

Guidelines to becoming a Bronco

Preface

When going through the university options for your exchange year, you might see **Kalamazoo** and think nothing of it, leaving Western Michigan as an option behind... However, located 2 and ½ hours from Detroit and Chicago each, this little town is home to a great university that you as a student should seriously consider. With almost 20.000 students, WMU holds many opportunities to meet people, make friends, and pick courses from any subjects you could imagine. The core values of WMU are “Community-engaged,” “Discovery-driven,” “Equity-centred,” “Learner-focused,” and “Sustainability-guided,” and the university, staff, and students always do their best to follow through. These values were a major contributor to why I chose to become a Bronco. So, if you admire these principles just as I do, you should keep reading to find out what you need to consider when applying to become a Bronco as well.

Application

First and foremost, you should have successfully completed the **Direktaustausch** application process, including the interviews, and should have signed a confirmation, accepting the spot they have been offered for WMU. After that, you must apply to Western through their online portals. For formality reasons, the school asks you to submit student information and a few documents regarding visa papers and insurance.

Preparation (including BAföG and insurance)

While working through the WMU application process I highly advise students to start their **visa application**. You have to pay for the visa yourself and need to make sure to schedule an appointment for an interview at the embassy (if declared to be necessary). The embassy usually works responsibly in time, but you do not want to take any risks. You should be prepared to have a time buffer. My personal recommendation is to make a properly organized to-do list of what you need to have and do in order for everything to go smoothly. It makes everything much easier. Moreover, **please do not forget to keep paying their semester fees at the FU**, otherwise you will be ex-matriculated! There is a possibility to get the money back by applying for an **Urlaubssemester** at the FU, and also letting the Semesterticket office know to get your VBB Ticket money back as well.

Students who receive **BAföG** and would like to apply for **AuslandsBAföG** can do so by applying at the **Studierendenwerk Hamburg**, as they are responsible for exchanges to the USA. This process is very similar to any other BAföG application (with minimal differences).

PLEASE make sure to apply as soon as you know you have the spot for an exchange year/semester! The Studierendenwerk usually takes longer to work through applications, so you need to make sure you have enough time, so that you do not run into financial problems. Once they reach out from Hamburg, you are responsible for letting the Studierendenwerk in Berlin know that you will be receiving money from Hamburg. The Studierendenwerk Hamburg will ask for a certificate of enrollment which you will need to get filled out by the exchange student coordinator at WMU once you start classes there.

When it comes to insurance, there are different options. You can either choose to get insurance through WMU's plan (which will cost at least a couple thousand dollars), or you can look for **Ausslandsversicherung** here in Germany. Almost all German insurance companies offer this type of insurance. You need to make sure to find one that fits WMU's insurance policy. The university will ask for an insurance statement to check that. My personal recommendations would be the **Reiseversicherung für Schüler und Studenten** from **Hanse Merkur** (if you are able to spend more money), or (as a cheaper option) **ADAC Auslandsrankenversicherung**. I booked the ADAC insurance which came with other additional insurances but still ended up being cheaper than Hanse Merkur in total. Firstly, you need to have a membership at ADAC (it is easy to get, they usually sign you up when booking insurance). Then you can book the **Auslandsrankenversicherung** for the amount of time you will be abroad. I booked it with an additional **Reiserücktrittsversicherung**, **Haftpflichtversicherung**, and **Rechtsschutzversicherung** for emergencies.

Housing and Meal Plan at WMU

A double-room occupancy and meal plan are included in the WMU scholarship, that means students do not have to worry about additional costs for these. There are **3 meal plan options** available: **Bronco 14, Bronco Gold, and Bronco Gold Plus**. I recommend choosing the Gold Plus since it offers unlimited access to get food and the scholarship covers it. When it comes to housing exchange students are required to stay in the **valleys**. I was not able to choose which one and was directed to choose a room in the **international dorm** (Hadley Hall in Valley 1) which was great because I got to meet students from all over the world, and local students who were very keen on connecting with us internationals. It might be likely that future exchange students will have to do so as well. You will be able to choose a roommate through WMU's housing portal. If you choose not to, you will receive a random one. Students are also able to choose a single room if they wish, however they will have to cover the fees for that.

Arrival and Orientation

As Kalamazoo is not an airline hotspot, many students (including me) choose to fly into Chicago. From there, it is easy to get to Kalamazoo with the Amtrak which takes you directly from Union Station to Downtown Kalamazoo. Students can request to be picked up by the university transportation service for free which will get you from the train station and take you to the valleys. There, you need to check in to receive your room keys and essential information. The first 1-2 weeks will be busy as all students move in and **Fall Welcome** (orientation) begins. During Fall Welcome, there will be tons of activities. Students are divided in groups with ambassadors that take them from one activity to the next. These serve to give new students all the information they need, and meet people, including faculty and community members.

Courses

WMU offers a ton of courses. Please take advantage of that! **The classes have different levels:** 1000 (freshmen), 2000 (sophomore), 3000 (junior), and 4000 (senior). I recommend students to stick with the 3000 and 4000 classes as the quality of class content is better and more specific, and you will have more chances to meet other students your age/closer to your age (if that's something you care about). University systems work differently in the US than in Germany (be aware): classes take place twice a week (instead of once) and you will definitely have more assignments and papers to complete. Examinations will take place a few times (mid-term, end of term, occasional tests depending on your teachers). At times it will seem like quantity is valued over quality, however, do not take that as not having to put effort into the work. Teachers will notice and your goal is to elevate yourself and your knowledge! **I would advise you not to over-do it with the number of classes you pick.** The scholarship covers 15 credit points which is a lot. You will have to take at least 12 to keep your visa status, and trust me when I say that 12 credit points are perfectly enough. If you do need activities/classes that in some way could take pressure off of you, I recommend signing up for physical education classes. WMU offers a huge variety of them, from Yoga to Badminton, Aqua Aerobics, etc.

Life on Campus and in Kalamazoo

Living on WMU campus is very communal. There are many **social spaces** that student can use to hang out with their friends (or study). The resident assistants from all houses often organize events as well which I recommend you participate in. Additionally, **team sports and games** are very important for the spirit of an American university like Western. Make sure you go see the football and ice hockey games (or other sports that you enjoy) as students can get

their tickets for free. WMU has an amazing ice hockey team and in the winter it is a blast to watch them win and celebrate with the entire school.

There is also a **student recreation centre** where students can go to work out. All that is needed to access it and make use of the facilities is your student ID. The rec centre has a **pool, ball sport courts, weightlift areas, etc.** However nice the campus, Kalamazoo itself should not be left unexplored. To get around, I would recommend making friends who have cars. The town has a **bus system that is free for students** but of course riding the bus takes longer, and is less reliable. Public transport in the US is unfortunately not half as good as in Germany... Nevertheless, the bus is good to go Downtown where there are a few **cute coffee shops and other stores**. In the summer, the town also arranges a vintage market with local DJs which is super fun! I also highly recommend checking out the **Kalamazoo Institute of Arts** as it features many art works, especially of local artists.

If you have access to a car, I recommend taking small trips to lakes and enjoy the summer as long as you can (before the cold winter comes). That will also allow you to drive to other cities in Michigan, for example Grand Rapids. GR is very popular and worth exploring! The car ride there only takes 45 minutes. Overall, living in Kalamazoo can be very nice and fun if you take the opportunity to plan and be active. I would not recommend to stay on campus every weekend but rather to find a balance that allows you to be content. Get out, have fun, and most importantly, **BE A HAPPY BRONCO !**

If you are someone who values community engagement and is looking for some volunteer opportunities, you might find this part interesting as well:

Volunteer Work

If students are interested in doing volunteer work, there are a few options. A local church in town always looks for volunteers to work with children (which is great). Moreover, WMU has a food pantry that is run by the **Invisible Need Project** (helping students without access to resources) where staff is always in need of students/people helping out with stocking up the pantry when donations come in. I personally also got in touch with Kalamazoo's mayor who is always very happy to direct you to places in town that need volunteers (you will most likely be able to see or even meet him during orientation – it is not hard to get in touch with him at all).