

Columbia University Direct Exchange Report 2021/2022

Having used the last couple of months to let all that has happened during my time in New York City sink in on its own, the following is a brief sketch of some of my impressions that have since stood out in both their personal and general significance. I hope you will find it helpful when navigating your own experience at Columbia University.

Before Classes Begin

I received my official acceptance letter from Columbia towards the end of April of 2021, along with a handbook concerning all the things I would have to take care of before the beginning of the academic year. Despite all its stress-inducing potential, this handbook was indispensable in preparing for my year abroad. Looking back, I think my arrival in NYC turned out to be as smooth as it was precisely because of all the heavy planning and list-making that went into it.

Financing Options

Admission to Columbia for one-year exchange students is tuition-free and guarantees you a BCGS stipend of \$12,000, from which \$1,600 are deducted for tax purposes. While this tuition waiver and scholarship are already very generous, one can and should apply for further funding. Whether you decide to live on campus or in the broader Manhattan area, housing in NYC totals around \$1,000 - \$1,300 per month, that is, around \$10,000 per academic year. I chose Columbia Housing and ended up paying \$10,500 for my entire stay. There are also some additional mandatory fees related to university living, and unfortunately, there is no way around any of them:

- Student life fee: \$850 per term (2021/22)
- International services fee: \$110 per term (2021/22)
- Health and related services fee: \$610 per term (2021/22)
- Columbia Medical Insurance: \$3700 per academic year; Fall Semester price paid prior to arrival (2021/22)

Beyond my BCGS stipend, I thankfully received a PROMOS travel grant and an Ernst-Reuter-stipend. Other scholarship options include DAAD, Fulbright and

AuslandsBAföG, though the latter two were not eligible for me as I don't have a German citizenship.

Visa

Like most of the exchange students I've met, I applied for an F1 student visa. This is valid for up to one year and allows you to work on campus. I recommend that you start with the visa process as soon as possible. This means requesting your I-20 document from Columbia's ISSO office immediately after receiving your admission letter, and then making a visa appointment at the U.S. embassy as soon as you get the I-20 in your mailbox. Expect to pay around \$150 for the entire process, and don't book a flight before obtaining your visa.

Housing

I would encourage you to opt for university housing. While not necessarily cheaper than off-campus housing, living in a Columbia dorm comes with certain advantages. For one, you are only a very short walk away from Columbia's main campus, its dining halls and libraries. You also get to network more with fellow students and dorm residents. I don't think I would have felt as close to some of the people I met at Columbia had it not been for our constant and immediate proximity. Living on-campus means engaging with campus events, clubs, initiatives, and people, while easy access to the 1 train via the nearby subway station means that you are also a short ride away from life in Manhattan's bustling southernmost neighborhoods.

Columbia's housing application usually ends sometime during late June. About a month later I was given a single room at the 600 West 113th dorm —otherwise known as "Nuss" for the great bagel shop right below it— but I've also heard great things about East Campus and River Hall. Though it is almost guaranteed that, as an exchange student, you will get a single room deal, what can be really annoying about the Columbia housing system is that it tends to neglect the dorm preference list that you attach to your housing application. An example: I had River Hall as my first option, and a friend of mine had 600 West 113th as his first option, and yet they placed me in 600 West 113th and him in River Hall.

Health requirements

Columbia Health requires you to submit proof of vaccination against measles, mumps and rubella, along with proof of a recent flu shot (received no more than 6 months before arrival). For students that do not qualify for religious exemption, the three doses of the Covid19-vaccine are also mandatory prior to arrival. You should try keeping an eye out for Columbia Health emails, and regularly check their website as requirements and deadlines are usually prone to change. Keep in mind that course enrollment for the fall won't be an option unless all immunization documents are submitted on time.

Phone number

For me, getting a U.S. phone number came as a great advantage during my stay, as people in NYC prefer using text over WhatsApp or Messenger, and it's just easier to maintain contact with friends if you are able to use their preferred platform. Like most foreign students, I purchased a [MINT](#) mobile card upon arrival. MINT has student-friendly phone plans, and if you're staying in the U.S. for 9 months like I did, purchasing a 3-month plan followed by a 6-month plan seems like a good deal: you end up giving \$15 per month for 4 GB, unlimited data and text, and nationwide coverage. (Along your MINT SIM card you get a second one in the mail for free, which can come in handy if you have friends or family visiting you from Europe.)

Bank account

Setting up a bank account in the U.S. is not necessary, but it is very convenient. There is a small Santander office on the Columbia campus, as well as a Santander ATM, which is why I opted for a Santander checking account.

Networking

Upon receiving your Columbia admission letter, you are immediately eligible to set up a Lionmail account, and I strongly recommend doing that. Lionmail will be your official Columbia email address that you will be using throughout the academic year, but it will also be your main platform for informing yourself about any pre-arrival trainings relating to, among other things, public safety, sexual harassment, and Covid19, as well as online networking and orientation events. The latter are not always mandatory but I've learned a lot by attending. It was mostly through these pre-arrival networking events that I got first-hand tips for living on campus and in NYC, for

instance, and it was through orientation events that I met some of my greatest friends at Columbia. Prior to arriving to NYC, you are also assigned an academic advisor and are required to have an introductory meeting with them to discuss everything, from enrollment and class selection to housing and health concerns. This advisor will be a primary reference person throughout your time at Columbia, set to help you with any problems that you may face.

During the Academic Year

Courses and Course Work

Course selection at Columbia is only possible through the [SSOL](#) platform, but you can check course descriptions and instructor reviews on [Vergil](#) or the [CU Directory](#) prior to registration. To maintain a full-time status at the university—in other words, to be allowed to keep studying there—you must enroll for at least 12 credits per semester. As classes usually count for three credits each, the most common minimum amount of classes you must take per semester is four. While full-time Columbia students do indeed take four, five, or even six classes per semester, I myself found the amount extremely unrealistic. For one, the workload for a single Columbia seminar can be immense, and given that I also wanted to make the most out of my limited time in NYC, I knew that four classes wouldn't do. I ended up taking three seminars and two 1-credit reading sessions for a total of 13 credits during my first semester, and took three advanced seminars for four credits each for a total of 12 credits during my second semester. Overall, I do think it's possible that you manage a reasonable workload without losing your student status or sleep, and I recommend taking it easy. That way you can devote more energy into individual classes and properly enjoy the city.

As a student of Comparative Literature and Sociolinguistics, I did have a lot of freedom in choosing and attending the courses of my liking, including two film classes that didn't have an immediate resonance with my degree. I understand that this might not be the case for all exchange students. In any case, I generally suggest that you always reach out to professors prior to the first week of classes and express your great interest in participating in their seminars—especially if you feel like you might not be the ideal candidate for the course. From personal experience, this gesture is greatly valued. Columbia instructors are very kind and attentive, and it's worth taking up the opportunity of weekly office hours even if just to say hi and introduce yourself.

Extracurriculars

During my time at Columbia, I became an editor for the literary magazine *The Columbia Review* and joined the chess club. There are so many things you can do at the university, from ballet, theater, and basketball to barista trainings and joining the Columbia Circus! A great way to find out about all the extracurricular options available for each academic year is visiting the activity fair at the beginning of September. Moreover, the gym is open to all with a Columbia ID and has an Olympic-sized pool, while your Lionmail can be used to access *kanopy*, an amazing movie platform with great and diverse options.

Work and Taxes

During my second semester, I became a research assistant to one of my most beloved professors at Columbia. The job consisted of 8 hours per week and lasted 14 weeks, during which I learned a lot about academic and bibliographical research, engaged with a number of administrative offices at Columbia and obtained a Social Security Number (SSN). For this latter benefit alone, working on campus is worth it for all exchange students. Getting an SSN once you begin working is so much easier and faster than getting an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN), which is what exchange students who don't work on campus need to obtain in order to file a tax return. I understand the privilege of my position, and I know that not everyone will have the option of working for a professor. However, one could still apply for a job at the gym, at one of Columbia's libraries, or at some of the cafeterias on campus and be almost certain of their timely employment, which would guarantee them an SSN and a stress-free tax filing process through the easy-to-use, free-of-cost Sprintax platform. A few more things on taxes: you always file a tax return the year after you've received U.S. income. For an exchange student who received a BCGS stipend during 2021, for instance, the tax filing period would be between March and April of 2022. All exchange students who hold a stipend must file both a federal and a state tax return on time, and missing the filing deadline means having to pay a considerable amount.

Meal plans

Though convinced that I would have enough time to cook for myself during the semester, it quickly became clear that I needed a meal plan, as living at Columbia can be pretty hectic. There are four main meal plans of varying prices and meal numbers.

Once you choose a meal plan, you can always switch to a bigger or smaller packet, but you cannot opt out of university dining for the entire year, which can be very limiting. I got the least expensive, smaller meal plan of 75 meals per semester, and ended up paying around \$16 per meal (!), what I consider to be a rather ridiculous amount. The food is not the best either. While there are many vegetarian, vegan, and kosher options across Columbia's six dining halls, the amount of fast food that is being served every day is insane, and sometimes really hard to resist. I don't know if I would recommend a meal plan. If you decide to cook all your meals, know that it won't necessarily be cheaper, but it'll definitely be much healthier. I recommend Trader Joe's on 72nd street and the new Lidl branch in Harlem for grocery-shopping.

Leisure

Eating out is very expensive, but it's worth it once in a while, and these have been some of my favorite options throughout the year: Bar Pitti, Veselka, Café Mogador, Wu's Wonton King (for larger groups), Deluxe Green Bo, Kiki's, and FMN. For options near or around campus, check out Pisticci, Fumo, Massawa, Milano Market, Absolute Bagels, Thai Market, and the absolutely legendary Hungarian Pastry Shop for *kaffee und kuchen*. NYC has some amazing bars, but my favorite by far has been Mr. Fongs in Chinatown. Finally, I recommend taking advantage of your Columbia ID for museum visits, as it grants you free (!) access to the Met and the MoMA, as well as reduced access to most museums around the city. The Whitney Museum has pay-what-you-wish admission on Fridays, and the Guggenheim on Saturdays. For books, go to the Strand for a great variety and to McNally Jackson for really fine editions.

Feel free to contact me per email through the Direktaustausch Office. I'll be very happy to answer your questions and give you more tips, and I'm sure you're going to enjoy your time at Columbia as much as I did, academically, socially, and culturally!