

Exchange Report:

**MY YEAR AT WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY**

(Fall 2022 & Spring 2023)

*Middletown, Connecticut*

My year at Wesleyan felt like taking a ride on a roller coaster you have never seen or heard of before. In the end, things have gone by so fast you do not even remember how slow it felt to get up to the peak in the beginning; you might scream and shout before you start to enjoy the ride and once you have to get off, you will want to line up and do it all over again – that's how good it felt!

Before hopping on my flight to New York, I got in touch with my class dean as well as with my academic advisor and boss, Iris Bork-Goldfield, to discuss my class wish-list and my accommodation on campus. Generally speaking, the organization of my year abroad went really smoothly with housing being provided and forms important to your visa application (the I-20 for example) being issues by the school at a very early point in the process. Once you receive online credentials for the student portal everything can be submitted online (like health forms for example and signing up for meal plans). I still highly recommend getting in touch with your advisor as well as familiarizing yourself with *WesMaps* and *WesPortal* before you arrive, since the first days on campus, packed with orientation events and health checks, can be quite overwhelming. Iris, professor at the German Department and taking care of German exchange students for years already is one of the kindest and most open-minded people I have met, and always supported me in all the administrative as well as life-struggles I went through. Having had someone to talk to about my experiences in the US from day one and even being welcome at her home for Thanksgiving, Iris really made me feel at ease in an environment so new to me and I am certain she will keep up with that in the future.

Beyond her lovely personality, working for her as a Teaching Assistant in the German Department was really rewarding: I was able to teach five to six hours a week for small groups of German students, who either had just started learning German or who had high school experience and were thus more advanced. Not only provided this job a great opportunity to get in touch with people in different class years and with different majors, but it moreover gave me a sense of purpose as an exchange student. It was extremely motivating to see students make progress in their speaking skills and getting into discussions with them about German as opposed to American culture. Having completed the first semester of my exchange year, the German lessons, although being demanding in their preparation, did not feel like "work" anymore. Instead, I was given a lot of leeway in designing the lessons and I really enjoyed being part of the students' learning experience and life at Wes. All in all, when it comes to the

TA position, I think it is not just something that *comes with* going to Wes - it is rather a really strong argument for *choosing* Wesleyan over another school. Being trusted with the responsibility and skill to teach despite not having any experience might seem scary at first, but Iris as well as the department staff were really helpful and supportive whenever I had issues with attendance, preparing class or meeting the students' needs (especially in explaining grammar rules I had forgotten about long ago).

Beyond being TA, being an exchange student having to deal with lots of administrative matters in the first weeks can be quite challenging: admittedly, I was often flooded with tax and travel forms, and simple things like finding an affordable phone contract or opening a bank account to get a social security number were really frustrating. I thus really recommend attending the international student orientation event about maintaining visa status, opening a bank account and receiving a work authorization as an F1 student in the first week on campus. In general, the Office for International Student Affairs (OISA) is prompt to help you file your travel documents and once you have mastered the paperwork installing you as an international student working on campus, things will be much calmer over the semester. In my experience, the golden rule stands at Wesleyan that "they who ask will always be helped".

When it comes to orientation as such, I can only say that colleges in the US to me seem to assume a much bigger role in helping students manage their lives and "grow up" after just having moved away from their parents. Thus, one should not be surprised to see seminars on sex education, drug prevention, safe partying and social cues when sharing a flat or a room that are mandatory to attend. I was honestly shocked to see how little free time new students including me were given to explore campus themselves, since we were divided into small groups that would spend four days walking from campus tours to health check-ups, to lunch and to the next seminar on managing student life - from dusk till dawn. In hindsight however I am really grateful for these tightly-knit groups since I kept in touch with my orientation buddies throughout the year and made meaningful connections there. Having made it through orientation and meeting so many people every day, I already felt kind of connected once classes started. Nevertheless, I hope Wesleyan will work more towards connecting exchange students and other juniors with one another and not just throw them into a box with all freshmen. In my experience, getting to know people in class was kind of difficult, since everyone seemed very concentrated and focused on their own stuff.

In the first week of classes, the "Drop/Add period", you can still move courses around and try out higher level classes if you feel unsure about your choice. I switched classes in both semesters and it really was no big deal: after one week, it is absolutely manageable to pick up on what the new class had been doing since the first meeting is usually just about explaining the syllabus and getting to know each other. I got into all the classes I wanted to and made great experiences with the Government and Philosophy Department as well as with language courses. Covid did not impact my studies significantly since almost all classes (except for single sessions in the fall semester when the number of infections rose) were held in person and wearing masks was only mandatory in some seminars in the fall semester.

Class discussions were overall really fruitful. I thought the small group size and more informal relationship to the instructor made it easier for virtually everyone in class to

speak up and share thoughts without being scared of one's image, and the fact that Wesleyan students are in my experience very hard-working and ambitious made debates flow from one argument to another. I was in a very reading-heavy but interesting class called *Decolonial Theory* with only four other students (held by Professor Velji), which was a very unique experience, and I strongly recommend classes held by Justin Peck (*American National Security State*, *American Presidency*) and Stephen Angle (*Human Rights Across Cultures*) for their selection of literature, the discussions and the essay prompts as well as helpful feedback. Generally, writing papers at Wesleyan seemed very rewarding to me since instructors were happy to discuss your work at any point in the process and point out meaningful literature to you. Furthermore, Wesleyan is really invested in teaching foreign languages and so I would like to point to the Department for Roman Languages and more specifically to French classes with Professor Leservot (such as *Franco-Caribbean Literature and Identity*). To me, being able to complete language classes with a weekly oral practice session held by first-language students often being home to one of the respective countries was a luxury.

When it comes to housing (and I can only speak for junior housing), Wesleyan pursues a very interesting approach by offering "program houses", such as "*German Haus*", where I lived with eight flat mates. These houses are intended to bring together students who share a common interest in a language/culture. I was assigned to a room in German Haus, so I did not have to worry about applying for a room. The house is a beautiful wood frame house with spacious singles and two doubles, a porch and a big kitchen equipped with everything one needs. I really liked living in German Haus and grew very close to my house mates, but to be honest, speaking German at home happened only on a few occasions, with everyone being occupied by classes and only four people taking German. However, I quite liked the idea of living together with people who were interested in German culture and so we listened to German music a lot together, played German board games and organized some events open to the entire campus community, the latter being a program house responsibility. As much as I liked living there, the housing system to me seemed a bit restrictive: every house has a house manager who is overseeing that everyone behaves according to the rules, and who organizes house meetings for planning events. While this probably sounds a lot worse than it is, having one house mate in the name of "law and order" was something to get used to in the beginning of my exchange year. I would also like to mention that wood frame houses and so its rooms are pretty old and not necessarily in the best condition compared to student accommodation in Germany, but Wesleyan was extremely generous and paid for room and board, making it much easier to take.

The hardest aspect about studying at Wesleyan was probably its location in Middletown, Connecticut. While the small town itself is very cute with a lovely book store and many restaurants and cafés, it is hard to get off campus without a car. Once I got to know people in my year as well as seniors, it was easier to get on grocery rides (the campus store is absolutely overpriced and eating every meal in the dining hall was something I personally did not want to get used to), but the feeling of not being able to go places on weekends without paying an expensive Uber ride to New Haven definitely impacted my mental health in the first semester. I think this is largely because I was

used to being absolutely independent back in Freiburg, with public transportation and bike lanes being normal. There are indeed really cheap buses going to Hartford and Meriden, from which you can take a train to New Haven in order to get to New York for example, but since this is very time-consuming, most people uber in and out of campus. This is pretty costly. In my first semester, it was hard for me to accept that my environment – a 3000 student campus resembling a picturesque village - would be so small and predictable and that I couldn't just go somewhere else on weekends, but the more I discovered extracurriculars, the less it mattered. Wesleyan students are really involved and thus there are all kinds of clubs and associations you can think of. As such, the student community really makes up for the rather rural campus setting and there are events every weekend ranging from stand-up comedy, dance shows, theater plays, to flea markets and football or soccer games. There is always something to go to and meet people.

This brings me to what I liked best about studying at Wesleyan and more generally, studying in the United States: while it may sound cheesy or stereotypical, I think there is truly an atmosphere of opportunity and openness that makes student life very enjoyable. For example, there are panels, guest lectures and club meetings almost every day, and all you have to do to be part of the vibrant student body these events form is say “yes” and show up. What I mean is really that it is very easy to become part of campus community and to feel a sense of belonging and solidarity. There is a very strong school identity that was unknown to me at university before I came to Wes and that I found to be very empowering to work towards one's goals. While school affiliation is certainly very commercialized and sometimes seems exaggerated, it in my view also has the effect that with everyone uniting in the name of the school, staff and students are personally invested in making studying at Wesleyan as fruitful as possible. Furthermore, with campus being so small and walkable, you run into familiar faces every time you leave your room to go to class, dinner or rehearsal. While we in Europe are in my view often quick to judge small talk culture in America and condemn it as superficial or pretentious, I found beauty in this extrovert culture for my every-day life, feeling more present and involved with my environment than I knew I could be.

Looking back at my year in the United States makes me smile, especially because with time my perspective on things changed dramatically: while I was in the beginning quick to judge that many things would just be “*better*” in Europe and I was absolutely foreign to the pride people felt in going to college, I later felt like I had a proper life at Wesleyan after only nine months, and it was hard to let go of it. So, here goes my last “*wisdom*”: Time can do magic! And all in all, I think spending a year at Wesleyan can amount to a magical experience - especially because it is so small, rigorous and community-centered. So, hop onto this roller coaster and let your breath be taken away by the Cardinal spirit – Go Wes!