

Semester Abroad Report

To go outside of my comfort zone, I decided to arrange a semester abroad at the California State University Channel Islands with the help of the International Education Centre (ieconline.de). In contrast to official study abroad programs from the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, you have to do a significant amount of paperwork and preparation to organize a successful stay. However, the advantage of self-organizing a semester abroad is that you have a much higher chance to get an admission from your host university. So, if you are interested in planning a semester abroad in the United States (or any other country) on your own, I highly encourage you to use IEC's free services. They will provide you an overview with all the necessary steps you need to take to make this whole process easier for you. IEC also acts as an agent, i.e. the staff will verify your application before they send it to the host university.

I will give you relevant information for the planning of your stay that you cannot find on IEC's website. While this website provides you all application forms, information regarding the visa, semester dates, and other formalities, I will give you useful information based on my personal experience at the CSU Channel Islands. This includes information on course selection, financing, housing, and transportation.

Choosing the right university might be difficult for some students. The host university should offer courses from your own degree program if you wish to transfer credits to your home university. The staff at IEC will assist you in the case that you are struggling to find the right university. I am majoring in Political Science and North American Studies at the Uni Göttingen, so I found the CSU Channel Islands to have several courses that I was able to take. You can find the course catalog online: <https://ciapps.csuci.edu/ScheduleOfClasses/SOC/index/Fall-2018>. Although you are stating your desired courses in your application, you have to ask the professors personally via e-mail if you can attend their course before you arrive in California. Because you are taking four courses with respectively three U.S. credit points in one semester, I advise you to have at least six courses that you can definitely attend. This gives you some room to choose your preferred course in the first week of the semester. Now all you have to do is to make a learning agreement, including all courses that you can attend, with your degree coordinator at your home university before leaving Germany. This learning agreement makes sure that you can transfer the credit points after returning to your home university.

Now we will go a step back in the application process and cover probably the most important aspect when planning a semester abroad: financing. Without sufficient funds, the host university is not able to initiate the visa process for you. Therefore, you have to include a financial statement in your application that assures that you have enough funds. As of August 2018, you have to present at least \$14,800. Since I was eligible to receive Auslands-BAföG, I had to submit a financial statement from the BAföG-Amt and a personal bank statement with the remaining balance, which was about 6000€. Make sure to contact the BAföG-Amt in Hamburg (responsible for studying in the U.S.) as soon as possible, so you can receive the financial statement in a timely manner. The following link gives you more information on the BAfög-application process and the fees that are being covered, e.g. 4600€ for the tuition fees, 1000€ for the flights, etc.:

<https://www.studierendenwerk-hamburg.de/studierendenwerk/de/finanzen/BAfoeG/Bafogeg.php>

With the admission letter from your host university, you will receive a deadline for the tuition fees. The current tuition fees at the CSU Channel Islands are \$5800 and are due about a month before the semester begins. Unfortunately, you will have to cover those fees yourself. After you arrive in California, you will get a confirmation of enrollment and a receipt that you paid the tuition fees. You will have to send those documents to the BAföG-Amt in Hamburg, so they transfer 4600€ to your bank account. Bear in mind that you have to request a single payment of the 4600€ at the BAföG-Amt, otherwise they will split it into a five-month (length of the semester) installment.

As a rule of thumb, you will most likely spend the required \$14,800 during your stay. If you receive Auslands-BAföG, you will need about 6000€ from your own wallet. The biggest expenses are housing, food, and transportation if you do not live on campus. When you decide to live on campus, you will not have to worry about transportation too much, except when traveling around California during your free time. I decided to live off campus because I did not like the idea of living with several students in one room and staying at one place most of the time. Living with a host family about 30 minutes from campus was not only much cheaper but it was a great experience as well. Check homestayfinder.com or similar websites if you are interested in living with a host family. The cities to look for housing or host families around the CSU Channel Islands campus are Camarillo, Oxnard, and Thousand Oaks. When living off campus, you will definitely need a car to commute between your place and the campus. I shared a car with my

housemate, so each of us had to pay about \$1000 for the car, registration, and insurance. You can use your German driver's license for registration and insurance without any problems. Also, we were very lucky because our host family helped us getting to campus in the first week before we got our car. When having your own car, traveling around California is fairly cheap due to the relatively low gas prices. I can only recommend visiting the national parks in and around California, such as Yosemite National Park and Joshua Tree National Park. Additional costs that you should consider are the visa fees that are around \$300, the on-campus parking ticket which is \$200 per semester, and \$100-\$500 for literature depending on your courses. If you are receiving Auslands-BAföG, you will get an additional 1000€ for the flights and the mandatory health insurance from CSU Channel Islands will be covered.

When you have made it so far and you have finally arrived in California, you will attend mandatory orientation organized by the international office, where you will also have the chance to meet other international students. The international office at CSU Channel Islands moreover assists you with further questions that you might have before and during your stay. Visit their website for more information: <https://www.csuci.edu/international/international-students/>

The international office also coordinates the Global Friends Buddy Program if you are interested in getting to know a local student. I highly recommend this program; you can find more on it here:

<https://www.csuci.edu/international/globalfriendsbuddyprogram/buddyprogramhandbook.pdf>

If you are ready to plan your semester abroad, simply contact an agent on <https://www.ieconline.de>. You can also find groups on Facebook provided by IEC to get in touch with other former and future international students.