

## Preparation

### - Visa, Insurance, Internal Application at the U.S. University

I started with the visa application process at the end of May. Applying for the visa requires a substantial amount of time investment. Like many other things, I would advise future exchange students to start the process as soon as possible. After being nominated by Viadrina, the coordinator at the U of M explained to me the subsequent steps and I had to apply internally at the U.S. university (online). After an official admission on their part, I had to apply for the visa for which I needed a document that the U of M issued called DS-2019/I-20. To receive that document from them, one needs to pay the so called “SEVIS fee” online (currently USD 350) after having received a personal “SEVIS number” from the U of M. After paying, the U of M will send you the I-20. Among other things, the I-20 states how you will finance your studies in the U.S. The U of M fills out that information, but you will have to inform them about your financial situation. The tuition fees for exchange students from Viadrina are waived according to the exchange program (or more specifically, paid by the U of M itself). The U of M also covered my health insurance for the semester (which I was very thankful for, it costs around USD 1,100). While waiting for the I-20 (or even before that), there is a very cumbersome online procedure to undergo in order to apply for the visa at the U.S. government website. There is a lot to fill out, so be prepared to spend more than 2 days on it. You need a personal photo with very specific measures and characteristics at the end of the online form, so I did that with a professional photo studio for EUR 15. When you receive the I-20 and complete the online application, it is time to pay the F-1 visa application fee (ca. USD 160) after which you can schedule an interview appointment at the U.S. embassy. The interview itself is not a big deal, it took no longer than 5 minutes and they just took my passport, saw the proof that I had paid the SEVIS fee and asked me some very basic questions such as what I am studying and for how long I would be in the U.S. My interview was on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and I had my visa ready on June 24<sup>th</sup>.

### - Arrival, Orientation, Buddy Program

I spent my exchange semester at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities (U of M / UMN) during the fall semester. Classes started officially on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019 (first week of September), but there were orientation days for international students starting mid-August through the end of August. I arrived in the U.S. a week before orientation. The orientation days were not compulsory, but I would highly recommend not to miss them since it is one of the best opportunities to make first friendships. There is also a compulsory 2-hour session for international students which can be attended on a few different dates, all of them before the semester officially starts. I managed to combine orientation days with that compulsory session. There is a



buddy program for international students (International Buddy Program, IBP) for which you can apply separately. Although I did not need the help of the program/my mentor that much, it is a nice thing to partake in. There are several events for all the buddies and their mentors during the semester which are nice occasions to interact with other international students.

### - Travel

To get to Minneapolis, I flew Aer Lingus (Berlin-Dublin-Minneapolis) which was the cheapest option at the time. I booked my round-trip ticket 2 months in advance and paid EUR 760. Flights within the U.S. tend to be pricier than in Europe. I did quite some travel within the country and would recommend flying Sun Country or Spirit as low-cost airlines in the U.S. If you travel, say, to Canada during the semester, you will need a signature from the international office of the U of M (International Student and Scholar Services, ISSS) on your I-20 before departure to be able to reenter the U.S. For domestic flights you do not need anything but your passport.

### **Accommodation & Food**

Accommodation in the U.S. in general is pricey. There is the possibility to stay at the dorms of the University on campus. Since the semester at the U of M lasts just 4 months, the benefit of staying in a dorm is that you would not have to search for short-term accommodation (which is, in fact, hard to find, but also not impossible). A dorm room usually costs USD 3,600+ per semester (=USD 900+/month) and the cheapest rooms are also shared rooms (usually 1 more person in the same room). Kitchen and bathroom are typically shared with 1+ people in the apartment. Off-campus accommodation in Minneapolis tends to cost as much, but there are some less pricey options too. Some of my friends had a small room for themselves for USD 550/month, others for USD 625/month. And others even shared a room for around USD 900/month. I was blessed enough to get in touch with a student at the University that offered me to stay at their apartment (4 people sharing 2 rooms, which meant each room was being shared by two people) for USD 425/month per person. Kitchen and bathroom were shared, and the apartment was 5 minutes away from campus by bus / 20 minutes walking distance.

When staying in a dorm, one can enroll for an optional meal plan which costs approx. USD 2,200 for the semester depending on which option one chooses (from what I remember, there was an option for 14 meals/week or unlimited meals, etc. whereby one also has a certain number of “guest passes” (usually 10 for the semester) so that you can invite your friends over to a meal at the dining halls. There are many different dining halls on campus, and you can use your meal plan in any of them, however, the quality and variety of the food differs significantly from one location to another. You can also eat at the dining halls without having enrolled for a meal plan (I do not know the price per meal, though). Overall, meal plan options did not make



much sense to me, so I chose to be on my own regarding food (when you do the math in the end, each meal would still cost USD 9+ with the meal plan, but at least you can save time that way and concentrate on other aspects of your exchange than your daily meals). If you go out for lunch or dinner, be prepared to pay at least USD 8, even in the University cafeterias. What is more, if you want to eat healthy, you will need to invest more time in preparing your own food or compensating with more \$\$\$\$. Supermarket prices are, on average, higher than in Germany, maybe even Europe in general. There are not many supermarkets on/close to campus so make sure to find accommodation close to one of them (Target, Fresh Thyme...).

Regarding living areas, the campus is relatively safe, but probably not the safest. In fact, no area is 100% safe as we received a couple of safety alert emails a week on average when (attempted) crimes were committed on or close to campus. Almost all of them are (attempted) robberies. Dinkytown is a very popular student area close to campus which is full of restaurants, bars (and the very important supermarket Target) and where many students also live. However, many of the crimes happen in or around the area which is why I would suggest living a bit further if possible. Avoid walking alone when it's dark, especially in the downtown area of Minneapolis.

## Studies

The exchange program between EUV and U of M was just established as of WS 19/20 and is with their Institute for Global Studies (part of the College for Liberal Arts). This means that any courses you would like to take and get recognized back at EUV should be offered within that institute/department. You can google "UMN institute for global studies courses" and when you get to the relevant page, the full list of courses will be displayed only if you log in internally. If you need the list, contact me and I will get some of my friends at the U of M send me the current course list. Once you have the full list, you can google the course names individually to see a course description or even email the respective instructors to have them send you the course syllabus (they are very open to help, so do not be too shy or hesitant to do that).

The exchange program stipulates that you can take up to 3 courses OR go on a research semester and optionally take 1 course. I applied for the first option. To begin with, it is worth mentioning that it can be very hard to get into your desired courses. Exchange students (who count as freshmen) suffer from the disadvantage that they can enroll in courses only after having "removed all their registration holds" from their account. For that, you have to: (1) Prove you have certain basic immunizations (which normally you should have already done as a child, but if not, you must do them before departure OR at the University clinic after you arrive); (2) Present your Bachelor's diploma and other academic documents OR ask for a 1-semester waiver of that requirement (I did that since I was not planning on staying more than 1 semester) and (3) Attend the compulsory session for international students that I wrote about in the "Preparation" section. By the time you



do all that, many of the courses will be already taken by non-freshmen. You can ask the respective instructors for permission numbers which can automatically let you in the courses. I got into all 3 of my courses that way, but there is no guarantee that every instructor will provide you with such a number since they might think that the course is already too full. Therefore, do have backup course options! It is always worth the shot to ask, though, especially when you use the trump card that you are an exchange student and you had no other chance, and you are really interested in the topic, etc.

Most of the courses at the U of M require some form of attendance, but it still really depends – once you know how the course is held and organized, you will know if you are obliged to attend. I took “The U.S. and the Global Economy” (no attendance since big number of participants – around 80), “Nonprofit and Public Financial Management” (no attendance sheet, but the instructor will definitely know when you are not there since she tied the participation points of the class to homework I had to submit in class as well as assignments that were done in class) and “Global Institution of Power” (occasionally, there was an attendance list which obviously also contributed to a part of my participation points). If you need to skip a class for whatever valid reason, talk to the instructor – they always try to be understanding. This is something I appreciated a lot at the U of M. Instructors and other staff members (and also customer service in the state or country in general) and their politeness and cooperativeness are just on another level, not very much known/practiced in Europe. Overall, the semester at the U of M can be very demanding. The college system is structured in a way that requires a lot of input from the students during the semester. The final grade of each class comprises of many different categories than just a final exam as many of us are used to at EUV. My classes entailed a mixture of a final exam, a midterm exam, points for participation, graded home assignments and in-class assignments, papers, presentations, group discussions (mostly part of the participation grade). Most of the exams are done in class. I once had an open book midterm and a take-home final. It really depends on the course instructor and his/her creativity regarding how they structure the grading of the course. Even when taking just 3 courses (most of the students there take 5 courses on average = 15 domestic credits per semester), the workload I had to invest during the semester felt immense in comparison to what I was used to at the WiWi faculty of EUV. The good news is that being diligent throughout the semester inevitably leads to good grades. Despite (or should I say thanks to) the big workload and thanks to the high competence as well as work experience of the instructors, I appreciated the fact that I could actually learn something interesting and practically valuable during the courses. I do not know much about language courses (except that your instructor might turn out to be younger than you since there are many graduate/exchange graduate students who teach) since I was not interested in taking one.

There are 50,000+ students (many of which international) at the U of M Twin Cities campus – the university is in the top 8 largest public universities in the country. I recommend joining one of the countless student



groups/organizations – there is something for everyone’s interests. I was part of a Christian student group on campus myself and could make great friendships with many American students. This contributed significantly to my invaluable experience at the U of M.

## **Everyday life and leisure time**

The semester ticket costs USD 110 and is valid for the whole Twin Cities area. I would get it especially when living off-campus. The light rail (metro/tram) conveniently goes to the airport and Mall of America (worth a visit). Depending a lot on your accommodation expenses, you would probably need between USD 900 – 1300 a month to survive in/enjoy the Twin Cities and the U.S.

There are many options to enjoy your time in the Twin Cities/Minnesota. The state has many lakes and parks one can visit. There is a student organization that does outdoor trips in Minnesota. The U of M also has a huge, outstanding gym (Recreation and Wellness Center). I was primarily dedicated to traveling across the country which is why I did not do as much in Minnesota.

A very important aspect to consider are the weather conditions in Minnesota. I would recommend going on exchange in the fall (winter) semester since I experienced August-October to be warm/decent months. From November onwards one can start expecting snow and very low temperatures. The lowest I experienced in December was -23°C. The start of the spring semester (Jan-Feb) can be even colder. In January 2019 they closed the University due to severe weather conditions and temperatures below -40°C. What I am trying to say is to be prepared. The fall semester is definitely manageable, one can “easily survive” by wearing two sweaters and a coat + hat, gloves and suitable shoes.

## **Conclusion**

Since there is surely a lot more to tell, do not hesitate to contact me with any specific questions. My best experiences were formed by the genuine friendships I could make with national and international students as well as my many travels across the U.S. My worst experiences were defined by the stress during the semester due to the many weekly course assignments as well as the fear of crime induced by the “safety” alert emails we received whenever someone reported being a (potential) victim. This I am sharing not to scare anyone off, but to inform future exchange students both about the ups and downs. Overall, this experience would remain unforgettable as well as defining and developing as to my personal character.