

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill – August 2018/May 2019

University of Freiburg Global Exchange/ Landesprogramm BW-NC

Liberal Arts and Sciences/ Life Sciences – Global Health/ USA-2018-682h8-w

Why I have spent one year (to be precise: 9 months) studying abroad at Chapel Hill, North Carolina? Definitely not because I had always wanted to. Seriously, I didn't even consider studying abroad in the US, at first, because I am the opposite of those people who celebrate everything American, and especially with Trump, I really did not look forward to spending that much time with all his voters. On the other hand, Oceania had gotten more and more unrealistic the more I had informed myself, due to its different academic calendar and the compatibility with my study program, the UK had gotten risky in the course of Brexit, and I had gotten a DAAD scholarship for studying abroad in North America. Side note: informing oneself early enough and applying for scholarships definitely pays off! DAAD paid me more than 1000 a month, plus helped me with flight, visa, health and insurance costs (and organization of the latter two). Once the money concerns were gone, I reconsidered the US and realized that when not now, when then? When would there ever come a better chance to dive into an English-speaking environment (which I wanted for career purposes)? Trump provided the perfect frame for exploring the internally extremely polarized country from an outside perspective, in order to benefit from its good education system, reflect on my own prejudices, and figure out what's going on behind the scenes of "America" – or how I like to stress: the United States of America, since there is much more America beyond.

But let's come back to some organizational details in advance:

I had been at the IO information session for studying in North America, and since I had no idea about American universities and wasn't extremely selective about where in the US, I followed the academic reputation mostly. Chapel Hill was my first choice, since it was announced to be a "Public Ivy" (which is true – there are extremely good students and professors, but it depends on which classes you take, and competition pressure is definitely less than at some Ivy universities), and, UNC is especially famous for Global Health – my specialization. Unfortunately, Chapel Hill being part of the "Landesprogramm Baden-Württemberg", made it much harder to apply: I not only had to be willing to go to other North Carolinian universities in case of not getting my first choice, but I also had to hand in separate applications to the program and the university itself, and was only informed about the final decision in April, days before course registration. Besides, Chapel Hill requires a TOEFL score above 100.

Once I was enrolled, I quickly had to book a flight (Raleigh airport closest to Chapel Hill) and apply for a Visa (F1) in Frankfurt, which was relatively easy but required personal appearance. Besides, I went to the "Landesprogramm Baden-Württemberg" and the DAAD's preparation weekends, where I got to know a lot of people, who I later met again in the US, and we were given a lot of practical and cultural advice, which was useful, although a lot of course not completely new to hear: Southern hospitality (going others out of the way, opening doors for others, greeting everybody, a very "schoolish" university system, extremely present patriotism and militarism (extra lines for veterans in roller coaster parks, veteran's discounts and honorations). Although this preparation through bringing people with similar plans together and distributing some useful information was short, throughout the year, I never have wished for more preparation, since help has been available everywhere. Students usually pay tremendous amounts of study fees (international students 60000 a year!), hence, there is a wide range of services when needed. Career services – the international office staff, language help – there are

enough people who'll immediately answer your mails and literally can't wait to help you in person. Besides, program and class instructions are usually extremely precise, so that I never have stranded without knowing what to do or where to get help.

Chapel Hill lies in the Triangle Area, which is an urban area with extremely many academics. Together with Raleigh State University and Duke University (Durham), it is also called the blue dot in a red state, since North Carolina is traditionally Southern, white, religious and agricultural. For someone who is looking for city life, Chapel Hill might not be the right choice. It is rather the perfect destination for people who want academic excellence, but also a cliché college experience in an environment which soon feels familiar and still shocks from time to time (with its Greek life, hard core Republicans,...). UNC Chapel Hill is a compact college campus, and still, Franklin street and public transport systems allow for at least a bit of a life beyond. The basketball university (Tar Heels – Michael Jordan's home) has about 40000 students in total and is the oldest public university in the United States, also often called a "Public Ivy". Especially UNC's Economics, Medicine and Global Public Health programs are known worldwide. The people are definitely less cosmopolitan than in Boston, New York or San Francisco, but world open enough to feel just right. North Carolina has the sea in the East and the Appalachian Mountains in the West, with Chapel Hill right in between, which makes it possible to explore culture, nature, and neighboring states on weekend trips. A lot of diversity, but also racism and extreme polarization in a country with a lot of parallel societies is what I experienced throughout the year. At UNC, there are mostly white students who don't get tired of stressing that they are "obviously not racist". But on move in day, to me it did strike out that all parking personal were people of color, or that all cafeteria staff speaks Spanish. I was also told that "Cookout" at midnight, or a Megabus ride were "not safe, because there are so many black people", apparently.

Academic report:

a) General impression of the host institution or the host university

In general, more guidance and more personal tutoring than in Germany is typical for American universities. At UNC, on the one hand, I felt "spoon fed" in the beginning of the semester, since syllabi were extremely detailed and reminder emails numerous. Concerning the latter, a big shout out to UNC's Global Office for their effort! On the other hand, people pay a lot for studying, and have a wide range of classes to choose from, so that motivated peers are surrounding you. Besides, teachers regularly hold office hours and have more time for the single person, hence more interest in getting to know one and one's interests than their German counterpart. It is up to the individual student how often to attend office hours, but teachers want to be seen as career resources, and I personally have gotten to know at least one mentor closely, thanks to office hour visits. Among fellow students, I always felt comfortable, sometimes too old and experienced even (although I am just 22). In the US people usually start college when they are 17 or 18, hence they graduate when they are 21 or 22. Almost no one has made a gap year or travelled (besides mere family tourism) the world. At least at UNC, most people are very open minded and educated, however.

In the course of my two semesters, I have completed 10 courses (all 3 credit hours that equal 6 ECTS in Germany/Russian had 4 credit hours): Introduction to Micro and Macroeconomics, Introduction to Russian (two semesters), Analysis of Public Opinion (R), Anthropology of Medicine, Comparative Politics, Programming for the Life Sciences (Python), Introduction to Global Health, Human Rights and Global Health, and Global Health Policy. Although I had a combination of introductory and high-level classes, in general, all of them had a higher workload than their equivalent in Germany. Being a person who is strong in class participation, I enjoyed being rewarded for class commitment besides the finals

(there are grades for participation, homework, hand-ins, presentations, discussions, team work, quizzes, midterms and finals).

The extracurricular activities are numerous at UNC. At the beginning of each academic year, there is a fair at Hooker fields, where all clubs present themselves. UNC is very famous for its many Acapella groups, for example. It was even said to have been the inspiration for the Pitch Perfect movies. I, however, joined the Model United Nations team, and thereby had the chance to travel to other universities, get to know fellow students and their view on the world. There is also the annual German-American Conference at Harvard, which is definitely recommendable to attend. Besides, I strongly recommend going to Memorial Hall concerts (only 10\$ instead of 100 for students), guest lectures (especially PPE program super interesting, usually including free pizza and cookies -yes, the school has money to throw out!), and workshops (e.g. Blue Angel workshop) as often as possible.

b) Content and purpose of your academic exchange

For me, Chapel Hill was just right! I had wanted a year with classes of specialization in the Global Health area, with a broad economics and programming overview, with some high-quality language class, in brief: courses that I wasn't able to take in Freiburg. I had wanted to be busy and challenged, but at the same time to be able to get around and get to know people and country, too. At times, I felt over-challenged (having to navigate the system, coordinate hard classes and frequent deadlines simultaneously, while being ready for weekend trips on time), at times underchallenged (listening to common knowledge – at least for me). To conclude, I can say that I have learned a lot of new things, culturally, personally, and academically. Culturally, I had the chance to reflect on capitalism and socialism (also because of studying Russian in the US), on diversity and unity, on polarization, racism, traditions and progress, competition (“Playing at Carolina is an honor, winning at Carolina is a tradition”/ Flu vaccination competition with rival university Duke), and most of all: questioning my own prejudices about America (clichés about fraternities – by far not as exciting as in the movies, but sexist as f*** (watch “Haunting grounds” – movie about how sexual assault is normal at US elite universities such as UNC); fast food is cheap and the poor's food; life without a car – very hard indeed if there is a lack of car-less infrastructure; etc.) and thereby getting to know my own German, European culture better. Personally, I have gained more understanding for opposite view points. While first of all Trump and his voters are displayed as idiots in German media, I do see the benefit for America, and even opportunities for the world (challenging the system, giving the forgotten a voice), now. My classes have taught me the challenges of the world my generation faces (industries that drive well-being of peoples without legitimacy, climate change and a lack of international cooperation), but also ways to cope with it, specifically thanks to my Health and Human Rights and Global Health Policy classes. I am sure that the acquired knowledge and contacts will prove useful and valuable for my future, since I am convinced that one can never network enough, especially internationally.

c) Criticism and recommendations

In addition to the before said, I want to highlight some things that I will take away from my year abroad. First of all, I have met people that have inspired me and will continue to do so: Professor Benjamin Mason Meier, who has proven me that my vision of the world is not too idealistic and that there are realistic ways to reach goals in international cooperation – through human rights, transparency and accountability (e.g. treaties of the UN and WTO system); many international students, fellow Europeans, who have strengthened my European identity, and at the same time helped me to understand the “other” better; many Americans, who have shown and explained me what they like about “Greek life”, about shooting, about Trump, about the military and the bible belt, while enduring my critical questions, and others, who have lived with me in the bubble of cosmopolitanism and share my world view although we were born at places far away from each other. I was strengthened in my

conviction that it is worth working for what I believe in and what I can morally support, and not just for money. Besides, I am convinced that it is often the intransparent, biased system, which makes a lot of good people do horrible things (e.g. US wars throughout the world). Therefore, I want to stress the importance of unity in diversity. We are all different. That is what makes humanity rich and successful through comparison and competition. But we are also all the same, faced with the same challenges in a rapidly changing, globalized world. Climate change, the dangers that come with it, and transnational profit-oriented corporations can only be controlled if we try to understand each other and work together for the better of all, instead of against each other.

Going back to when I first thought about going abroad, without even considering the US because of prejudices, now, I am glad that I went, because I realized that while half of the country thinks pretty much as I do, the other half has reasons for thinking differently, although I might not agree at all. My fear that I might be caught between naive and cognitively limited Trump voters for a year did luckily prove wrong. Chapel Hill was an international, world open, democratic bubble, which made it easy for me to fit in and feel comfortable in everyday life. Nonetheless, it is located in a Republican state and was originally constructed by slaves' hands. Therefore, diverse experiences are guaranteed. I can definitely recommend a year like mine and wouldn't really do anything different. I lived in a dorm, which was comparatively very expensive, but worth the experience, which others might evaluate differently. I had no meal plan, although not having a kitchen, which still was the right decision for me (cost and quality wise). I participated in everything I could, traveled as much as possible, accepted all invitations, and found a good balance between academic effort and general abroad experience (sometimes desk nights had to replace lost time through traveling). Maybe, if doing it all over again, I would try to go to more weekend conferences and be in Chapel Hill on weekends more often, in order to get integrated even better into friends groups who always stayed in Chapel Hill on weekends, who, compared to those who just as me love exploring and traveling, weren't my priority however.

Coming to an end, since it is impossible to say all that could be said, here are three pieces of advice: Be quick to observe, but slow to judge. Don't just confirm, but reflect on your own prejudices (which every German has tons of about the US). And last but not least, smile and be open for everything... you won't regret it!



Chapel Hill's main street: Franklin street



Oldest part of campus, my home for a year – beautiful from the outside, practical inside: Kenan community dorm



Oldest library on Campus: Wilson library



Campus UNC Chapel Hill



The old well (University symbol): who drinks out of here the first day of classes will have a lot of success all year, apparently... I drank out of it the second day, but my success was still alright



Good old Southern rocking chairs – something I will definitely have to import to Germany... they're just great!



Crazy American party life (although the party is over at 1am when clubs, which are all over 21, close)



Making some advert for Germany at the UNC study abroad fair



Hiking with the UNC adventure club at one of the many beautiful North Carolina lakes, lake Jordan



Me provocatively taking my reusable, non-plastic bag for shopping, and supporting not just UNC, but LAS/UCF advert thereby





Prom at UNC



Tar Heels goooooo!
Basketball at UNC – honoring Michael Jordan’s legacy

sportscenter

THE HOTTEST TICKETS IN SPORTS

Super Bowl LIII	\$4,323
UNC-Duke	\$2,663
2018 NBA All-Star Game	\$1,622
UFC 229: Khalid/McGrégor	\$1,053
2018 World Series Game 1	\$744
CFL: Demary vs. Alabama	\$524
2018 NFL Pro Bowl	\$497

Through ticket price Data on **WISCONSIN**



Ramses – the UNC mascot in front of the student stores that sell everything from UNC toothbrushes to books



Shooting with a friend at a creepy lake in the middle of nowhere