

Experience Report

Direct Exchange - University of Minnesota 2021-2022



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1. Congratulations!

Congratulations on getting a spot at the University of Minnesota. A great, exciting, and perhaps also challenging time awaits you in the United States. This report will talk about some of my experiences in Minnesota and hopefully give you some useful tips to make the most out of your time in the United States.

2. Preparation

A direct exchange involves a great deal of organizational effort, which should not be underestimated. You should therefore start planning the exchange about a year before the actual exchange in order to have enough time to organize everything.

2.1 Application Process

The application process at the Freie Universität Berlin starts with gathering all the necessary documents for the application. For this you will need your **current enrollment certificate**, your most recent **report card**, a **letter of motivation**, one to two **letters of recommendation from professors**, and **proof of language proficiency**. Certificates accepted by the University of Minnesota to proof language proficiency are the TOEFL iBT, IELTS and the CAE. Regarding the exact requirements, you can find more information at the following link: [language proficiency](#). I ended up taking the TOEFL, which can be taken at various test centers in Berlin. It currently costs about \$250 and is valid for two years. You will get the test result 10 days after the test. I took the test in June of the year before my exchange.

Once you have gathered all the necessary documents you can fill out the **online application form** that opens about four weeks before the application deadline. This can again take some time, so start as early as you can.

Subsequently to the submission of your application, the selection committee will make a preliminary decision and you will be invited to a short interview in case of positive feedback. The questions are very doable, and you shouldn't be nervous about it. The interview will furthermore be conducted in English. After you have been finally nominated by the FU Berlin you still have to be accepted at the partner university. However, this is usually only a formality. After final acceptance at the partner university, you will receive the exchange contract, more documents to fill out, as well as your **I20** – the documentation you need to apply for the visa.

2.2 Visa

Once you have received your **I20** you can start the visa process by paying the **SEVIS fee**. This fee is administered by the US Department of Homeland Security, and you will have to pay it on the official website. To pay the fee you can click on the link found at this step by step guide from the University of Minnesota: [visa](#). After having paid the fee, you can locate the nearest US embassy or consulate in your home country and apply for the visa. For Germany, you can click on the following links: [ein US-Visum beantragen](#) -> [neues Benutzerkonto erstellen](#) and start the

online application. The application will from experience take some time, but the exchange is worth the effort 😊. After a successful online application, you can make an appointment at an embassy or consulate. Since those appointments may be shortly before the beginning of the exchange you should **apply for the visa immediately after receiving the I20** to give yourself a time buffer.

2.3 Scholarships

Since the exchange in the United States is very expensive despite the scholarships from the direct exchange, you should look into further financing options, especially a possible **scholarship from the DAAD**. The deadlines are relatively long before the exchange and you should thus get an overview of them when starting your application process. You can find more information about the financing options under the following link: [Fördermöglichkeiten](#).

2.4 Classes

The University of Minnesota offers a very wide variety of classes. If you don't plan on getting credit for all of the classes you are taking, I would recommend taking courses from other degrees to expand your horizon as well as taking fun classes. The university for instance offers great PE classes such as skin and scuba diving, squash, and skiing. Even though some of those courses include further fees, it is a great opportunity to learn something new.

As an exchange student, you will have to take at least 12 credits (24 ECTS), but can take up to 20 credits (40 ECTS). The recommended amount is between 12 and 16 credits. I took 16 credits during my first semester, and I really wouldn't take more than that, as the workload is usually a lot heavier than in Germany, even though exams are much easier. If you are planning on getting a student job, I would not take more than 12 credits to still have enough free time.

When choosing courses, you must also keep in mind that as an exchange student you are considered a non-degree student and will therefore not be able to take courses that are reserved for students from certain colleges. As a business student, I wanted to take a course at the business school and would not have been allowed to do so. With the permission of the professor, I was allowed to take the course anyway, as there was enough space after all business students had already chosen their courses. It is therefore always worth asking in such situations.

Finally, to choose your classes, you will use the university's [schedule builder](#). After selecting all of your classes, you can add them to your "shopping cart" and you finally register via the university portal. You can use the university's [step-by-step guide](#) for detailed instructions on how to register for classes.

2.5 Housing

While living in the United States, you will have different options when it comes to housing. First of all, you have to decide if you want to live in an accommodation that is provided by the University of Minnesota, or if you want to look for housing on your own. For exchange students, the university provides three choices. Radius and Yudof, both apartment style complexes, as well as Centennial, a classical dorm. While Radius has the most amenities, including a private gym as well as a community hot tub, Yudof is the most conveniently located accommodation, as it is right across the student union, Coffman Memorial Union, as well as right in between all the classrooms on the East- and Westbank. As both, Radius and Yudof are apartment style complexes, you will also have a little kitchen in your apartment and the meal plan in the dining halls is thus optional. If you decide to live in Centennial on the other hand, you will have to take one of the meal plans.

I ended up living in Yudof and was very happy with my decision. Being able to choose when I wanted to cook, having a washing machine in the apartment, as well as being able to walk practically everywhere turned out to be super convenient. The only factor that you have to take into account is that most exchange students and many international students will choose one of those options and it is therefore possible that you will not end up living with Americans. If you decide to arrange housing on your own, you can take advantage of the temporary housing option on campus. Fall semester students can live on campus from mid-July up until one week before classes start, for about \$25 per night. This is a great option, as the ISSS doesn't recommend leasing an apartment, before having seen it and you therefore don't have to worry about housing before finding something in the Twin Cities. To find out more about the different rooms and housing options, as well as finding helpful links to find housing on your own, you can click on the following link: [housing](#).

2.6 Meal Plan

The University of Minnesota offers different meal plans to students, that are only mandatory for those living in dormitories. However, students living in apartment style complexes such as Yudof and Radius can take either regular meal plans, or block meal plans. If you choose a block meal plan, you can go to the dining hall either 150, 80, or 50 times, depending on the plan that you choose. This plan might be good for you if you still want to cook sometimes, but to also have to opportunity to go to the dining halls. You can click on the following link to find out more detailed information about different meal plans: [meal plan](#).

Since the food provider is different starting this fall, I don't know if lunch boxes are still provided at the dining halls. However, when we had them, my roommate used them to "maximize" her block meal plan, by filling her lunch box at lunchtime and eating both lunch and dinner with one swipe. You can get creative 😊.

3. Minnesota

There are a couple of organizational matters I would recommend getting done as soon as you arrive in Minnesota, as it will make your life there a lot easier. I would therefore also recommend arriving in Minnesota about two weeks before classes start, to take away the pressure and stress.

3.1 Immigration

After arriving in United States, you have to upload all of your immigration documents and you should do this as soon as you can. The ISSS will email you detailed instructions on how to do everything.

3.2 Bank Account

Another thing that I would do shortly after arriving, is [opening an American bank account](#). There are a lot of different banks on and around campus to choose from. I chose Huntington Bank, as the banks basically offer the same services to students, and you will get a free University of Minnesota sweatshirt, if you choose Huntington Bank. Another advantage of Huntington Bank was, that they have a branch in the student union as well as in Dinkytown. It was convenient to have an American bank account, as it enabled me to write checks, to make transfers within the States, and to set up a direct deposit for my student job's salary.

3.3 Payment of Remaining Fees

As the scholarship from the FU Berlin “only” covers tuition fees, other fees, and health insurance, you will have to pay for the remaining fees, such as meal plan and housing. There are a couple of ways to pay for those remaining fees. First of all, there are two [methods of payment](#) for which you will need an American bank account. If you have an American bank account you can pay the fees by either transferring funds via an “eCheck”, if your bank offers this service, or by writing a traditional check, that you mail in. Even though it may seem a little risky to mail in a check for a couple of thousand dollars, I chose this option, as the exchange rate with the international payment processor wasn't very good in my opinion. If this is too unsafe for you, I'd recommend checking out Flywire, the international payment processor the university uses. Lastly, you can also pay with credit or with debit card. This is however not a very good option, as you will be required to pay a non-refundable service fee of almost 3%, which would be a lot of money, considering the bill you will have.

3.4 American Cell

Furthermore, it is recommendable to get an American cell number for your time in the US. There are a lot of different providers, offering either physical sims or online sims. I chose a

physical sim from [Mint Mobile](#) and was satisfied with their services. It really depends on you to choose a plan that you like.

3.5 U-Pass & U-Card

During your first few days in Minnesota, you should also go to the [U-Card office](#) that is located in the Coffman Memorial Union to get your U-Card. You will use your U-Card to get access to buildings, get meals, print, clock in, and more. Starting in the 2022 fall semester, students attending the University of Minnesota, will have unlimited access to the [regional transit system](#) in the Twin Cities metro area. The U-Card thereby serves as the former U-Pass, that we had to pay for in the past. You will receive an email regarding the activation of your pass.

4. Free Time

Even though Minnesota is not one of the best-known states in the US, it has a lot to offer and will surprise you in a positive way. I made a bucket list with all the activities I wanted to do at the beginning of my exchange, and I tried to do one of those activities every weekend and was thus never bored. With very good time management, you will also manage to have most weekends completely free and still get very good grades.

4.1 Activities at the University

To make connections in the United States, you can join one of the many student clubs. Under the [Gopherlink](#) you can find all the clubs that exist at the university. I made very good friends attending some of the clubs so I would recommend going to at least a few events in the beginning to meet new people. Even if you don't have the intention to stay in the club.

If you enjoy **bowling** or playing **foosball**, you can pay a visit to [Goldy's Gameroom](#), in the student union. The bowling is not free but comparatively still very cheap. Another fun activity is going to the movies at the student union's movie theater, **Coffman Theater**.

One of the best activities for me, which reflects American culture as it lives and breathes, is going to the university's sporting events. In order to get tickets to the games, you need to get a [gopher sports account](#). To activate your account, you have to send an email to the following email-address: GopherSports@umn.edu. Once you have your account, you can login in and buy the tickets to the different games. The entrance fee is usually something between \$5-\$10. Note that the account works only on cell phones and not computers. Try to support as many sport teams as you can, as it is truly fascinating seeing all of the amazing athletes, like gymnasts for instance.



Throughout the year, there are also always great events that you shouldn't miss out on. One of the longest standing traditions at the university is the [homecoming parade](#), that you can watch

on University Avenue. Many students, alumni, sport teams, the marching band, and many more participate and it also is a must see. Another event that I really liked was the **ugly Christmas sweater competition**, that took place in the student union. We got to decorate our own sweaters and got to vote on the “ugliest” design. It was really fun and the designers of the ugliest sweaters even won a price. Events like this are not always greatly advertised, so you



should keep your eyes and ears open. Lastly, the University offers an annual [Spring Jam](#) with fun activities and live music. Even though we were quite unlucky with the weather, it was a great event that was also free for students.

One last tradition at the University of Minnesota that I want to talk about is the shoe tree that is located right by the West Bank of the bridge, crossing the Mississippi river. There are several rumors as to why students throw their shoes into the tree. One is the symbolic meaning of starting a new chapter in your life after graduating college. I interpreted the tradition in a similar way and also threw a pair of shoes in the tree on one of my last days in Minneapolis, symbolizing the end of my year in the United States.

4.2 Activities in the Twin Cities

At the same time, there are plenty of things to do in the Twin Cities, whether it is sightseeing, sport events, shopping, or going out. The first thing I would recommend you to check out is downtown Minneapolis. At first glance it seems that there are only office buildings and parking garages, but you will in fact find some hidden gems. You can get to downtown by either taking the light rail or bus, or simply by walking across the beautiful pedestrian [Stone Arch Bridge](#). It connects the neighborhood of Marcy Holmes with the Mill District and offers breath taking views of the skyline. Once in downtown, you can visit the [Amber Room](#) in the [Guthrie Theater](#) for free. From the Amber Room you have once again a great view of the city and the change of perception due to the yellow glass is incredible too. If you're



interested in getting to know more about the history of St. Paul and Minneapolis, you can visit the [Mill City Museum](#) just down the street. In case you need a break after all the activities you can grab a coffee in one of the cafés downtown. [Caribou Coffee](#) (a coffee chain native to Minnesota), [Spyhouse Coffee](#), [Dunn Brothers Coffee](#), and [Starbucks](#) are just some of the options you have 😊. Your last stop in downtown, that is a must-do,

should be the famous [Sculpture Garden](#), that exhibits funky art installations. The heart piece of

the garden is a huge fountain that displays a spoon with a cherry on top. The cherry gets taken off during the winter for restoration, so make sure to go there in the fall, spring, or summer.

Furthermore, there are not only great daytime activities in downtown. You can also enjoy the nightlife in one of the many clubs and bars. If you're not twenty-one yet, no worries, you can go to the [Gay 90's](#) (open for everyone) and enter during their 18+ nights. If you are twenty-one and older, there is an abundance of clubs to choose from. My personal favorites were [Sneaky Pete's](#), [Cowboy Jack's](#), [Union Rooftop](#), and the Rooftop bar at [Hewing Hotel](#).

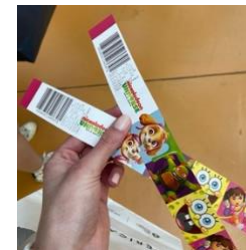


The second activity that I would recommend doing, is going to **Uptown**. Uptown is a very charming neighborhood in Minneapolis with mostly family homes. It is also home to the [Chain of Lakes](#), which includes five magnificent lakes. It is the perfect place for anyone who enjoys outdoor activities, as you can go on long beautiful walks along the shore of the lake, kayak, treat yourself to an ice cream, swim, or even walk, go ice skating, or do ice fishing on the lakes during the freezing Minnesota winters. In Uptown you'll also find cute cafés and restaurants, like [The Copper Hen](#).



If you want to enjoy more breathtaking nature you have to visit the [Minnehaha Waterfalls](#), that you can reach by taking the light rail. The waterfalls completely freeze during the cold Minnesota winter and it was an absolutely unique experience being behind the frozen waterfalls. To have a great contrast, I would recommend visiting the falls during the summer as well as the winter.

On the other hand, you can experience American capitalism up close at the [Mall of America](#), the world's most visited shopping mall and the biggest mall in the United States. The mall offers in addition to many restaurants, shopping stores, an aquarium, and an inside amusement park. Even if the tickets for the different rides are pretty expensive, it was a very cool experience to be on a roller coaster inside a mall.



Moreover, Minneapolis offers great art. The [Minneapolis Institute of Art](#), the [Weisman Art Museum](#) and the [Immersive Van Gogh](#) exhibit are three good starting points, but you can also enjoy art in other ways, such as checking out some of the city's murals. The most famous would be the [Bob Dylan mural](#) that you can find downtown.

Another great way to enjoy your time in the Twin Cities is to check out the East Bank. On the East Bank you should visit the [Como Zoo and Conservatory](#), try some good ol' fried chicken at [Cane's](#) and visit the [Malcom Yards Market](#), which is a food hall in a former factory building.



Another must-see area on the East Bank is [Dinkytown](#), that is not as small as its name implies. A lot of students live in Dinkytown and it is thus really lively with many cafés, boba shops and other stores. You can also go out in Dinkytown if you prefer to be closer to the University's campus. The [Kollege Klub Bar](#) (KK) and [Blarney's](#), an Irish pub, are very popular amongst students. If you want to experience, an all-American frat party, you can also do so on the East Bank. Most frats and sororities are located on the so called "**frat row**" – down University Avenue. For me, it was personally quite interesting to see what a frat looks like, but it is unfortunately ridiculously difficult for men to get in, meaning that you usually have to know someone in order to enter as a guy. I therefore enjoyed myself much more in some of the other bars and clubs, such as the KK, Blarney's or [Sally's](#) (a bar located on the East Bank down Washington Avenue).

As already talked about before, a way to indulge into American culture is to go to one of the many sport events. There are four big sport teams in Minneapolis, and you can get tickets to games at very reasonable prices. The basketball team that you may want to support are the [Minnesota Timberwolves](#). You should check out the NBA website, as they offer great discounts for students – you can get good seats for about \$15-\$20. But make sure to buy the tickets with some advance. If you prefer to see a professional American Football game, you can support the [Minnesota Vikings](#) and thereby see the great U.S. Bank stadium from the inside. Fun fact on the side, the U.S. Bank stadium is supposed to resemble a huge ship from the outside. The two other big sport teams in Minneapolis are [Minnesota Wild](#), the local ice hockey team as well as the [Minnesota Twins](#), the baseball team.



The last thing in the Twin Cities I want to talk about is the [Minnesota State Fair](#) that is one of the biggest fairs in the United States. It takes place annually from the end of August until Labor Day and is a must see. At the State Fair you can not only participate in overpriced games and ride on the roller coasters, you can also taste a lot of food and everything seems to be deep fried and on a stick. And yes, you might even find a fried pickle on a stick. Regarding food at the State Fair, I can recommend [Martha's famous sweet cookie jar](#) or something typical American, such as a root beer float or a corn dog.

4.3 Traveling

If you want to get out of Minneapolis, which is relatively small compared to Berlin, I can highly recommend taking a weekend trip. In order to have this opportunity, it is recommendable to build your schedule so that you don't have any classes on Fridays. In the following, I will talk about some trips I went on with my friends that are relatively affordable due to the proximity to the Twin Cities.



The first trip my friends and I took was to **Green Lake, Wisconsin**. There we stayed with a family friend, but there are also many Airbnb's in rural Wisconsin that you can rent. With our trip to Green Lake, we had the opportunity to experience the rural United States, which is very different from the big cities. To go to Wisconsin, we rented a car from [Turo](#), the Airbnb for rental cars. Since we were able to split the costs among five people, we ended up paying about \$75 per person for the three days.

Our next weekend trip took us to **northern Minnesota**, to Lake Superior. On the way to Tofte, where we stayed, we stopped in **Duluth** for a short visit. Duluth is one of the bigger cities in



Minnesota and I would say that it is enough to spend about half a day to a day in Duluth. When we arrived in the north, we went hiking near Tofte and saw the waterfall "[The Devil's Kettle](#)" which is close to **Grand Marais**. In the evening we also saw Grand Marais and were very lucky to see a great sunset. If you are lucky, you can also see **auroras** in northern Minnesota. We weren't lucky enough, but we were still able to see an amazing starry sky due to the lack of light pollution. On the way back we stopped at the famous [Split Rock Lighthouse](#) and had another great weekend.

Another idea for a weekend trip is to go to **Chicago**. Chicago is much bigger than the Twin Cities and my absolute favorite city in the United States. In Chicago you can do a lot of things and accordingly spend much more time there than just a weekend. However, the must-do's are definitely the [Hancock Tower](#), the [Millennium Bean](#), **Willis Tower (Sears Tower)**, trying **Deep Dish Pizza**, strolling around the **lake front**, seeing one of the many great museums or art galleries, and even going on an architecture tour. To get a great view over Chicago, I can recommend you to go to the bar in the Hancock Tower. The drinks are of course overpriced, but you can save the entrance fee to the observation deck and get a drink instead.





Finally, I can recommend visiting **Stillwater, Minnesota**. Stillwater is a small town right on the Wisconsin border. There's not an insane amount of things to see, but it was very nice to stroll through and see a typical small American town. In Stillwater, you can also cross the bridge and walk to Wisconsin, which is pretty neat.

For me, traveling in the United States was really special and made the year abroad so memorable. I also didn't come back to Germany over Christmas because of the high cost of the airfare. I used the money I "saved" to travel within the States and even got to see the south. If you have the time to save up enough money to travel, do so, you will not regret it 😊.

4.4 Student Job

Since the cost of living in the US is higher than in Germany and I wanted to be able to travel, I looked for a part-time job in the second semester to earn some extra money. With an F1 visa, you have the possibility to work on campus, including for companies that provide services to students (such as Starbucks, Panda Express etc.) but also to work in the bookstore, dining halls, and more. You can also work off-campus, as long as the position is educationally affiliated with the school. That means that there needs to be a connection to the school's established curriculum, or the job needs to be related to contractually funded research projects. Since all exchange students are non-degree students, I'm not entirely sure if that remains possibility for you, but you can always make an appointment with an ISSS advisor to make sure it is. You can find more information about working with an F1 visa under the following link: [student jobs](#). I ended up working in two of the dining halls, Comstock, and Pioneer. It was nice to work with other students, and even though I worked 13-hours per week, I felt like that I still had enough free time. If you decide to get a job though, you need to make sure to fill out your tax return. The deadline for the current year is usually in April of the following year. The ISSS can also help you with filling out the form if you have any questions.

5. Wrap Up

All in all, I can only recommend choosing the University of Minnesota as your place for a direct exchange. It was one of the best years in my life and I would do anything, to have this amazing opportunity again. One last tip I have for you, is to write a journal while in the States. It's now a great way look back on my exchange year and to reread all the funny anecdotes one might forget.