

Global Exchange: Final Report

Partner university: McGill University

Semester attended: Fall 2024

Degree program in Freiburg: Liberal Arts and Sciences (Major Governance)

Classes taken during the exchange in: Political Sciences, Sociology, Geography

Studying in Montréal for one term was probably even better than I had expected. If you think about going as well (you should!), I hope that this report helps you to make an informed decision and to learn from my experience!

Decision Process

There's a couple of advantages spending your semester abroad in Canada and more specifically in Montréal that were important for me: Canadians are in fact extraordinarily friendly, masters of smalltalk but not as superficial as Americans, and always extremely helpful. Quebec is a French-speaking state, and even though you get along with English almost anywhere in Montréal, people do have French as their first language. So, if you want to improve your French (but be aware of the super-weird accent), it's a good opportunity, while all classes at McGill are still in English. Furthermore, Montréal has great winters with lots of snow and very cold temperatures, but the same amount of sunlight per day as Freiburg! It is a city with much European influence, but also has the North-American downtown skyscraper vibe. Also, it's super diverse and open, is considered queer-friendly, and has loads of students, with 4 big and a few more smaller universities. Its nightlife is pretty cool, and Montréal is considered the cultural capital of Canada, with lots of music, museums, theatre (French and English), and a famous Ballet. Lastly, it is located in (for American conditions) pretty close distance to other cool cities such as Quebec City, New York, Boston, Toronto, Ottawa, Niagara Falls, Detroit and Chicago, with all of these cities being reachable by bus or train (even though Chicago is too far for a weekend trip). McGill's downtown campus (where most departments have their classes) lies in the heart of the city and is incredibly beautiful.

Generally, regarding the choice of university I would suggest to just listen to your gut, I didn't feel like I could do anything wrong, but wanted to go to a bigger city, and since McGill has a very good reputation (over all, but specifically also regarding Political Sciences) it seemed like a perfect match.

Preparation

The application process, even though you have to prepare for it a bit (nomination letter, and don't forget the TOEFL) and keep in mind that it starts very early, went very smooth for me. As soon as you decide to apply, there's contact persons that are always super helpful if you have any questions, and that guide you through the process. Also after my application was successful, there were regular updates from the international office, regarding what to keep in mind (e.g. visa) and what we should do next. That the application deadline is very early was actually helpful for me, since that way you do not have to worry about application deadlines later on in the semester but can use the lecture-free time in summer to prepare the application and maybe do the TOEFL.

For preparation for the actual semester, McGill offered online seminars that I would recommend, where you could ask questions and got general information about healthcare, housing, immigration documents, and living in Montréal. These are also available to download afterwards. The McGill websites are pretty helpful, and they respond to e-mails quickly as well, even though I would only

write to the contact points that are specified for exchange students, as the general contact points not always forwarded correct information concerning exchange students.

Documents, insurance, and housing

If you only stay for one semester, you do not need a study permit, but it may be helpful either way if you want to work (on campus there's always open jobs) during the semester. If you choose to apply for a study permit, you should do so soon, probably 3 months before takeoff at the latest. The ETA (electronic travel authorization) is easy to get.

There is a McGill healthcare plan for international students that is mandatory (I think it was about 300 EUR for one semester), but if you come early or want to stay longer to travel, you should research the cheapest insurance options for that period. If you want to rent a car at some point (which is beneficial in many situations as public transport outside the city, e.g. to national parks, is not always available and often expensive) you need a credit card (helpful to have anyway, even if there's some debit cards that you can use abroad as well, but not for renting cars), and some credit cards include travel healthcare insurance, so that is worth taking a look.

Regarding housing, I would not necessarily recommend choosing the McGill student residences, even though they are a safe and easy way to find accommodation, which is why I chose it. However, they almost always include a meal plan, which costs about 1800 CAD (~1200 EUR), so you have that money to spend in the dining halls and some on-campus cafés or restaurants. If you do not use all that money, you will NOT get a refund, so it basically forces you to eat on campus every day, which is not as good as Mensa in Freiburg, and not very healthy. Plus, if you like to cook or only eat vegetarian or vegan food, that makes it super complicated. There is almost never an option to opt out of that meal plan if you live in university residence, and in some of them you don't even have a kitchen to cook for yourself. The rooms are ok in most cases but expensive, and very sterile and impersonal of course. Plus, we had to buy all kinds of kitchen items ourselves, because the kitchen (that we were considered lucky to have) was totally empty. Last but not least the rent is pretty expensive, I paid about 1250 CAD (~830 EUR) per month, and it was a major exception that we did not have to buy the meal plan. It is definitely possible to live in a cool area of the city for less money (friends of mine lived on the plateau, which is among the coolest student areas of the city, for less than 1000 CAD), but of course you have to be lucky (Facebook marketplace and Facebook groups of McGill students are probably the best bet, as there's always outgoing exchange students subletting their rooms). All in all, it is definitely less stressful to find university residence, but also it's not as nice as living in a shared flat somewhere off-campus, and often more expensive. Last but not least, the communication prior to my move-in was absolutely awful, and there was no one to call when my flight was delayed so that I had to sleep in a hotel for my first night. Conclusively, I would probably not choose to live in university residence again.

Differences between studying in Germany and Canada

I think in general it can be said that the academic standards were quite similar to those at the University College (UCF), where I study Liberal Arts and Sciences. However, there was a larger number of midterm exams and assignments, so there were hardly any less work-intensive phases during the semester - but this was manageable as long as one worked continuously.

The courses were generally quite large (in my case usually 80 or even more people, and therefore larger than in Freiburg), but there was often group work, room for discussion or 'reversed classroom activities', where you had to be active during class. In general, all my lecturers were very good, I

never once sat in a poorly organized course - the standard was a bit better than in Freiburg, even though it was not necessarily more demanding or harder to write good grades.

There was a much larger selection of student groups, so that a larger part of everyday life took place close to campus and in connection with the university. This makes it very easy to get to know people anytime and anywhere while pursuing your interests. Sports, music and performance, social or political engagement, but also random things like a wine society, a raclette team, or a dinner-with-a-stranger initiative were available. These clubs often also organized social events. For instance, the outdoor club which I joined and where you could also rent outdoor gear very cheap, organized all kinds of trips and tours, but also social events like speed-friending.

In general, I think there were many possibilities to get to know people and make friends (also Canadians, who are very open!). However, that was not the case from the very beginning. At first I struggled to find the right people, and during “Frosh”-week, which resembles the Firstie-weeks here, I only met 17- to 19-years old that made their first drinking-experiences. In general, students in Canada are extremely young, as gap years or so are not a thing at all in Canada and the US.

My highlights and low-lights

Over time, I met more people that were my age and that I became friends with, e.g. in an acapella group that I joined, in the Outdoor club, and in the exchange bubble in general. With these people I did trips to many national parks that are close to Montréal, which were probably among the coolest things I did in Canada. The nature in Quebec is incredible, in the late summer it's perfect for camping trips or hiking, in the fall the woods are extremely color- and beautiful, and in winter you can go ski, do cross-country skiing and ice-skating through the woods. Already in August, I bought a bicycle on Facebook Marketplace, joined the bicycle club and met many people on cycling tours to national parks close by, something that I would definitely recommend, as Montréal also has good cycling tracks in the city. Also my travelling after the end of the semester to all the cities close by were super exciting. Lastly, my acapella group was incredible, I enjoyed every second of it, and since there's a couple groups on campus that are all very good, I recommend either auditioning or going to their concerts!

One of the very few things that I didn't like was the food options on campus, without meal prepping it's almost impossible to afford a more or less healthy and affordable meal. Since there is nothing similar to the Mensa, except for the meal halls which are expensive, with little vegetarian options, and very greasy food, and the other food places on Campus were very expensive (it was hard to find anything for below 10 EUR that was actually affordable and filling), it was very annoying having to plan and prep my meals even in exam period. However, it should be noted that once or twice a week the so-called Midnight-kitchen-collective (Instagram @midnightkitchencollective) offered free lunch and on Friday the 'Yellow Door' (Instagram @theyellowdoororg) offered lunch for 4 CAD. Thus, it was manageable, but I really missed the Mensa.

Overall, living in Montréal is expensive. While going out for dinner is not much more expensive than in Freiburg, groceries are, so that I sometimes spent up to 100 EUR for my weekly groceries in an average supermarket (only late did I discover Épicerie Segal in Blvd St Laurent, where groceries are probably only 70% as expensive as in other supermarkets). Public transport is generally ok and affordable (metro is good and busses are ok as well), as I said my rent was very expensive, healthcare was affordable. There are some bars and restaurants that are cheaper (check out “Pushap” in Pare Street, very cheap very good Indian food, or “Turbo Haüs” in Rue St. Denis, where beer-pricing is ok and they have free funk-jam-sessions every Wednesday, I loved it there!), but in general prices for

food and drinks were quite high (average beer price probably between 7 and 10 EUR, tax and tip included). For travelling, bus prices and car rental were ok (maybe a bit cheaper than in Germany even), while train tickets were expensive (if trains existed at all, there's only a couple of train connections in all of Canada, that are very slow but really beautiful). All in all, life was much more expensive than in Freiburg, but probably what I expected from North America. I definitely recommend applying for the BW-scholarship, that gave me much more freedom!

Further advice

Try to learn French a bit, go cycling on the formula-1 racetrack on Ile Notre Dame, check out all the cafés on the plateau. Go ice-skating on Mont-Royal, try cross-country skiing (on Mont Royal or around Quebec City, also Mont-Tremblant has good tracks), visit the Atwater Marché for nice vegetables and good bread, have cheap icecream on Tuesdays at Frostbite Icecream (2 scoops for 2 CAD). Check Place-des-Arts for student-discounts, check the festival-schedule and visit Piknic Électronik and Igloo festival, and go to Rocky Horror Picture Show in Rialto for Halloween. Try to keep up with Uni, otherwise it might get extremely heavy during midterms or finals season, but do compromise! Do cool stuff on the weekends, go camping (it's so easy to do, Oka national park is really nice) and rent outdoor gear (camping stuff included) at the Outdoor Club. The nature is incredible and you don't want to miss it! Get a credit card in case you want to rent a car. I would also recommend joining the Facebook group for exchange students as early as possible, from which you get access to the WhatsApp group. This enables getting into contact with others from day one, which I missed a little at the beginning. Still, in terms of social pressure, I would also like to encourage you to stay relaxed - people don't go anywhere and don't become less inclined to get to know others, and you don't have to meet your best friends in the first week. So, if you're like me at the beginning and don't hit it off with the right people straight away, don't panic! It will stabilize after a few weeks.

Class schedule

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8am					
9am	GEOG 216-001 3019 - 8:35 am-9:25 am Adams Building AUD		GEOG 216-001 3019 - 8:35 am-9:25 am Adams Building AUD		GEOG 216-001 3019 - 8:35 am-9:25 am Adams Building AUD
10am					
11am					
12pm	POLI 368-001 5103 2 times 1.5 hrs/wk 11:35 am-12:55 pm Wong Building 1020	SOCI 212-001 5335 2 times 1.5 hrs/wk 11:35 am-12:55 pm Arts Building 150	POLI 368-001 5103 2 times 1.5 hrs/wk 11:35 am-12:55 pm Wong Building 1020	SOCI 212-001 5335 2 times 1.5 hrs/wk 11:35 am-12:55 pm Arts Building 150	
1pm					
2pm					
3pm					
4pm	ECON 208-004 2107 2 times 1.5 hrs/wk 4:05 pm-5:25 pm McConnell Engineering Building 204	POLI 340-001 5092 2 times 1.5 hrs/wk 4:05 pm-5:25 pm Stewart Biology Building S1/4	ECON 208-004 2107 2 times 1.5 hrs/wk 4:05 pm-5:25 pm McConnell Engineering Building 204	POLI 340-001 5092 2 times 1.5 hrs/wk 4:05 pm-5:25 pm Stewart Biology Building S1/4	
5pm					

- This was not my final schedule, I had dropped ECON 208 after 10 days, which was a basic micro-economic course. Thus, my course-load was not the average, comparing to 24 ECTS.
- GEOG 216 was my least favorite class (“The Geography of the World Economy”), it was pretty uncritical and not extremely insightful.
- SOCI 212 (“Sociology of International Migration”) and POLI 340 (“Comparative Politics of the Middle East”) were both extremely interesting, with a good mixture of theory and factual knowledge and its application.
- POLI 368 (“Political Theory and Indigeneity”) was probably the best course I’ve ever taken, with totally new insights, a great professor and eye-opening literature about but also very much from indigenous political theory and realities. If you study Political Science, you absolutely have to take it!