

Experience Report Direct Exchange
FU Berlin – University of California, Irvine
Wintersemester 18/19-Summersemester 19

Preparation:

Due to my subject of focus, going to North America, and specifically the United States, has been my goal all along. With the help of FU's Auslandsbüro, it hasn't been too difficult to gather the necessary paperwork and understand the procedures in order to obtain a J-1 student visa.

Scholarships opportunities are usually informed to you by the University, due to the relative-high costs of living in the United States, I would recommend applying to as many as you can. Other things such as health insurance are usually provided by U.S. universities, hence it would be a personal choice whether to opt-out of it and have your own or get the one which the school provides. Travel costs can be covered by the scholarships, however, most do not, so make sure it is counted into your overall expenses for the year or semester abroad.

The most important step is to attend all of the meetings held by the Auslandsbüro and to understand the whole process of leaving, coming back, and what is expected of students along the way.

Living:

Students' living situation in Irvine, California is quite different than that of Berlin. Usually, two people share a room. There are also single rooms, but for that you need to be ready to pay around 900-1200 U.S. dollars a month.

There are dormitories and "international houses" where they arrange exchange students from around the world to live together. I personally decided to look for accommodations close to the university, although I eventually did move into the off-campus housing built by *The Irvine Company* which is right by the university. There will be people renting them out around campus once a new quarter begins.

Living in Irvine, especially around the campus, you should be ready to share a room or pay more than the rent in Berlin to live alone.

If you live off-campus, there is an issue with transportation. People usually get around with cars, public transportation is scarce, although not completely nonexistent. Bikes can be seen but not a lot of students get around on bikes due to the constant high-level of traffic.

Studying:

UC Irvine runs on a quarter system which is around 11 weeks, hence the tempo of learning and classes are very different from that of the FU. In a quarter system, you have to learn things rather quickly and look for key information that can help you with your exams. Halfway through the quarter there will be a “midterm”, and at the end “finals”. Both are exams to test your understanding and efforts in the classes. Some classes of humanities have several essays throughout the quarter, but in general there will be more exams. The workload isn’t necessarily more, but definitely more compacted, hence you should be ready to work intensively for classes.

In your free time:

University culture is very different in the U.S. from in Berlin. The school arranges and hosts a lot of programs throughout the quarters and an American college students’ free time usually consist of extracurricular, club-activities. Fraternities and Sororities provide you with a network of alumni and peers who are interested in the things you are interested in. However, joining one requires time for activities and money to be invested. Other activity-based clubs are interesting as well. There will be plenty of chances to look around the area. Orange County is most famous for its beaches – Huntington and Newport are both surfers’ paradise.

You will also have the opportunity to travel around California, take that chance and see more of the state, or even the country. Visit Los Angeles (2 hours away with a car) or San Francisco to get a taste of the differences within one single state.

Overall:

It was a great experience packed with adventures and lots of things to learn. If you are willing to try out new things, it won’t disappoint. It is up to you how your exchange year will be. One can be uni-focused and at the same time take time to explore. I found the exchange program really worthy and I have definitely learned a lot throughout the 10 months I was there. Remember to follow the guidelines, and the rest is an empty canvas of which you are the artist – fill it up with unforgettable memories and knowledge. Have fun!