

Winter Semester 2024/25

**Final Report on an Exchange Semester at Middlebury College,
Middlebury, VT.**



Introduction

Having spent one wonderful semester at Middlebury College, this report collects some reflections on my stay in a structured way that will hopefully help you to make a decision whether this would be a great place for you to apply to. Should you desire to contact me with any more specific inquiry, my email address will be available via the Direct Exchange Office.

Preparation Phase

For those who, just like me, have never applied for a visa before, the entire preparation process might seem to be a daunting task. In fact, such worries proved to be completely unfounded. The team of the Direct Exchange Office supported me in the process, and the internal application at the Free University left me with a collection of documents that were needed later. I received a decision on the nomination to the program much ahead of time, which allowed me to map my last months in Berlin before the departure.

Navigating your DS-160 form, the SEVIS I-901 fees, and the rest of the visa application process is time-consuming but not overly complicated. In case of DS-2019 form, the International Scholar and Student Services (ISSS) migration specialists at Middlebury take care of the documentation, staying in touch with you. If you qualify for the direct exchange program, I ensure you that there is nothing you will be incapable of managing in a timely manner on your own. Still, make sure to proceed with your visa application as soon as all requirements are met.

As for a health insurance and other useful services, I arranged a comprehensive health insurance with a private company and did not purchase neither a phone number nor an internet subscription prior to my arrival. Here, it is important to highlight that Middlebury College offers its own health insurance package. If you are uncertain whether a private insurance meets the conditions determined by the U.S. government, this option might be worth considering. On my private insurance, I was still entitled to have non-emergency appointments with the Health Services or to get a flu shot at no extra cost.

(Pre-)Orientation

As an exchange student, I was invited to participate in pre-orientation and orientation programs that took place throughout the end of August. All activities during that time were coordinated by the International Scholar and Student Services (ISSS) to ensure the smoothest possible start into a new chapter of this academic journey.

On the whole, the two programs touched on various aspects of life as a college student in Vermont. Sessions with the ISSS experts provided international students with a better understanding of the U.S. academic culture and intricacies of maintaining the J-1 status. Testimonies of international upperclassmen on their beginnings at Middlebury brought reassurance that, sooner than later, this place on another continent would feel like home. Group meetings with team leaders familiarised us with the Middlebury Honour Code and other important matters. There were also numerous opportunities to get to know the campus with its main buildings and adjacent facilities, as well as the town.

At the pre-orientation, exchange students were divided into small groups with international freshmen, whereas the orientation created a shared space for all exchange and transfer students. Around that time, I also got to know some of the teaching assistants for language programs. Although the daily schedule was packed, (pre-)orientation evenings were full of fun activities such as a student talent show or an art night. Thanks to such multitude of occasions to bond, I met a great number of my future friends even before the semester officially started.

During the term, the ISSS staff was staying engaged in an outreach action to students from abroad, running drop-in sessions and hosting events such as apple picking in a local orchard or a Christmas gathering in the Service Building. Nonetheless, I am of the opinion an active participation in the (pre-)orientation is the program that every exchange student should prioritise while putting together their travel itinerary, particularly booking flights. You really would not want to miss a day or two due to an unexpected flight delay, right?

Academics

Since the institution was founded in 1800, Middlebury College has long been a place of academic excellence. Despite the fact that the school is relatively small, roughly 14 times smaller in terms of student enrolment than the Free University, its Environmental Studies, Political Science, and language programs are particularly renown in the United States and beyond. As one would expect from a liberal arts college, there is a large focus on the pursuit of interdisciplinarity. Additionally, students are very flexible to combine unconventional choices of majors and majors in accordance to their interests and objectives. While the first attitude is a fundamental of the course structure at my institute at the Free University, I was not familiar with the second approach. Therefore, after the first week of participating in various classes, I opted for a final selection of four courses offered by the Department of Political Science and the Department of Economics.

Three courses set the minimum to maintain your J-1 exchange visitor status. Some Middlebury students take five courses per term, which is considered the maximum and not recommended unless necessary to graduate within four years. For these reasons, the number of four appeared to strike a balance. Of course, there is an add-and-drop period at the beginning of the term, but I did not take this chance. Each of my four classes had sessions twice a week; however, it is quite common for Natural Science courses to have an additional laboratory or problem set session, usually on Friday mornings.

Being very content with all of my choices, I have to admit that the workload was high, and three of my courses were very reading-heavy. For some classes, response papers were to be submitted essentially on a weekly basis. For the others, an hour-long segment of class discussion each class verified understanding of both broad concepts and minute details. Sound knowledge of all of the assigned readings was a key to be able to participate in the courses, and I spent long hours at the Davis Family Library, which is open till midnight five days a week. The library became my favourite place to learn, but other spots enjoyed include the lawns in the autumn and cosy armchairs at

the main entrance to the Axinn Centre or the entire second floor of the Grille in the winter. Exams came in two rounds: once as midterms and the other time as finals. An exam can take different forms, from a standard in-class test to a multi-week project culminating in a presentation. The form of the exam is usually announced at the first course meeting.

Across various departments, there is pressure to do well that I could not adhere to strictly. My main objective was to challenge myself academically, and this was more relevant to me than maintaining a perfect GPA. It was definitely a privilege of being an exchange student that allowed me to take classes that I was highly interested in and to focus on personal feedback from professors on my progress rather than on grades and established conventions. From a couple of my Middlebury friends, I heard that they would not take a four hundred level class during their semester abroad, and this is a piece of advice for you that I felt obliged to share with. At the same time, my four hundred level seminar was my favourite class, and it broadened my horizons to an unbelievable extent.

What I highly appreciated is students' openness about their academic work. During one semester, I experienced more groupwork than during any of my previous years at the Free University. In some situations, this was dictated by the nature of a project, but proofreading each other's papers, brainstorming mock exam questions, or discussing ideas for individual presentations was just as popular.

Last but not least, there are plenty of highly fascinating extra lectures, talks, discussions organised each week all over the campus. I was particularly fond of those organised at the Rohatyn Centre for Global Affairs, but it is always good to let yourself be surprised by an event that does not necessarily spotlights your discipline.

Campus Culture

As Middlebury College is located in Vermont, a predominantly rural and ultimately beautiful state, it implies two facts. First, the relatively large campus remains the centre of the social life. Second, there is plenty of opportunities to enjoy the outdoors. I learnt to wholeheartedly cherish both of those things.

Before coming to Middlebury, I had significantly underestimated how amazing living on campus would be. At all times, you are within a walking distance to places where social events take place, ranging from Afropop concerts to American football and hockey games. Also, as 2024 was the election year, all of us on campus followed the race. I made sure to have enough time to bring my friends to all debate watch parties, trace the Senate race between candidates from Vermont, Bernie Sanders and Gerald Malloy, and join a couple of political luncheons that were held in between my classes on Wednesdays. I have also become an avid reader of the Middlebury Campus and the Local Noodle, admiring both effective voices for voting and commentary that mocked the presidential candidates. In terms of voter turnout, Middlebury College has secured a position of one of America's leading colleges over the years. Regardless of the election results, it was an incredible experience to be a part of such a politically active community at the time. Apart from that, collective spirit was displayed during

the spooky “Hallo-Weekend”, the colourful Dia de Los Muertos, relaxing pre-Thanksgiving gatherings, or the MiddKid Night in town.

Vermont might be a small state, but its beauty simply takes your breath away. As some of the sports at Middlebury are played on a very competitive level, which I presume to be a reason why no one got back to me regarding my application to the rowing team, I eventually found my way to the Mountain Club, and it was the best decision I could have made. With the club, we went for absolutely crazy adventures such as the full 18 mile Trail Around Middlebury loop on one day, as well as hikes to Mount Moosalamoo, High Pond, Deer Leap Mountain, or Silver Lake. For more tranquil activities in nature, there was the Dunmore Lake Day, and the Centre for Health and Wellness organises forest bathing to experience healing power of green spaces. Taking a walk to the Knoll, a college farm, to go flower picking or stargazing is another valuable option that comes to my mind. Once it became too cold for all of that, my indoor highlights featured yoga practices in a wonderful group on Sundays that a fellow exchange student from the Free University introduced me to.

Summary

Concerning academics and life in general, the semester that I spent at Middlebury College surely exceeded all of my expectations of a great study abroad experience. I aimed at describing my astonishing time in Vermont in a relatively objective way, but, depending on your academic interests and dozens of other aspects, your stay at Middlebury might be completely different, which only proves how many opportunities this college provides to its students. One more time, I would like to use this occasion to express my deepest gratitude to the Direct Exchange Team, particularly to Ms. Simon, for your assistance.

*Sustainability Tips

I always try to travel sustainably, and I hope that this little tricks will help you to do so if you choose Middlebury:

1. Recycling Centre: In the first weeks of school, the Recycling Centre remains open. There you can borrow virtually anything that other students do not need any more for a certain duration, from LED lamps to decorative pillows.
2. Adapters: I would discourage you from having a charging adapter shipped via Amazon; I found a perfect set at a local Dollar Store, right next to the Hannaford.
3. Laundry: The Forest Hall was the unsurpassed spot to do my laundry, as laundry driers there confidently fit two washing machine cycles instead of a one.
4. Holiday plans: Some may fly to New York City via the Burlington airport, but, why would you want to leave such a high carbon footprint if, at the beginning and at the end of school breaks, there are very reasonably priced Middlebury bus connections to and from New York City and Boston?
5. Packing back home: As I had some gifts to fit into my suitcase, the winter closet boxes were a rescue point – there you can donate your heavy jacket or your fluffy polar fleece, giving it a second life.