

## **Intermediate Report**

USA-2019-DEC22-w

Degree: Psychology, B. Sc.

Host country: United States of America

Start and end date: 09/04/2019 – 05/18/2020

Host university: University of Wisconsin – Madison

### **General impression of my host university**

I chose to spend my year abroad at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States. To be honest, this university has not really been on my radar before I started looking into potential host universities in North America. The more I learned about UW-Madison, however, the more I could see myself spending two semesters there. It has an outstanding academic reputation, especially for my major (Psychology), a beautiful campus and it offers a true American college experience.

Throughout my entire time in Madison, our advisors at International Student Services (ISS) and International Academic Program (IAP) regularly checked in with us via email and reminded us of important issues to take care of, such as filing taxes or getting a travel signature on our visa documents before traveling internationally.

During my stay abroad, I became friends with both American and other exchange students. While it was very sad to say goodbye to most of my exchange friends at the end of the fall semester, I was even happier to deepen the friendships with my American friends in the second semester. It was nice sitting together in lectures as well as studying and complaining about the workload together. In general, I became very close with many of the other research assistants in my social psychology research lab to which our informal lab socials with the grad students and the professor also contributed. Besides my lab and the community of international students, I also made some great friends in the Wisconsin Consulting club, a student organization that I had joined in fall. In the spring semester, we decided to enter a case competition – something that was completely outside of my comfort zone since I'm not even a business student. Our hard work and late-night prep sessions paid off, however, and we actually won first place.

UW-Madison offers countless opportunities to make the most of your leisure time. There are student organizations for every possible interest (I tried out the Badger Cheese Club, for example. Highly recommend!), events and activities for exchange and international students (e.g., BRIDGE mentoring program), amazing sports facilities (incl. gyms, indoor tracks and an ice rink) and a student union with a bowling alley, a cinema that is free for students and a climbing wall – to name a few. Additionally, the city itself offers many activities, like the weekly farmers' market, festivals, bars and restaurants on state street, the Capitol and activities on the lakes.

The figure to the right shows that you can make anything you want out of your time at UW-Madison (the red “W” in the top right corner) as it’s highly ranked both in terms of “partying” and “academics”. I can’t guarantee the figure’s scientific accuracy, but my personal experience is pretty much in line with UW-Madison’s positioning.

I used the winter break for a road trip through California, Nevada and Arizona with two other girls from Freiburg. I loved the diversity both in nature and people that we encountered during our trip. Also, it was great to have a few warm days before returning to Wisconsin where the lakes had frozen over in the meantime.

In sum, UW-Madison offers a unique and special experience for everyone, whether you’re looking for academic excellence, varsity sports, a variety of student organizations, a vibrant campus or a beautiful city. With around 40.000 students, it is a rather big school, but I’ve never felt like I couldn’t make any connections with other students. The one downside might be the cold winter in Wisconsin. There is definitely a lot of snow and I experienced many cold days. However, I was expecting so much worse and since Madison is almost always sunny and the bus system is very good, it was surprisingly easy to cope with the weather.



### **Content and purpose of my academic exchange**

After feeling a bit overwhelmed by the work load in my first semester, I quickly adjusted and enjoyed the benefits of a very diverse academic experience, a variety of different tasks and assignments and not having the pressure of a single cumulative final exam at the end of the semester. It took me some time to find a “study-rhythm” and to figure out how to allocate my time but once I got the hang of it, it was very easy to get good grades. I was proud of the positive feedback I got from the professors, especially since I was not used to so much attention from my professors in Freiburg. Since I completed the only two courses that would count towards my Psychology degree in Freiburg (i.e., I/O Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience) in the fall semester, I chose courses for my spring semester that interested me and were not available in Freiburg such as a course on behavioral endocrinology, consumer behavior as well as dance and music courses. Over the year, I had not one course in which the professor or TA did not make an effort or wasn’t approachable to the students. Especially in smaller class settings, the atmosphere was always very accepting, encouraging, and appreciative of the diversity that the students bring to class. I quickly noticed how my spoken and written academic English improved as a result of the many papers and essays I had to write and presentations I had to give. Another invaluable academic experience was my participation in the Brauer Group Lab which researches social norms and prejudice with the aim to improve diversity and inclusion. I was able to compare the German and American

way of research which helped me to better evaluate whether I could imagine a career in psychological research. When my time with the lab came to an end, the professor even offered me to collaborate with them on my future research projects at the University of Freiburg.

Looking back, I think every aspect of my stay abroad will benefit me somehow for my future career path. Networking opportunities, conferences, language improvements, self-confidence as well as theoretical and practical career insights are just a few of these benefits. Before coming to the US, I thought my stay abroad might help me to decide whether a career in research or business psychology is the right path for me. In that regard, my year in Madison was helpful only to a certain degree. On the one hand, my course on consumer behavior helped me figure out that I could combine both paths by focusing on market research. On the other hand, I fell in love with a few other fields, such as forensic psychology and psychoneuroendocrinology which I've gotten to know through my unique courses. This means that I'm now again facing the challenge of exploring potential future career fields...

### **Criticism and recommendations**

My time as an exchange student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison was unforgettable. I struggle to put my experience into words, and I don't think that this report can do it justice. The courses I took challenged me on a whole different level. While I've always been a conscientious student back in Freiburg, I suddenly realized what it means to feel passionate about the things you learn in a course. I ended up recommending the book I had to read for my forensic psychology course, "Just Mercy" by Bryan Stevenson, to everyone who cared to listen and even bought it for my best friend. Of course, studying abroad has also allowed me to grow personally. Not only has my confidence in myself increased, I also feel like having been confronted with very sensitive topics on campus, such as discrimination, racism and white privilege, has opened my eyes in a way that my studies in Freiburg never could.

One of the most important lessons I have learned through this whole experience is to work hard for what you want to achieve. On this journey I faced multiple challenges but being persistent has helped me to tackle those. Such obstacles may be small, like getting into a course that usually doesn't allow exchange students, or bigger, such as being able to join a research lab or working through various application processes to make this whole experience possible in the first place. In the end, it was worth investing all the effort because the memories I have made and the people I have met mean so much to me now.

### **Advice for future exchange students**

Here's some practical advice to future exchange students at UW-Madison:

- Check out Madison's Red Bike Project for renting a free bike and lock
- Some churches offer free lunch or dinner (e.g., "the Crossing") recovered from the dining halls
- Go to the Marquee in Union South if you want to watch a movie for free (worth it!)
- Apparently, you can get cheap furniture from the Madison Friends of International Students network
- If you want to participate in the BRIDGE program, look out for early application deadlines
- Don't hesitate to email professors and advisors if you want to take a course that might not be readily available for you

Some recommendations based on my personal experience:

- Go to the terrace every day while it's still warm
- Try and love a slice of Ian's Mac 'n Cheese pizza
- Try cheese curds
- Go to the Rathskeller and look for wrongly spelled German words
- Burgers for 1\$ at Red Rock Saloon on Wednesdays
- Whiskey Jack's has drinks for 25ct on Thursdays
- Avoid courses on Friday mornings
- Music in Performance ("Clap for Credit"): a course worth one credit for listening to live performances in a concert hall
- Frat parties are usually overrated
- Join a club!
- Participate in all the campus traditions
- Buy a varsity sports season pass (e.g., for football or ice hockey)
- Travel as much as you can
- Don't study all the time

On a general level, my advice would be to be open to everything but also to evaluate critically. Since the U.S. is so large and diverse, there are a lot of different people, places and behaviors that you might encounter. I tried to have an open mindset about most things but sometimes I think it is also good to reflect and maybe share your own opinion, for example on sustainability and the waste of resources that I witnessed every now and then.

Finally, what the abrupt end of my stay due to the coronavirus pandemic made clear: Take opportunities as soon as you can! There were still so many things I wanted to do and places I wanted to go that I couldn't in the end because I had thought I could do them later. Instead, I left the U.S. regretting all the things I had not done yet as well as the things I haven't cherished enough. On the other hand, I am even more grateful for all the incredible memories I've made and the amazing people I got to meet. Go Badgers and On Wisconsin!



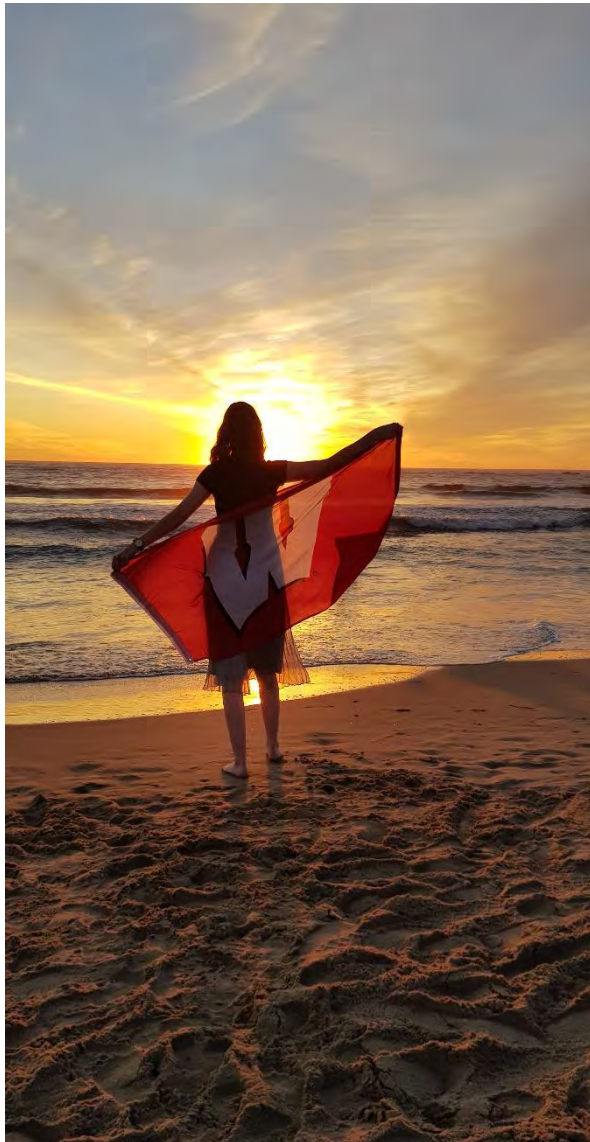
*Football Game at Camp Randall Stadium*



*Day trip to Devil's Lake National Park*



*UW-Madison Campus during winter*



*UW-Madison pride in Santa Monica*



*Rubbing Abe's nose for luck*