

GLOBAL EXCHANGE: FINAL REPORT

University of Virginia

Fall semester 2024

B.Sc. Betriebswirtschaftslehre (Public and Non-Profit Management)

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences: Physics, Computer Science and Psychology

Deciding where to go and preparing my trip:

When deciding where to go for my exchange, I already knew that I wanted to study in the U.S.—it had always been a dream of mine. My father is American, so together, we reviewed the list of partner universities in the U.S. He had some knowledge about each university and the states they were in, which helped me narrow down my choices. I placed the University of Virginia (UVA) as my top priority because I knew very little about Virginia and wanted to experience something new. Additionally, UVA is a highly regarded and well-known university in the U.S., and it was important to me to study at an academically rigorous institution surrounded by motivated peers. I also knew that I didn't want to end up at a community college. *[Note from the International Office: there are no community colleges among the partner institutions in the U.S.]*

When I was selected for UVA, I was both excited and nervous as I started preparing for my stay.

I had a few advantages that made settling in easier. First, as mentioned, my dad is from the U.S., and I grew up speaking English and visiting family in Missouri, so I already had some familiarity with the country. Second, I had extended family living near UVA in Charlottesville, which provided an additional support system. When I arrived, they picked me up from the airport (which was incredibly small!) and hosted me for my first night. The next morning, we moved my belongings into my dorm at Brown College. With everything in place, I was ready to start my exchange experience.

First impressions and initial challenges:

I went into this experience expecting to be surrounded by open-minded, outgoing, and fun people, and I thought I would immediately feel at home. However, I quickly realized that things wouldn't be as seamless as I had imagined.

I lived in Brown College, a residence hall located at the heart of UVA's campus. Despite its central location, I often felt isolated. My dorm setup was unusual—I had to walk through my roommate's room to access the bathroom, and she had to walk through my room to exit the building, meaning we had virtually no privacy. On top of that, I never really clicked with my roommate, which created an awkward dynamic.

However, on the other side of the bathroom was another pair of roommates, and I became close friends with one of them. In the first few weeks, I actively sought out social opportunities, joining various clubs, including the art club, rifle club, German club, game development club, and even a chocolate milk club. I also went to the gym regularly and decided to go through informal recruitment for a sorority. Despite meeting a lot of people, forming deep friendships wasn't as easy as I had hoped.

At our international exchange orientation, I met other exchange students. I quickly noticed that most exchange students tended to stick together because integrating with local students was challenging. However, I wanted to make friends outside of the exchange student circle, as I didn't feel like I truly connected with most of them. Over time, I got to know many different people from diverse backgrounds, but I still felt quite alone. It took me a while to realize that this was part of the experience—stepping outside of my comfort zone and meeting people I wouldn't usually interact with. This was probably the most important lesson I learned: not finding a friend group immediately doesn't mean there's something wrong with you.

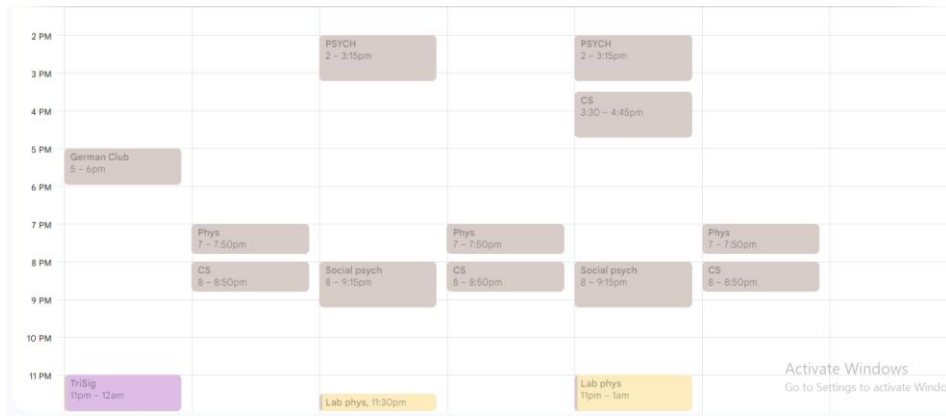


Classes and work load:

Beyond the social aspect, academics at UVA were also demanding. Each course required weekly assignments, readings, multiple midterms, and a final exam. The workload was heavy. The good news was that, depending on the course level, the material itself wasn't necessarily difficult. Since I had never taken a CS or psychology class before, I opted for introductory and second-year courses.

My daily routine largely revolved around studying, eating, sleeping, and occasionally attending a club meeting or going to the gym. At times, my days felt repetitive. Additionally, I didn't have access to a private kitchen—only a shared community kitchen used by the entire dorm. This meant my primary food source was the campus dining halls, making my daily life feel less independent compared to my experience studying in Freiburg.

Unlike in Germany, class attendance at UVA was mandatory and expected, which was a significant difference. In Germany, students have much more freedom to attend or skip lectures as they please.



Above you can see a typical week. Tuesdays and Thursdays I had courses spread out through the whole day so I would have lunch and prepare for my next class in the periods before the next class.

Joining a sorority:

As mentioned earlier, I decided to join a sorority just to experience what it was like. Since it was the fall semester, there was no formal recruitment process. Instead, I had to go through informal recruitment, which meant going on a coffee date with a sorority member who would then decide if I was a good fit. Only two sororities (out of approximately 15) were offering informal recruitment, so I applied to the first one I found.

The girl I met was very friendly, and she gave me a great impression of the sorority. However, I hesitated before committing because I knew that joining a sorority was not only a social commitment but also a financial one. Looking back, if I had to do it all over again, I don't think I would have joined. While I don't regret it—I would have always wondered what it was like—I didn't have an amazing experience, nor did I make meaningful friendships. My personal experience with the sorority was somewhat disappointing; I felt that many of the members were superficial and uninterested. That said, I know that plenty of people love being part of a sorority, so I don't want to discourage others—it's just not necessary for a fun and fulfilling experience.

Things I did and places I went:

Since studying took up most of my weekdays, I used weekends to explore and have fun. Some of my favorite activities included:

- Attending house shows (live bands or DJs performing in student houses)
- Going to fraternity parties
- Participating in sorority events
- Watching football and baseball games
- Going to the cinema
- Going downtown (small shopping street about 20min away by bus)

- Hanging out at The Corner (a popular shopping and dining area near UVA)



There was always something happening. One thing that really stood out to me was how much students got into certain events and traditions, such as Halloween and the Lighting of the Lawn (a beautiful Christmas event). It was inspiring to see how much effort people put into celebrating these moments together.

Aside from the things to do in Charlottesville, I would highly recommend taking the opportunity to visit nearby cities. Traveling while studying abroad can make the experience even more enriching.

One weekend, I took the Amtrak to New York City with a friend, and this was probably the highlight of my entire exchange. I had an incredible time and completely fell in love with the city. The energy, the sights, and the overall atmosphere were unforgettable.

Another time, I took a Greyhound bus alone to Washington, D.C., for a day trip. It was a great way to explore the nation's capital, see some iconic landmarks, and break out of the Charlottesville bubble for a while.

On two other occasions, I flew to Missouri to visit my grandmother. It was nice to reconnect with family and take a break from the university setting.

Getting out of Charlottesville from time to time was refreshing and gave me a chance to experience different parts of the U.S. If you have the opportunity, I'd highly recommend taking short trips to explore beyond campus!

My tips and important things to remember when going abroad:

- Try to have as few expectations as possible.
- Put yourself out there!
- Try new things and meet as many different people as possible.
- Take a trip somewhere!
- It's okay to feel lonely—it's part of the process.
- Don't take the experience too seriously (once you're back, it'll feel like a distant memory anyway).
- Focus more on friendships than academics.
- Most importantly: Have fun!

Conclusion:

The hardest part of my exchange was living on campus and occasionally feeling lonely or “stuck.” However, the most valuable aspect of my experience was meeting so many different and interesting people. My biggest piece of advice is to stay open and engaged. Do things you wouldn't normally do and spend time with people who seem unfamiliar to you.

As for practical tips, I would recommend opting for meal exchanges (eating at dining halls) rather than relying on a community kitchen, as it's much easier without a car. Additionally, if I could do it all over again, I would probably choose to live in the International Residential College (IRC). I met a lot of people from there, and they seemed very friendly and open-minded.

The University of Virginia is an excellent university with endless opportunities. The administration was always helpful and well-organized, ensuring that exchange students had all the support they needed. While my experience wasn't perfect, it was incredibly valuable and transformative in ways I didn't expect.