

## **UC Santa Cruz Sept 2018 – June 2019**

So, you're considering studying abroad in California. Let me tell you about my experience, in the hopes of guiding you towards a choice that's right for you! I spent one full academic year at the University of California Santa Cruz (September 2018 to June 2019; three academic quarters), and one full calendar year in the US (August 2018 to August 2019). Here's what I learned.

### **Application:**

1. Whether you are about to start the application process or whether you're just starting your first semester and merely thinking about your future exchange options, *start working on your relationships with your professors now*. If you have a class that you know you are/were very good at, email your professor or go to their office hours. This will enormously help your chances when the time comes to ask for letters of recommendation, and these are vitally important to the selection process. When it is time to ask, make sure you are polite, respectful, and tell the professor why you believe they are a good fit for the job of recommending you (ex: they wrote very encouraging feedback for you previously, you got top marks in their class, you have similar areas of academic interest etc). To help them out with what to write, I also recommend that you briefly discuss your own academic or career goals with them.
2. I strongly recommend attending any and all information events held by the Auslandsstudium department, asking any questions you have about the programme, and above all *taking notes!* Believe me, this will save you a lot of googling and frustrations as you complete the application process. Don't be afraid to send them an email or go to office hours either, as it's much better to let them help you if you are stuck, rather than potentially miss an important document or deadline.
3. In my opinion, the most important aspect of your application is not your grades or your CV, but your study proposal. This letter is your chance to convince the selection committee that it's *you* they should put their faith in. It is an opportunity to explain why you're passionate about what you study, what your big dreams are following your studies, and how your exchange placement of choice will prove invaluable in helping you to succeed. Don't waste this opportunity, or rush it. Get as many people as you possibly can to read it, proofread it, and give you feedback. Don't stop working on it until it makes somebody emotional to read it!!
4. When you get accepted to the UC system, you will need to write another statement explaining your top three choices of university within the system. You can adapt your study proposal, but it is very important to do some research here. Picking your top 3 should not be an easy choice – you should not make your decision based purely on international rankings, location,

or weather. (Although these will certainly be private contributors to your choice, **do not** mention them in your proposal.) Instead, you should first research how each university approaches the subject you're studying; what kind of research are they doing? Mention specific professors, and specific papers that piqued your interest, in your letter. Now, research the culture of each university; how could their campus culture enrich your learning, or challenge you? Finally, research some programmes, societies, and initiatives done by each school; how do these inspire you, excite you, or make you want to be associated with that school?

5. Finally, a rather niche piece of advice: I grew up in an English-speaking country, and therefore did all of my schooling through English. I was able to get an exemption from the English test requirement by emailing the International Student Services at UCSC. If you are in the same situation, try this before you pay money to take an unnecessary test.

### **Stateside:**

1. As I'm sure you're tired of reading in every one of these reports, California is *expensive*. Like, really expensive, especially in comparison to Berlin. If you are eligible for any kind of grant, you should 100% apply for it, and if not, make sure you are budgeting to spend around \$1500 per month, not including rent. On that note, Santa Cruz is one of the most expensive areas for rental housing in the country. I would recommend trying to set up a flatshare in advance of your arrival or, if you're up for it, living on campus. Since I was bringing my boyfriend and my dog with me, I opted to live 30 minutes away from campus in a town called Watsonville. This is an excellent option that I can really recommend, as long as you are willing to buy a car while you are there.

2. Having a car was probably the best decision I made. If you can drive, I urge you to consider it, as this is what enabled me to visit Los Angeles, Joshua Tree, Las Vegas, Oregon, The Grand Canyon, and more during my weekends and weeks off school. In addition, I was able to drive up to San Francisco or Oakland (~2hrs) whenever there was a concert that I wanted to see. There is also the option to use the carsharing service Zipcar, which has cars on campus, or to rent, but for me it was worth it to buy an old, used car and then sell it before I went home.

3. The classes are hard work, but they are so rewarding. You will have homework every week, and dozens of pages of readings per class. There will be small tests and assignments every other week, in every class. You might feel like you are back in secondary school. But you will learn so much, you will be challenged and encouraged to participate, and you will have some really thought-provoking discussions with your classmates. The ten-week quarters are a whirlwind, and I absolutely recommend diving in by choosing courses that truly interest you, rather

than merely choosing those that satisfy your requirements. The professors are generally extremely accommodating for exchange students, so if you see a course that looks interesting in a totally different subject or that is technically above your level, just email them and ask! It worked for me twice, and I am so glad that I chose to challenge myself. Just make sure you don't overload yourself in your first quarter, as you'll still be finding your feet. I took 3 lower-division classes in Fall; 2 upper and 1 lower in Winter; and 3 upper 1 lower in Spring. This worked out for me because I really knew what I was signing myself up for in that final quarter!

4. The UCSC campus is the most breathtakingly stunning campus you're ever likely to see. Even spending four days a week there for a total of 30 weeks, I never got used to the magical feeling of walking through the forest to get between buildings. However much stress you might pile onto yourself with readings and exams just melts away on a solo walk through the trees, or out to the fields that overlook the ocean. Check Instagram's geotags for UCSC and believe me when I say, no picture I've ever seen actually does it justice.

5. I said that I managed to spend a whole calendar year in the Americas. It is extremely (and increasingly) important that you handle all of the bureaucracy and rules around your visa status seriously. Know your rights and your rules on your visa. The J-1 visa allowed me to arrive 30 days before the start of my programme, so I arrived 29 days before. At the end of my programme, I had 30 days to leave the States, so I stayed for 25 and then went to visit friends in Argentina for two weeks. While there, I renewed my ESTA. This allowed me to re-enter the USA again and stay for another 3 weeks, before picking up all my stuff and heading back to Berlin. This is why it is important that you know your rights and do everything within the rules of your visa status, and I recommend clearing any travels you want to do outside of America with the International Student Services before you make plans.

Finally, if you're unsure about whether this is all worth the money, the effort, and the homesickness (which can get pretty intense!), I'm telling you: there's no decision I've ever made that I think was better for my academic CV, my future career, my confidence and my mental health, than choosing to run away to California for a year. Do it. You'll probably never get a chance as good as this one again.