

# Erfahrungsbericht Stanford University 2014/2015

Either whether you are going to visit courses, attend lectures or conduct your personal bibliographical research, the experience of visiting Stanford University as a researcher with the Freie Universität *Direktaustausch* will be without any doubt a unique experience in your academic career, because of its leading position in the technical and scientific horizon in many aspects. The beauty of northern California will also inspire many personal achievements that will remain forever in your memory. In this report I will try to describe the bureaucratic process needed for a satisfactory visiting at Stanford University (financial aid, accommodation, studies and free time). This information will differ from other reports made by previous visiting researchers whenever any change has taken place.

## 1. About a VISA

One of the first concerns any traveler has to deal with when visiting a foreign country is the permit of residence or VISA. In the case of USA, the VISA question depends entirely on your own nationality and the length of your staying. Even if that must not be always the case and a researcher from the FU doesn't need to be necessarily an EU national for the purpose of this report I will take this for granted, for the reason that my experience is based on this. In general, tourists traveling to the United States require valid B-2 visas, unless they are eligible to travel visa free under the Visa Waiver Program, or they are a national of a country which has an agreement with the United States allowing their citizens to travel to the United States without B-2 visas. For EU nationals, US government allows you a VISA-free staying in the country for tourism. In this case, you just need to have a valid Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) approval prior to travel. However, since you are traveling to US with an academic program for longer than 3 months you will need to apply for a regular J1 VISA for the time of your staying.

For this purpose, by May/June you will receive in your German address along with your letter of admission an essential document, the DS-2019, which you will have to bring to the US embassy along with a valid Pass (not expiring the very same year) and the so

called SEVIS proof of payment (paid by you in advance, to be refunded later by your Stanford department). On the web page of the embassy you will fill the DS-160. You will collect all these documents, along with a biometrical photo, and bring them to your appointment at the US-consulate, whose address in Berlin is on the Clayallee 170. After a short interview, you will receive your Pass/VISA in your Berlin address in less than 2 weeks. All these requirements here described might be subjected to change, so I recommend to check previously the web of the US-embassy (<http://germany.usembassy.gov/>) for a more accurate information.

There is an important question to be considered in terms of allowance of residence. Even if the VISA begins on the starting date of your program and expires on its last day, J1 visitors are allowed to stay for a period of 30 days previous to the start and 30 days after its expiring date. This is known as *grace period* and is a very useful thing that gives you the possibility to arrive one month in advance in order to look for accommodation and to leave the country one month later - in case for example that you want to travel around. Nevertheless, you have to be very careful with this when you book your flight, since those 30 days include the starting day and the last day of your program and any small mistake flying beyond this grace period will lead to compromise any future VISA. That means, for example, that if the program ends on the 14<sup>th</sup> of this month, you are allowed to be in the country until the 13<sup>th</sup> of next month, but you **MUST** leave the country on that day.

Last but not least, depending on the embassy authorities you might be lucky and your status as a student but not as a postgraduate - this is how you will be considered in terms of bureaucracy - will not subject you to the rule that forces you to be in your country at least for the same period of your staying before re-entering the US.

## 2. Health Insurance

One of the most recommendable things to do previously to your flight is to arrange a European Health insurance valid in the US for the period of your research and that fills all the multiple requirements that Stanford University demands for an insurance. Otherwise, as shown in your letter of admission, you will be automatically enrolled in Stanford's own Health Insurance "Cardinal Care", deductible from your Grant and far

more expensive than a European one. The minimum standards are listed on the Stanford Vaden Health Center web page, and I list the current demands for informative purposes:

- An annual deductible less than \$1,000 USD
- Lifetime aggregate maximum benefit of at least \$2,000,000 USD OR a maximum per condition/per lifetime benefit of \$500,000 USD
- Coverage for inpatient and outpatient medical care in the San Francisco Bay Area and the U.S.
- Coverage for inpatient and outpatient mental health care in the San Francisco Bay Area and the U.S.
- Prescription drug coverage
- Coverage for non-emergency as well as emergency care
- Coverage for pre-existing conditions OR you have met applicable waiting periods

Do not forget that there is a deadline to apply for this waiver. All the information required to apply for a waiver can be found here: <https://vaden.stanford.edu/insurance/waiving-cardinal-care/international-students>. In case that your European Health insurance would not cover these standards, I recommend you to contact previous Direktaustausch Students, as they might help you to find a proper one.

### 3. Housing and transportation

Once you have your VISA, your health insurance, and once you have booked your flight, you can already fly to USA. If you are visiting Stanford, the most reasonable airport to land will probably be San Francisco Airport, but you can also fly to San Jose Airport. The first (and probably not the last) problem you will encounter in your visiting Stanford will be the accommodation. Since we are not official Stanford Students until the very first day that our program starts, we are not eligible for Campus housing, and they make sure

to make it clear to you. In other words, you can ask for advice at your department, but you are virtually alone in your hunt. The most recommendable instrument to find a place will be the web page [craigslist.org](http://craigslist.org), where you can filter offers according to your needs and to your possibilities. As you might already know, the whole Bay Area is an extremely expensive area to live, and it is not always easy to find a place. Do not forget that in USA public transportation is just a shadow of what it should be, so you should consider places with good commuting possibilities. Further, do not forget either that the Grant will be paid by the end of the first month, so you have to live with your own money until the first payment. The question here is either you want live in Palo Alto near to Campus or in other places of the area such as Sunnyvale, Redwood City, Mountain View, San Jose or San Francisco. Again, that depends on your academic needs and preferences. (San Francisco for example is a very recommendable city from the cultural point of view but with bad weather and far from Campus, Palo Alto is nice and sunny and close to campus but culturally dead...). All these places are connected by a train called Caltrain, which rides from early in the morning till evening, being Palo Alto in the middle of the line. Train distance from San Francisco/San Jose to Palo Alto Caltrain Station is more or less one hour (plus distance to each Caltrain Station) and it cost each way around 7 USD, so you have to find a place that allows you a reasonable commuting time. Once you are in Palo Alto Caltrain Station, Stanford University offers free shuttles (named Margarita) that will take you to the main Square in the Campus. If you prefer to live in Palo Alto, a bike will help you to reach the Campus. But remember: the nearer you live from Campus the more expensive will your rent be.

As a suggestion, and depending where you choose to live, I recommend you to purchase a *Go Pass* for the Caltrain, which is one of the policies introduced recently by Stanford authorities to reduce the impact of private transportation in Campus. This is something relatively new and I didn't know about it until I bumped into it by coincidence, but in case you are going to use Caltrain everyday it can save you a lot of money: paying 180 USD a year (100 USD at the end of the summer) will entitle you to use the train as much as you need. To be eligible, you must be an off-campus graduate student or postdoctoral scholar and you have to present a proof that you are enrolled in some courses. Frankly speaking, being a research scholar will actually doesn't allow you to be enrolled in courses, because you will have to pay extra for these courses and the Grant doesn't cover this. However, here is a trick: at the beginning of the semester there is what they call a "shopping period", which allows you during one week to enroll in courses and de-

enroll again in case you don't like them. By using this possibility, during the first week of the quarter you can present a proof of enrollment with the minimum amount of units (six units), purchase the Go Pass, and after that de-enroll, avoiding thus any kind of problems. This Go Pass will be stuck to your Student ID-Card surface. You can find some information about the Go pass here: <https://transportation.stanford.edu/News.php?p=15june-pilot-go-pass>.

#### 4. Studies and financial aid

The very first thing to need to do when you arrive to Campus is to visit your department. There you will meet your coordinator who will lead you in your future research. From the administrative point of view, you will have to visit the Students center at the main Square, where you will be given a Student ID-Card that entitles you to use the Sport Center for the time of your program and to use the Library and to take as many books as you need for long periods. Then you will get your SUN-ID, which allows you to enter to your Stanford e-mail address and to your online student account through Axxess, where you can manage important stuff such as the courses in which you will enroll, your updated address (SEVIS Address) or the number of your American Bank account in which you will receive the Grant payments (either through check or, more recommendable, through Direct Deposit; if you don't have one, you will need to open therefore an American Bank account). Furthermore, you will have to visit the Bechtel International Center, where you will be invited to an orientation meeting and get your DS-2019 signed. Do not miss this orientation meeting, because they will share very important information, especially concerning the terms of your VISA.

As I mentioned above, you will receive your payment by the end of every month, plus an extra amount for the flight on the first and on the last month. In USA, Grants are subjected to pay taxes. But as a European, you can claim a tax treaty, which works as a waiver and allows the Payroll office to pay you in full. To do this, you have to apply for a Social Security Number in a Social Security Office (there is one in Redwood City and one in Mountain View, you will informed you about their location in the Bechtel orientation meeting) filling the formulary W-8BEN once you have this number. All related information can be found online ([http://web.stanford.edu/group/fms/fingate/staff/taxcompliance/quick\\_steps/claim\\_taxTr](http://web.stanford.edu/group/fms/fingate/staff/taxcompliance/quick_steps/claim_taxTr)

[eaty\\_fellow.html](#)). Make sure to keep this number safe and not to share it, since this is a lifetime number and that can be misused for illegal purposes. Depending on when you start your program, you will be required to declare your taxes. If you start in January, you will only need to declare it for the natural year, and you will have to do it in the next year from January till April. Only at the end of the year you should get a 1098T or a 1042-S, that is the document that will determine if you need to file a tax return or not. Unfortunately, you will need to wait until the end of the year for an ultimate answer.

## 5. Free time

To finish this report, just note that in USA prices shown for merchandise (food included) are not the final sale price, but they will add taxes to it (State/Federal). In the case of Stanford, this will be the case anytime you will go to buy some food. However, I discovered that by showing your Student ID card you will not be charged any taxes, because you are considered a student and Stanford University will bear the cost. Probably that doesn't seem a big deal at first sight; but after many meals in Campus to US prices, you will notice the difference.

By researching Stanford, you will have the opportunity to visit the Bay Area and California. If you have more free time, you can also visit other States of the Union. As mentioned before, public transportation is very rare. A good and cheap way to travel is by coach, and there exist several companies that cover long distances in California/Nevada for good prices, such as Megabus.com, but you will have to book in advance. For longer distances, coaches might not be an option, in which case you will have to take a plane. With your VISA, you will be allowed to travel throughout the USA with any limits. In case you don't want to take a plane or a coach, you can always rent a car. Depending on the company, you will not need any special California driving license, which you will need though if you want to purchase a car. Just read carefully your rental contract and make sure that you will not have any mileage limit, because otherwise you will have to pay extra and that can make your travel much more expensive. Visit Sausalito, Point Reyes, and if you dare you can try to visit southern California and its beautiful National Parks. Once per quarter, Stanford University outdoor program offers organized trips to beautiful places for very reasonable prices, in which you are allowed to take part just by showing you Student-ID and paying the Outdoor program fees. Just make

sure of the day the signing up starts and sign in very early on the very same day, for the quality of this program makes it very demanded and will sell out very quickly.