

Final Report

University of Virginia - Fall 2022

Deciding to spend one semester abroad seems intimidating at first and the organizational effort you have to overcome beforehand may let you think whether that is all worth it. For me, it absolutely was and I had a great time at the University of Virginia that exceeded my expectations.

In terms of organizing my exchange I felt a bit overwhelmed by all the things that one has to sort out before the actual semester abroad begins. Whether it's the application for the exchange itself, deciding which universities would be a good fit as well as which courses you would like to attend there, or applying for scholarships to fund your stay, there were many uncertainties throughout the planning. The best advice I can give here is: keep going, write down all the open tasks and which deadlines are associated with them. If any questions arise, ask someone. Ms. Kutnar and Ms. Kästner were very helpful and gave great advice throughout my planning.

However, some things don't always go as planned. When applying for the visa, I opted for the F-1 visa instead of the J-1 visa. The main reason for this was that the F-1 has a 60-day grace period, which I required for my travel plans. However, this seemed to cause issues with UVA's visa portal, for which reason I received the I-20 form quite late. Since this form is a prerequisite for the official visa application as well as for scheduling an appointment for a visa interview, the whole visa process was delayed. Because of this, I had to request an emergency appointment at the U.S. Consulate to get my visa in time before my flight. This seems to happen frequently for a variety of reasons, as I met many other students at the consulate who had a similar experience. For this reason, it is best to be aware of this and ask for an update one more time rather than risk running out of time on your schedule.

Also, do not wait too long to enroll in a health insurance plan that meets UVA's requirements. There is a deadline to upload proof of health insurance or you will be enrolled in the rather expensive Aetna plan otherwise. I wanted to stick to the German health insurance companies and tried to enroll in the HanseMerkur USA Profi plan with the waiver add-on. While the general plan was accepted, the waiver was denied due to their risk assessment. Therefore, be aware that it doesn't take much for them to deny the waiver. In the end I decided to insure myself through two companies. The general HanseMerkur plan to have insurance that would cover 100% of health care costs and a very basic U.S. health insurance plan from ISOA that just met the UVA health insurance requirements. I ended up needing my insurance during my time abroad and was glad I chose to keep the general HanseMerkur plan.

There is also one aspect related to my major that I would like to point out. Since there are many students majoring in Computer Science, most upper-level electives are very popular and fill up quickly after the enrollment period begins. In my semester this even led to waiting lists of more than 200 students for some courses. The issue hereby is that the student portal has no information about the transcript of an exchange student and therefore cannot automatically enroll you into courses that have other courses as prerequisites. One must contact the instructor of the course and fill out a form that requires the instructor's approval to manually enroll in the course. However, this is only possible as long as there are remaining open seats. For this reason it is important to act quickly at the beginning of the enrollment period to be able to take the courses you want. This whole process caused me some issues, but thanks to other students who dropped some courses at the beginning of the semester, I was able to get into all the courses that I planned to enroll in.

Since I probably could have handled the situations differently and perhaps avoided some of these issues altogether if I had known about them beforehand, I hope these tips will help other outgoings in the future.

Everything else went smoothly and I flew to Charlottesville, where UVA is located, in late August. Charlottesville is a small college town in rural Virginia that has a lot to offer, especially for people that enjoy the outdoors. In my opinion, Charlottesville and UVA offer a good balance of on-campus life and the things that you can do in your free time. Being a student here felt as being a part of a close-knit community to me. I decided to live on grounds and was assigned to a shared room in Lambeth. Housing in Lambeth is apartment style, which I consider as better than hallway style housing. The apartment consisted of two shared rooms, two bathrooms as well as a combined kitchen/living room. It is about a 20 minute walk from Lambeth to the main campus. Some consider it quite remote compared to other housing, but I was always good with walking that distance. In turn, Lambeth is very close to JPJ Arena and Barracks Road, so it's only a rather short walk to the next basketball game or buy some groceries.

After my arrival I quickly noticed the different handling of the pandemic here. Every class was offered in person, masks were optional, and public events weren't restricted. It seemed to me that public life went mostly back to normal here.

During the first days, the international office held an orientation session, which was a great way to meet other international students. I would also recommend everyone to go to the Activity Fair where loads of clubs are looking for new members. It is the best place to find a group of people with common interests. This is where I joined the outdoors club. A club where students offer trips and take other club members with them. The best part is that they have a huge gear room where any member can borrow gear for their next trip for free. I participated in a trip every few weeks doing backpacking, hiking, caving as well as rappelling and made some great memories with the people I met there. I would recommend this club to any exchange student as it offers a variety of activities and is the easiest option to get out of Charlottesville and into the nature without having to own or rent a car.

In the weeks that followed after classes began Charlottesville quickly became my home. At first I was worried about how easy or difficult it would be to get in touch with others, but I felt that everyone I met was open and welcoming. After a while I no longer felt like an exchange student anymore, but as a regular UVA student. Student life there is much more engaging and you quickly get that sense of community. A big part of that is college sports. I attended numerous games of the Virginia Cavaliers. Football and soccer earlier in the semester and basketball, one of UVA's top sports, at the end. The atmosphere in the student section at any of those games is absolutely overwhelming. You can't help but root for the Cavaliers.

However, later in the semester in mid-November the University community was deeply shattered by some tragic events close to my apartment in Lambeth. In the evening, while my roommates and I were in our apartment, we suddenly received an alert message that an active shooter had been reported nearby and that we all should shelter in place. The shelter in place ended up staying in place until the next morning, when the shooter finally could be taken into custody. As it turns out, the shooter, who was a UVA student himself, killed three other students and injured two on a bus that just returned from a field trip. We all were shocked by this tragedy. That evening, students organized a silent vigil on the lawn, where a sense of community provided important support during this time. Since everyone was affected by the events, the university tried its best to support the students in this situation. It took some time for everyone to process what had happened and get halfway back to normal.

From the academical side, UVA fully met my expectations. Courses such as Cryptocurrency and Machine Learning were up to date and always included practical components or group projects. The professors had a great teaching style and were always willing to help if something was unclear. What I particularly liked about the course system was that the final grade does not only consist of the final exam but can also take a midterm exam as well as weekly exercises into account.

Overall, I learned a lot and made countless memories during my time in Charlottesville. I am glad I had the opportunity to study at UVA for a semester and would recommend anyone to do the same.