

University of Freiburg Global Exchange Report

Through the Global Exchange program of the University of Freiburg and the CSU International Program, I got to spend the winter and summer semester of 2022/2023 at the San Francisco State University (SFSU). In the following I will expand a bit on the organizational steps of the exchange, the classes offered, finding housing, the start of the semester and some practical tips.

Organization of the Exchange

The global exchange program is often the very first deadline to apply for study abroad and since I wanted to go somewhere with an ocean to take classes in marine biology, I decided to apply for California. California is quite difficult to get into as there are often only few spots, so the letter of motivation is very important to make sure you explain why that place in particular is important for your academic path. The application process is quite extensive and involves a lot of paperwork: a preliminary course selection, letter of motivation, forms to fill out, proof of finances, a campus selection etc. Once I handed that in, I got selected as a nominee for the University of Freiburg in late December. Among other things, you have to select in which campus you want to be put in. In California, they are color coded according to how difficult it is to get into: red means there are few spots, and it is difficult to get in, green means there are many and it is almost sure you will get a spot and blue is somewhere in the middle. Depending on what campuses you choose, you have to give a backup which is green-coded. Here it is also important to look at their impacted departments: some majors, such as film, nursing, marine biology, are often impacted which means they it is not possible for international exchange students to take

courses in them. This might become important in choosing a campus. I decided for San Francisco as there were marine biology courses offered to exchange students but also because it is known as a vibrant, liberal city I was curious to explore. I finally got placed there in March. Now it means waiting for the forms etc. to arrive. For the J1 visa, you need a DS2019 form from the university to start applying for an appointment at the consulates. Here I can give advice: Once the university creates the form, they send it to you scanned via email and then the physical copy by mail. The physical copy however might take some time to arrive, but you can already make an appointment for the visa earlier by taking the number from the form that is scanned and emailed. I didn't know you merely needed the number and waited for the physical form to arrive, which took so long that I didn't get a visa appointment until one week before I was supposed to fly. This meant everything was quite stressful and I couldn't book my flight until the very last minute, meaning more costs.

For the visa you get walked through all the documents you need. Be sure to read the additional information on the website of the consulate to ascertain you have all the documentation you need. Also treat the DS2019 form carefully: it is important throughout your whole exchange and makes sure you can enter and reenter the country.

Classes

The class selection takes place online way in advance of the semester. As exchange student, I got to choose them earlier than most students in the first selection period, so chances to get into the courses are generally good. In my case, my profile was blocked because my COVID vaccine wasn't checked and validated by the university yet and I could only register for courses quite late. As a

result, I didn't get into the class I wanted but was waitlisted. However, the professors are often very obliging and want to help you in your academic path. So I spoke to the professor and in the end got into the class three weeks into the semester and she also offered me to join her lab and research project.

Classes are offered in all formats: hybrid, in person and some are online synchronous or asynchronous. I took a mix of all these versions: it is generally good to be in person so you experience campus life, have classes with other students. But also, taking public transport in San Francisco means you take about 30-45 minutes everywhere. So sometimes having an online course helps so you don't have to make that trip every day.

Housing

The California State Universities offer the possibility to apply for university housing in their dorms, but it is not guaranteed that a place will be offered. As this housing is very expensive, you mostly have to share a room and sometimes even add a meal plan (which is also very expensive). I opted for finding accommodation myself. I went to San Francisco without any housing in place and stayed at distant acquaintance and looked on the internet. I eventually found a place with some other Americans my age in a lovely little house through Facebook marketplace. Another option is looking at craigslist, although you might have to sift through more fake inserts, and in Facebook groups. Another way you can go about it is look through other students on orientation day that are still looking or writing into the chat which is quickly formed.

Start of the semester

The University hosted an orientation day with a breakfast with all the exchange students where they went through general information and showed us the campus. They also offered a tour over the golden gate bridge. This was the first opportunity to meet other exchange students and small groups quickly formed. I met some friends there I kept for the rest of the semester and we went for lunch that very day.

Other than that, there is an organization you are required to be a part of as an exchange student called IEEC which organizes events. Some exchange students also brought Taco Tuesday into life. Every Tuesday, everyone who wanted to join came to a bar (which is sadly closed now) on Tuesdays. This is how I met almost all my good friends that I am still with today. It was a great initiative to mix up the groups that form in the very beginning and also a nice way to stay in contact with some people you don't see everyday.

In class, the first week is often referred to as syllabus week, where the professors introduce themselves and go over the organization of the semester. In the first two weeks, it is also possible to switch classes if there still are spots available. There are also lots of stands from student organizations, sororities and fraternities, information etc., and the university also organizes some events.

The Country

San Francisco is an incredibly beautiful city and I loved the community of exchange students that formed there from all over the world. We explored a lot of the US together, and especially

California has some incredible landscapes and world-famous cities I had never seen before. San Francisco itself holds a lot to discover, from old bars where the Beat Poets dwelled, colorful houses, lots of parks and viewpoints.

What collectively shocked all of us exchange students was the state of the homeless and opioid crises that are very omnipresent in San Francisco. There are many streets with tents and a lot of consumption. Extreme poverty is crassly contrasted with the expensive city and incredible wealth, especially through the tech companies of silicon valley. This dichotomy is definitely something to get used to in the beginning.

Practical tips

1. If want to avoid the stress of looking for housing only once you get there, you can also look in advance through some accommodation sites, which many of my exchange friends did: an example for San Francisco would be FOUND housing in California Street. If you know other people that also go to the same university, you can also look for long-term Airbnb's together.
2. When looking for housing, inform yourself on the area or street you will live in. SF has some places and streets that are not as safe, and when you have to walk home from the bus stop through these areas, you might have encounters best avoided.
3. If you have the opportunity to go for a trip with some other people, and if you can manage, always do! California has a lot to offer and everyone I knew went on some explorations here and there, whether it be natural parks like Yosemite or cities like LA or San Diego. This was where we became really close and also had so many little adventures

that make the semester abroad even more memorable. For rental cars I can recommend the app Turo, which is like Airbnb but for cars.

4. California and especially San Francisco is very expensive. You might want to look into scholarships to help you cover some of the rent (which is incredibly high) and general living costs. You can also find a job on campus, as a teachers assistant but also as e.g. barista or caterer, but be sure to do it early as you have to apply for a social security number from the university and that takes some time.