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I am currently studying at the University of Wisconsin – Madison and it's been almost five months since I'm living in the United States. However, the preparation for my academic year abroad started many months before my arrival. Applying for the DAAD year-long scholarship required planning almost one year ahead, even without having an acceptance letter from any university yet. Once I've been granted a scholarship and offered a place at the UW-Madison, there was again a long period of waiting and imagining what the life in the US is going to be, before I could start with preparation for my studies abroad. I've used this time to review all the classes that my host university offers and that are of interest for my academic and professional aspirations. While I was still in Germany, I consulted with my professors and academic adviser about the classes that I wished to take, making sure that all of them will be recognized once I'm back to my home university in Germany. In May 2018, around three months before the start of my classes at UW-Madison, I was finally able to formally enroll in courses of my choice. During this period, the main contact with the host university was the International Academic Programs department of UW-Madison, who offered considerable guidance and help with course enrollment and every other issue that I've had. An issue that most exchange students have during enrollment is that the university does not have a record of previous courses that we took at our home university and therefore we don't have immediate permission to enroll in certain classes that have requirements. However, this was not a big problem, since we just had to send an e-mail to the course instructors and explain our situation, and the response was always positive and helpful. Then, it was time to apply for a visa and find a place to live in Madison. Applying for a visa was a pretty straightforward process that didn't take as much time as I thought it would. I firstly had to apply online, pay two different kinds of fees, and then travel to Frankfurt for an interview. I received my passport by post in about 10 days after the interview at the consulate. Finding a place to stay took a bit longer. I initially decided that I don't want to live in a student dorm, since they are very expensive and cost even more than the monthly amount of money that I receive from the scholarship. So I joined a Facebook group called 'New UW Madison Sublet and Roommate Board' and wrote a post saying that I'm looking for a room. I started looking in the month of June, and I was a little worried that I was late, but soon after that

I got in a contact with a person who was looking for a flat mate in a two-bedroom apartment situated off-campus. We texted and Skyped two times, to see if we would get along living together, and I decided that this was probably a good option, so I signed the lease. I had to pay a deposit fee in advance, which I was not very comfortable about; you always hear that you should never pay in advance and this was especially not a common practice in Germany, where the deposit fee is usually requested with the first rent once you've already moved in. But my future flat mate was very helpful and seemed trustworthy, so I did what I had to. It all turned out fine in the end, and I'm still living in that same house. Madison is not a big city, it has a population of 250,000 people and the campus is urban, meaning that it is not isolated from the rest of the city. However, most undergraduate students live in student dorms and residential areas around campus, while the families, graduate students and young professionals live in the downtown area and neighborhoods surrounding the town. The public transport is surprisingly good, and students get free semester long bus pass at the beginning of each semester.

During the first week in Madison, we had an international students orientation week. During this period, we could attend student organizations fair and join a number of activities organized by the International Student Service, which besides the International Academic Programs, was the main point of contact during the first weeks. Most of the friendships that I've made were with people that I met during these weeks of orientation program. I've joined a student organization called BRIDGE, which pairs international and American students for the purpose of cultural exchange and this is surely something that I would recommend to every student that comes to UW-Madison. BRIDGE organizes events and activities throughout the semester, and one can therefore meet a number of both international and American students that are interested in mutual exchange and learning.

From the very first day of my stay in the United States, I was struck by how different this country is from any other European country. I've lived in a number of different European countries and travelled a lot through Europe, and before coming to the US I believed that I was going to just another Western country, and there would not be a considerable difference. However, for the first time in many years, I felt like I didn't know how things work, or even what is considered as a common sense among people here. Luckily, my flat mate was very patient and answered to all of my 'how', 'why' and 'I don't get it' questions.

At this point, after the first impressions have long settled down, I am able to observe all these difference from a critical point of view. USA is the center of the Western worlds and I believe that all the traits of such society are magnified and appear more extreme than in Germany and Europe. Consumption and individualism are one of those aspects of Western world that I believe is the most prominent in the United States and that have been one of the hardest things to get used to while living here. On the other side, I had a chance to engage in conversations about political system in the US, and get a sense of how people perceive their government. A big point of interested to me is the idea of social welfare system upon which European Union and Germany are based, but is almost non-existent in the United States. What more, many people don't even believe that such system is valuable and could serve as model for every country.

Perhaps one of the most important experiences during my stay in the US is the change of perspective on Europe. I've left my home university in Freiburg believing that I am now an ambassador not only of my university, but of Germany as a whole. However, I became aware of the fact that, I might be Bosnian coming from Germany, or wherever else, but for American people I am simply European. And I took pride in my European identity and gave a lot of thought to the lessons and implications of that. If only we, the Europeans, could see ourselves from the eyes of Americans and probably the rest of the world, perhaps Europe wouldn't be facing the challenges for its survival due to rising skepticism about its value and worth. And this brings me to conclusion about the importance of exchange and scholarship programs which give the opportunity to young Europeans to travel, live and learn in other countries in order to come back and build an even stronger European society where everyone can equally thrive.