the program! So, for those who dream about an academic career, this is a good chance to get a taste of it and get an extraordinary set of professional skills. There is absolutely no doubt even *post factum* that I would apply and go again.

### **Teaching and working**

All members of the program need to co-teach a class in one of the three terms. But we are as FU students are an exception. In fact, the new agreement with the German department consists now in being provided with free housing during all the three terms in exchange of working for the department. So, you will not co-teach only once as the other members of the MA program, but you will have tasks that occupy around 10 hours a week across all the three terms. The tasks consist in:

- Being one of the two residence advisors at the Max Kade Centre together with the Fulbright Exchange Student from Germany or Austria, who has more tasks in the German department and works 20 hours a week without being registered in a study program. The Max Kade Centre is basically a set of 4 shared apartments (16 rooms in total) in which students who are interested in German culture or take German classes apply to reside. Your tasks will be to organize one activity every week with the Fulbright student, to which students dwelling in the Centre should regularly participate, since they received one room from the department. In Max Kade, there is a cozy communal area where meetings happen.
- You should offer 4 to 6 office hours a week during every term for the students of the German language classes, which are normally 3 per term. One suggestion I have is to ask the professors of the language classes to go and meet the students on the first week of the new term in order to make sure that they will come to your office hours and not only to those of the Fulbright student, who they will know better because he or she will assist in classes regularly.
- Attend weekly the Mittagstisch in the Mensa, an informal meeting with German students who want to practice their German.
- Sometimes there are a few minor practical things to cope with in the department. The director Ann Fenton will let you know.

Overall, it is 10 hours of work in every week of the three terms, which of course adds up to the already numerous tasks that one has to deal with in the study program. This was however an amazing experience, because I got the chance to work within a department, participate to meetings and teach to students during my office hours. All in all, this was one of the most enriching parts of my year at Dartmouth, as I learnt a lot from all the professors I was working with. Moreover, the German Department at Dartmouth is composed by great scholars who happen to be wonderful professors and humans. The atmosphere in the department is for this reason always very welcoming and they will make sure that you feel part of it.

### **Housing**

As I said, you will receive a free room within the Max Kade Center. The room was in a shared apartment of 4 people, one of the other 3 was the Fulbright student with whom I was actually working. The room was not particularly big, but enough to feel comfortable within. The kitchen is very well served and there is also a small living room. Maxwell Hall, the building within which Max Kade is located, is a 10 minutes walk from the green, where most of your classes and your work in the German department will happen.

Unfortunately, in the year of my cohort, none of the other graduate students stayed in Hanover. Most of them were settled in Summit on Juniper, a dormitory outside of campus, or in other cheaper

accommodations outside of Hanover. This makes organizing outings in the evening logistically a bit difficult. Also, campus life is mostly undergraduate-oriented, as the graduate school is relatively small, and Dartmouth has a focus on teaching rather than on academic research. Often, you might even feel a bit out of place, because undergraduate students are young and have their own experience constituting the core of campus life at Dartmouth.

## **Finances**

The Graduate school provided us with a monthly stipend of 2933\$, which becomes 2522\$ after tax. There might have been a slight increase from this last year, but I am not sure. Because there is no rent to be paid for your accommodation at Max Kade, this will be more than enough for you, but also other members of the program who had to pay rents felt that the stipend was enough to cover their living expenses. Personally, this was a very generous financial support.

Though, life in Hanover is expensive. So, your savings and financial stability will also depend on your lifestyle. Personally, I managed to make a few travels during breaks and allowed myself to go to restaurant more than once a week, and still I was feeling very stable financially.

Furthermore, the graduate school will support you with a maximum of 1000\$ to present a paper in an academic conference, covering transport and accommodation.

I opened a bank account at Bank of America, which has a branch in Hanover.

## **Groceries**

The Mensa is quite expensive, so it is advisable to cook at home. There is only one supermarket in Hanover, the Coop. It is a very good supermarket, with vegetables and fruits of good quality, but on the other hand it is a bit expensive. You can get there either walking or with a bus during the week. For alternative cheaper options, you might catch a bus (or your car if you want to buy one, even if you won't really need it as I've explained) during the week and go to Lebanon or West Lebanon in less fancy supermarkets. Shaw's is still a very good one, for instance.

## **Health/Safety/Fitness**

You will get health insurance for free from the college. I had to go a few times to the doctor for minor check-ups, and I never had to pay. However, there are deductibles or out-of-pockets to be paid for a few other check-ups or major issues, which can get high. For more information, you can google Dick's House's website, in which they explain very precisely the whole medical plan and what is covered by the college insurance. Since this is a hot topic when it comes to moving to the US, based on my experience I would suggest you not being frightened by the US health system and still apply and go, if you are interested in having this study experience. A good advice would be to take medications with you from Europe, especially expensive ones. One further helpful pre-arrival indication is to check if you have a second vaccination of measles and mumps, as it is not obligatory in most European countries, but it is a requirement from the college in order to be allowed into campus. A few months before departure, you will need to fill an immunization form listing all your vaccinations.

Mental health is not secondarily, especially when you are exposed to stress. There are services that Dartmouth offers for people going through too much stress or other issues that negatively affect their mental health, so do not hesitate to contact them in case you need their help!

Hanover is an exceptionally safe and quiet area, so there are no major risks there that one would possibly encounter.

Also, you have as a student of Dartmouth free access to the alumni gym, which is awesome!

**Taxes**

The only tax that you need to pay to the college is due by the beginning of the program and is both for the registration and the record of your student path at Dartmouth, that will allow you to request a transcript. It is 110\$ in total.

Also, you will need to declare taxes in the US twice, since you will stay at Dartmouth along two solar years. Dartmouth's graduate school offers workshops in which they explain how it works, I would not say that it was particularly complicated.