

Admission

Getting officially admitted as a non-degree graduate student at Cornell took a while for me – partly because you need a (nominal) advisor in your field of study. In my case, a wonderful professor in German Studies agreed to give her signature – in contrast to the actual grad students at Cornell who are pursuing a PhD I did not have mandatory meetings with her, though.

The admission process will likely be a little bumpy and don't hesitate to send a polite email to the Office of Global Learning if things are taking too long for you to get your visa in time (but also remember that they have a hell of a lot to do and will get round to you eventually).

I arrived in Ithaca by bus from New York City a week before classes started which gave me enough time to get my visa and settle things in Berlin but also to almost get rid of the jetlag before attending the first seminar.

Academics

As a grad student you're not strictly tied to one subject or department and it is common practice to enroll in courses from all over the humanities.

There is a "shopping period" similar to the FU's enrollment period, but it's shorter and you might be required to already prepare some reading for the very first session.

I enrolled in several courses through the Cornell equivalent of Campus Management but wanted to explore a few more before settling on a final choice, so emailed the professors if I could attend the first session of their seminars. Everybody was very helpful and eventually, I settled on three courses, which turned out to be incredibly enriching, all leaving a strong impression on my academic interests and work since.

Let's talk about workload: Yes, the seminars themselves take longer (3 hours), at least in the humanities, there is a lot more reading to do than what I was used to at FU and at the end of the semesters I had to finish my papers in a rather short amount of time. To those who tend to stress a little about the workload ahead: You'll be fine, just be prepared to adapt your style of reading and writing a little. Rather than spending sessions with a close reading of certain arguments, seminars will take a broader approach to a text – which took me some time to get used to, but in the end, I found incredibly rewarding as a somewhat complementary skill to what I learned in humanities seminars at home. In terms of writing: I had to hand in short writing assignments for each seminar every week, which – after two or three initial weeks of getting the metaphorical rust off my fingers and keyboard – quickly turned out to be great practice. If you have to hand in a final paper, try and get thinking about it early to reduce stress at the end of the semester but also don't be too perfectionist about it. Professors don't expect something that's ready to publish, take it as an opportunity to document where you're at in a certain topic.

The advice I can give: Check out courses that serve your interests, regardless of whether they are offered in your field (but check with your Masterbeauftragten at home whether they are compatible with your Studienordnung). Decide quickly and limit yourself to a reasonable number of courses – the semester's gonna pick up speed before you know it. Prioritize and, yes, be prepared to work during the weekends. Try and keep participating in the seminars, even if a communicative barrier may show up between what you're used to from a German academic context and what you're encountering at Cornell.

And enjoy: My professors were incredibly well prepared for each session, they were genuinely interested in each individual student's thoughts and progress and I enjoyed talking with fellow students after the sessions.

Getting around Ithaca

Cornell, as I learned firsthand to the chagrin of my poor leg muscles, is located on a hill – a real hill, don't let yourself be fooled by your hubris like me. I considered myself a fine enough walker and biker to not care about a little incline... so if you, like me, originally come from a rather flat stretch of Europe, be warned, this hill will make you sit sweating and panting in your seminars, if you miss the bus.

Speaking of buses: Public transport works relatively well in Ithaca and if you live close to the Commons (a small egg-shaped pedestrian zone in the center of the town) getting around by foot will probably work out fine.

As I lived in a lovely flatshare a little further from the Commons – on another hill – I bought a bike (there are bike sales held regularly by a great co-op-like workshop, check out Bike Walk Tompkins at 803 Cascadilla Street, if they're still around). Biking was a great way to get around downtown, but I wasn't one of those crazy fit bikers, who rode up that steep hill to campus. You can actually fasten your bike to a bike rack in front of the buses, which is a really cool service they offer (for free), but the best routine for me was to ride downtown, lock my bike at the foot of the hill and then walk (slowly) or catch a bus to campus.

Biking isn't as common in the US as it is in Europe, so be prepared to get funny looks when you're cycling. Still, there's somewhat of a die-hard community of bicycle lovers around and in US-terms, Ithaca is a very bike friendly town. Plus: There are e-bikes all over town that you can unlock via app and that will actually take you uphill (still sweaty, but at least you get there on time). I found them too expensive to be a long-term solution, though.

Having a bike is also a great way to explore parts of Ithaca that are further from the Commons too and to do some grocery shopping at Walmart/Wegman's or Aldi's which are all a little too far to walk, if you don't want to spend a whole afternoon on groceries. Most people without a car, however, resort to "Instacart" and have their groceries delivered to their door.

Housing

Ithaca is a small town in the middle of nowhere and not really sufficiently equipped to support a big university, which is part of the reason why rent is so expensive compared to average housing cost in the area. There is campus housing available, but it isn't cheaper than living downtown. To find a flat, Facebook groups can be useful and, with a solid amount of distrust and gut feeling, you could probably use Craigslist – but always keep an eye out for scams. Cornell also lists a number of co-ops which are houses, in some cases owned by the university, that are shared by about ten to twenty people. Via a few detours, I actually found my room through one of these co-ops and ended up in a lovely, shared house with five grad students in the sciences. As we lived a little further from the commons on west hill, which traditionally isn't one of the favored streets for students, the rent was cheap compared to the rest of Ithaca. I liked the area though: from the porch we got a great view of the river inlets and Cornell on its hill. But if you don't have a car, it's

probably not a great option for the spring semester as the snow might make it difficult to ride downtown on a bike – or you have to take into account a half hour walk.

Be prepared that it may be a little more difficult to find housing for a semester as most contracts are designed to last for the whole academic year. But also, don't stress, if you're having trouble finding a place to stay right away – renting out and subletting works a little more short-term than what I'm used to in Berlin. That is, housing offers for the fall might not get published until June/July.

Social Life

I was lucky to live with very caring and helpful housemates who picked me up from the bus station where I arrived from New York City, showed me around Ithaca and introduced me to their friendship groups very early on. But even without such a soft landing it's easy to get to know people at Cornell, everybody is happy to have a small chat, share useful knowledge about the Campus and Ithaca and as the town is so small, there's a great chance you'll run into people in the Commons.

It did, however, take some time to connect with people on a deeper level, which I think is mostly due to that specific situation of being in an Ivy League PhD program in a small town, where there's little else to do. Remember: The grad students around you are all in different stages of their PhD, they are under great pressure with a workload that's probably higher than yours as most of them teach undergrad writing seminars several times a week.

Still, talking to a lot of people worked out for me and I'm still grateful to those who naturally included me in their Friday nights out and took time out of their tight schedule to have a drink on their porch with me.

Finances

I was lucky to receive a generous stipend from Cornell so didn't have to worry about savings and additional income at all. A minor disadvantage is that you'll have to open a US bank account as the stipend won't be deposited directly to an international bank account. Most banks will require a Social Security Number to open a checking account online. If you've never been employed in the US, it's pretty much impossible to get one though. What worked for me was to make an in-person appointment with a bank of my choice and they only required my visa documents and a US-address.

If you need to buy appropriate winter clothing, you can try to apply to Cornell's Access Fund that provides students who qualify as low income (based on their financial aid package) with up to \$500.

In terms of food, I was lucky to share groceries with my flat which lowered the costs a little. There's the option to get a meal plan at Cornell which gives you access to the dining halls on campus. Most grad students don't opt for those, however, and there are other places to get food on campus (e.g. Zeus Café in Golwin Smith hall, the Big Red Barn and other little cafés on campus). The cheapest option would probably be to do your own meal prep.

A few last tips and heads-up:

Most bars in Ithaca won't accept your foreign ID, so get used to carrying around your passport.

If you get tired of working in the (admittedly very lovely and well equipped) libraries or tired of campus in general, the public library in the commons can be a good option to get a change of scenery every once in a while. You can get a library card with proof of an Ithacan address and they are well stocked with non-fictional and fictional literature, and they also have a large online offering, including audiobooks!

Initially, I planned on traveling to New York City on the weekends – which never worked due to my workload. But there's Fall Break (a long weekend), Thanksgiving break (a week) and of course, you can travel during your visa grace period (just make sure not to leave the country to go to Canada e.g., you'll not be accepted in again during the grace period – before that though, I can highly recommend to take the seven-hour bus around Cayuga lake past the Niagara Falls to Toronto for example).

A word on mental health: The winter gets quite cold and dark. I was lucky to leave the city before the real winter hit and locals have told me that the onset of winter has been shifting during the past years. So you have a good chance to escape the coldest days if you're going in the fall, but if you're going for the spring semesters, it might be snowing until April. Personally, I found autumn and winter a lot less draining, tough, than the Berlin Winter, as Ithaca is sunnier and greener than Berlin.

Also, be prepared to be part of an Ivy League University that works as a capitalist enterprise, and – during my time at Cornell at least – was fighting with the city of Ithaca because Cornell wasn't paying taxes. The concept of the university as a public, critical and possibly contested space seemed even less widespread than in Europe. On a more hopeful note: During the semester I spent there, there were efforts going on to obtain greater political power for the student body. However, I left too early to experience how the encampments changed university politics and the atmosphere on campus.