

My Experience at UCLA

As a student of North-American studies, it is essentially required to do some form of study abroad and with my regional focus it made sense to go to the US. After looking through the US-American partner universities, I quickly realized that it would be smart to also apply for a DAAD scholarship for financial stability. Since I ended up going to the University of California, Los Angeles, which doesn't come with a scholarship from the Direct Exchange, getting the DAAD scholarship actually saved my stay abroad. However, because I had a DAAD scholarship, my experience slightly differs from people who did not have one, but I will make these differences clear in the report, so you can plan accordingly.

Application Process, Visa, and Flights

The application process for the Direct Exchange is essentially the same for everyone in its beginning stages. My top choices were Chicago, Middlebury, and the UC System (which is what I ended up going to). After being nominated for a spot, things will differ depending on which university you are being sent to. For the UC System, there is a second application process in January, which will determine which UC campus you are going to. It is a fairly simple application process, and you don't have to worry about spending a lot of time on it, since you will have needed most of the documents for the direct exchange application. There, you also have to list your top three UC campus choices, which in my case were UC Los Angeles, UC Riverside, and UC Santa Barbara. In March, I received the news that I would be going to UCLA.

This is when all of the bureaucracy starts and let me tell you – it will feel like a lot to handle and possibly overwhelming. **But trust the process.** Thousands of students before you have been sent on the direct exchange.

The main thing you will have to tackle is the visa application. Most likely you will apply for a J1 visa (the exchange visitor visa); but it could also be the F1 visa. Your university will tell you what visa you will be applying for, which in my case was the J1 visa. The first step in this process actually involves the university. Some time after you receive your Letter of Acceptance, UCLA will ask you to provide them with documentation of your finances. For bureaucratic reasons, you have to show that you have some 18,000 USD available for the year abroad, which can come from a combination of scholarships and family and personal funds. With the DAAD scholarship, I was already able to cover about \$14,000, the rest of the 4,000 I covered with family and personal funds. It's important to know that you don't actually have to use those funds when in the US. They just want to know that you can support yourself during your time abroad, but nobody checks if you're actually using your relatives' money. After about 4 weeks you should receive a form in your mail, the DS-2019. This form is the most important

document for the next year, aside from your passport. You need the DS-2019 to not only apply for the visa, but also to get into the US. **Do not lose it.**

With the DS-2019 you will be able to apply for the visa, filling out a lengthy application form online with ridiculous questions (such as “Are you a part of a guerilla group?”), and some other documents. You need to schedule what is called an “interview”, which you should do as soon as possible, as the appointments can fill up fairly quickly (you can always apply for an emergency appointment if you can’t get one in time for your departure). The actual interview is just running from one counter to the next and answering maybe 3 questions. A week later you can pick up your passport including your visa. As soon as you hold it in your hands you will think to yourself: “And that’s what all that fuss was about?”

A short note on flights: try to book them with the option to reschedule them. This is not something you’ll want to save money on. I had some last minute doctor’s appointments that would have been after my departure, but luckily I was able to reschedule my flights for free. Likewise, I was able to push back my flight to Germany to travel some more.

Finances/Phone Contracts/Insurance/Doctors

If you plan on going to the UC, I highly recommend looking out for scholarship opportunities. The DAAD scholarship is one of the best for year-long stays in the US, as it covers your housing/food expenses with a €1200 monthly allowance, and also covers insurance and travel expenses among other things. However, there are also other scholarships, and with how desirable the DAAD scholarship is, it makes sense to also check out other opportunities that tend to get overlooked. Application deadlines for these types of scholarships are quite early, so make sure to check them as early as you can. If all else fails, there is PROMOS which can at least “support” you for half a year.

Generally, you should calculate for expenses of at least \$1500 per month, which includes housing, food, university expenses, and extra-curricular activities. Depending on your living situation, this number may be higher or lower, but it’s better to overestimate.

As you probably have heard a million times now, phone contracts are really expensive in the US. You have to make sure to use a provider that is actually compatible with European phones, such as T-Mobile, AT&T, or Mint Mobile. Mint is certainly the cheapest option, I ended up using T-Mobile because it offered some additional benefits. You should get an American SIM-Card as soon as possible, as it will be necessary for many benefits in the US.

At US universities, everyone has to be health insured (similarly to the German system). You have the option to either take the University-own insurance plan, which is often more expensive

but comes with more benefits, or you can try to waive the university insurance with an equal insurance plan from a different provider. With the DAAD scholarship, which covers insurance, this decision was made for me. The DAAD has its own insurance plan, but they already know when universities don't accept that plan for a waiver. In the case of UCLA, it does not accept the DAAD insurance, meaning that the DAAD will pay for the UCLA insurance. I was honestly really happy about that, because with the university-own plan you can use the campus doctors essentially for free, without the annoying self-pay fees. Therapy is also covered by the UCLA insurance plan, and the therapy infrastructure in the US is actually much better than it is in Germany. I did therapy in the US and got a referral with an appointment within a week's time – no three months waiting periods. As long as you don't have to go to urgent care or the emergency room, going to the doctor is actually surprisingly chill at UCLA.

Housing and Food

Housing in LA is ... a bit of a difficult topic. First of all, it is expensive. And not Berlin/Munich expensive but *actually* expensive. Your first option is to look for a room off campus. You should prepare to share a room with at least one other person, which will cost you at least \$800 a month. Single rooms in a shared apartment start at about \$1500 a month. That is not to say that you might not find cheaper rooms, but the cheaper the further away from campus, the more ratchet, and the more people will apply for it. A good place to look for housing are Facebook groups.

Your other option is to live on campus in either dorms or university apartments. This is what I did, and it turned out to be a perfect choice for me. However, this can also go very wrong for you if you have terrible roommates. Dorm rooms are also quite expensive, but they come with a built in community (making it easier for you to meet people) and they come with a meal plan, meaning you don't have to worry about food. On-campus apartments don't necessarily come with a meal plan, but you might have the option to book one anyway. I chose the cheapest dorm option, a classic triple, in which three people live in a tiny room for about \$1400 a month including the meal plan – the true college experience. I was very lucky, and me and my roommate actually never got a third roommate assigned, meaning the two of us essentially lived in a double while paying for a triple. The classic triple is the cheapest option, but you can also go for better quality/bigger rooms, which cost more. The other thing you should look out for are **Living Learning Communities** (LLCs) which you can apply for within the housing application. These LLCs are kind of like "topic floors", where one floor has a certain theme. I was in the Creative Collective, but there are also other themes like sustainability, LGBTQ+, and political engagement. LLCs have a much tighter community network on the floors because they have organized events and an intern that is specialized on creating community

engagement on the floor. Because of that, I actually knew almost everyone from my floor, which is somewhat rare in the dorms.

Lastly, a note on the meal plan. UCLA will tell you that it has the best on-campus food in the nation. This is a pre-pandemic narrative that they continue to blast everywhere. Don't get me wrong, the food is much better than any cafeteria food at the FU, but it is far from what it used to be. I generally liked the food, but if I could have had the choice of cooking for myself, I would have done so. Food is quite expensive in LA and the US in general, so at least I didn't have to worry about that with the meal plan. Also, don't sleep on Epicuria. It is by far the best dining hall and that's a hill I'm ready to die on.

Academics at UCLA

With the quarter system, studying is actually much more stressful at UCLA than it is at the FU. Instead of a whole semester, you only have a quarter of 11 weeks to cover the course material. You will also not write your papers in the break after the quarter, as we do here in Germany, but there is what is called a "finals week". This last week of the quarter is when everyone wants to die a little, because they have to finish three 10 page papers by the end of the week (I am not kidding, every midnight during finals week people do the "midnight scream" to let out their frustration). This sounds like a lot, but I also want to tell you that it's actually not as hard as people make it out to be. First of all, your entire grade does not depend on your final project/paper/exam, as there are usually multiple small essays, quizzes, and midterms during the quarter that make up a large part of your grade. The final project normally doesn't make up for more than 30% of the grade when everything comes together. Also, there is what students in the US call "grade inflation". It's actually much easier to get an A at UCLA than it is to get a 1.0 at the FU. In summary, there is more work and it's generally more stressful, but it's also easier to get good grades. My advice: Use the first quarter to get a feel for the dynamics of studying at UCLA and then take time out to travel and see LA when you have a good feel for how much work you actually have to do. As the saying goes, "B's get degrees" and no one expects you to be a straight A student in your year abroad. Part of the deal is that you get to experience a different culture. I usually did way too much work for university, and in hindsight I wish I had used my time to see more of LA and California.

Living in LA and Public Transport

LA is an absolutely ginormous city which is really hard to actually see fully. Westwood (which is where UCLA is) lies in the very West of LA, north of Santa Monica. I think everyone can find their own niche in LA, I personally rediscovered my love for art and museums in LA. Some of

the best museums are in LA with many world-famous works exhibited, and you should at least go to the Getty, which is near the campus and has an amazing view on LA (it's also free). Other than art, LA has something to offer for everyone. It's obviously a city of film, and you'll recognize many filming locations when traveling through the city (also on campus, UCLA is often used for college sites in movies and TV shows). But you can also do some amazing hiking, surfing, and other sports here due to its highly diverse landscape. It's also a city of music, with some great Jazz clubs and many *many* concert opportunities.

Now, actually getting to those places is another thing. Before I went to the US, I heard people speculating about getting a car. **Do not get a car in LA.** Aside from the money you'll waste on car insurance and the car itself, do not underestimate the money you have to spend on parking spots. You can rent parking spots on/near campus, but they cost a couple hundred dollars a month. In the city, parking will cost you up to \$15 an hour if you're unlucky. And that's not even considering how terrible traffic is in LA – infamously the city with some of the worst traffic in the country. My advice: use Lyft/Uber, Flixbus or public transport. Lyft and Uber are fantastic when traveling in a group of three or more people because you can then split the cost of the ride. For single rides, it is normally a little too expensive. Flixbus is great if you want to cheaply travel California or to Las Vegas. If you're traveling by yourself, your single best option within LA is public transport.

LA has “surprisingly good” public transport. Naturally, it's nothing in comparison to Berlin, but it's actually much cheaper and LA is far bigger than Berlin, so it's a bit of an unfair comparison. LA has mainly a bus system, but there is also a metro. UCLA is quite well connected to the bus system, unfortunately not yet to the metro system, but they are building in station in Westwood which isn't finished yet. You can expect to take about an hour (or more) anywhere you want to go in LA. Santa Monica is reachable within 40 minutes meaning you can get to the beach fairly quickly. To use the buses and the metro you should get a “TAP Card”, either the physical version or the mobile version. For the mobile version you need a phone number, but it is a little more convenient. On the TAP card you can store money for fares and simply tap it on the sensor when boarding the bus. What I love about the LA buses is that the bus drivers are super chill. If your TAP card doesn't work, or you don't have the money for some reason, they will still let you ride the bus.