

My semester at Michigan Tech

I've dreamed of studying in the U.S. since I was in high school. So, when I learned about the opportunity for a study-abroad semester, I knew I had to make my dream come true! Already in my freshman year, I've decided that I just couldn't let this chance slip away, as I might not get another one. If I had to graduate and answer "No" to the question of whether I've done an exchange semester, I would have been very frustrated. So, I absolutely had to go!

Application

I really wanted to get place, and of course, I was worried that I might not be accepted. What if my grades aren't good enough or my CV isn't consistent enough? How do I write a convincing letter of motivation? What if I can't get letters of recommendation? The only thing I didn't worry about was the English language test. I was confident in my English skills and had no doubt that I would pass. And that played a trick on me: I forgot about the test at all! So, when all the letters were written, all the forms were filled out and I was reviewing the list of required documents, I saw TOEFL on there and realized that I had not yet taken it, and the application submission deadline was only in a month! Luckily, there were still spots available for the test, but I only had two weeks to prepare. In total, it took me two months to get all the documents ready, including a list of universities and programs I was interested in, but I strongly recommend not using this timeframe as a benchmark and setting aside more time for preparation.



Where to go?

I wanted to go to a big university. For some reason, I thought it would be the most authentic "American experience". I ended up at the exact opposite of what I initially wanted, and now I just can't imagine it any other way! Worried about studying at a small, remotely located university at first, I ended up absolutely loving this close-knit community where, after a few weeks, it was impossible to leave my dorm room without running into familiar faces on campus. In four months, Michigan Tech became my second home, and I am so glad I did my exchange semester there.

When to go?

You should definitely go to Michigan Tech in the fall – unless you secretly dream of spending four months knee-deep in snow and seeing nothing else. Fall also fits better with the schedule: the spring semester in the U.S. starts in January while classes in Germany are still ongoing, and the fall semester starts at the end of August, allowing you to finish classes in Germany and even take some exams before leaving. In the fall, most of

the major events for new students take place, where you can learn more about the university and meet new people. A good time to travel around the U.S. would be before the semester starts, during Thanksgiving break, and at Christmas.



Paperwork

Apply for admission at Michigan Tech, get a visa, select courses, arrange housing, book a flight, pack a suitcase - this is a rough list of things to do in the last few months before departure, and it will require an impressive investment of time and energy, as well as lots of emails! For example, to get my classes credited in Germany after I come back, I needed approval from every professor teaching the corresponding class at Leibniz University. I had to know, for example, why each class was being taught in one form or another or how do the credit points in the U.S. correspond with those in Germany. Tip: put your department's advisor for international programs in CC. If it wasn't for him, I'd probably still be writing emails! Also, all grades and certificates had to be sent to Michigan Tech directly by the issuing institution, and not by myself. At one point, I was worried that the whole plan would fail because my high school wouldn't respond to my email! Luckily, I was able to contact them, but this requirement came as a surprise to me.

Applying for a visa can also add gray hairs. After filling out a multi-page application form where I was asked to list all my social media accounts, all the countries I've visited in the past 5 years, and provide a detailed travel plan, I had to go to the US embassy in Berlin (don't forget that bags and cell phones are not allowed in the embassy building). The tip that saved my trip to the embassy: bring a photo with you! For some reason I thought that the photo would be taken on the spot, but that was not the case, and not having a photo can delay the whole process when deadlines are already pressing. Despite the long application form and strict requirements, the interview itself was quick and easy, and in half an hour I was already standing outside of the embassy - without my bag and cell phone, but with an approved visa. Also, I recommend paying your Michigan Tech bill as soon as possible (since you can't register for courses until it's paid), getting health insurance in Germany before you fly, and taking an academic leave of absence.

Let's go!

All set and tickets in hand! I've been planning this trip for two years and here it is in two weeks. It feels weird, but I'm so happy and excited! And on top of that, I'm flying to New York! This has been a dream of mine for a long time too. New York! I can't believe I'm going there!



My flight was on August 9, and, after spending five amazing days in New York, I took my flight to Chicago on August 15. Directly from Chicago airport I was supposed to take a night bus to campus organized for MTU international students. I thought that arriving four hours in advance for the bus would be enough and... my plane was delayed by four hours. I ended up running from terminal to terminal, pushing through crowds like in the movie "Home Alone", reporting my progress minute by minute, and luckily the bus waited for me for 15 minutes. I had planned to arrive early and meet my future classmates, and in a way, the plan worked - they definitely remembered me.

First weeks

The first few weeks were full of events! For all of us international students who arrived by bus (mostly future master's students), the university and some other organizations arranged a bunch of welcome activities, like a campus tour, hiking to the waterfalls, sunset canoeing, a bonfire with roasting marshmallows, and a trip to the nearest shopping



center. During these first weeks, I met many other students who later became my good friends. Like most international students, I arrived on campus well ahead of time. Upperclassmen arrive right at the start of the semester, while freshmen come earlier during the so-called Move-in Weekend, to attend a mandatory one-week orientation. Orientation covers available campus resources, campus safety, free speech policy, university values, conflict resolution strategies, time management and motivation, and where to go if you're struggling and need support. It's also a week to get to know different clubs within the university, play active games on the lawn, swim in the lake and watch movies outdoors.

Classes

As soon as classes start, it becomes clear that the horror stories I've heard in the first few weeks were true: huge loads of homework, readings, quizzes, and online discussions can make your head spin if you're not used to it. It wasn't easy for me at first to keep up with everything: deadlines started piling up like a snowball. The thing is, in the U.S., unlike in Germany, a grade in a class depends only a little on the final exam. Mostly, it's based on class participation and completing assignments throughout the semester. And there are a lot of assignments! They might be small and not too complicated, but it can be challenging to manage your time with all the deadlines in mind (and also do your laundry and grocery shopping). Later on, of course, I got a better idea of the workload for each subject, but I would still sometimes put things off until the last minute so I could, for example, go watch a hockey game (deadlines were usually at 11:59 PM, and everything had to



be uploaded online, so after the game, there was still two hours left for homework – plenty of time! Just kidding. Don't do that. Plan your schedule and turn things in early). I took four courses, which was the minimum required for undergraduate students (you can take up to six). This turned out to be a great decision because it allowed me to focus on each class while still having time for other activities. Overall, I really enjoyed my semester academically; all the subjects fit perfectly into my study plan and had a practical focus that I liked a lot.

Campus life

I decided right away that I wanted to live on campus so I could always be in the center of things. At Michigan Tech, there are 3 dorms for freshmen (Wads, McNair, DHH) and one for upperclassmen (Hillside Place), apartments for grad students and PhD candidates (Daniel Heights), and several standalone houses with rooms for rent (Transfer House, 214 East Street). I chose Hillside Place - it's the most comfortable dorm but also the most expensive one. It's more like an apartment for four people, where everyone has their own room (which is pretty small and dark, unfortunately, but that's the only downside), and there are also two bathrooms and a living room with a kitchen. I'm glad I ended up there and thus avoided many common dorm issues (shared bathrooms on the floor, one kitchen for the whole building, lines for the washing machine...). I'm glad I had a sleeping bag and a small travel pillow with me when I first entered my room (completely empty except for the furniture) at 6 a.m. after a night in the bus. And of course, I'm really glad I lived on campus and not in the neighboring town - for a fully immersive college experience, it's a prerequisite! Besides the fact that it's only an eight-minute walk to classes, there are sometimes parties and hangouts in the dorm lounges. But the coolest thing was that I got really lucky with my roommates - we quickly became friends, and I always looked forward to coming home.

Free time

Watch hockey and American football, go to a sauna and a swimming pool, attend a career fair and a Vegas-themed party, explore the neighborhood and admire gorgeous fall colors in the woods, cook a holiday dinner with roommates, carve a pumpkin and come up with a Halloween costume, learn to swing dance – this is a shamelessly incomplete list of what you can do in your free time. From numerous clubs (Society of Women Engineers, Outdoor Venture Crew, Forestry Club, Mushing Club...) to all kinds of sports, holidays, festivals, guest performers, and ice cream nights in the dorm, this campus has literally everything. I watched movies and comedy shows, went to the theater and a parade, and during the Diwali celebration, the Indian Students Association put on a drone show!





Challenges

I was sure I wouldn't experience culture shock. How wrong I was! Suddenly, buying the right size bedsheet becomes a real quest, 80 degrees is considered a comfortable temperature, tipping is a quarter of the bill, and an attempt to print a document in A4 can very well end in a nervous breakdown. Standard greetings now include the obligatory "How are you?" and I need to learn how to respond correctly. I live on a campus in a remote area, where the neighboring town has 8,000 inhabitants and the nearest major city is 6 hours away by bus. However, the biggest challenge for me was the food. Many familiar foods were hard to find (cheese and fresh bread lovers would struggle), and many had unfamiliar taste. Dining halls were great to save time, meet people, and chat. I went there once or twice a day, mostly for lunch and sometimes for dinner. Since the dining halls were occasionally closed, and sometimes I wanted to try the local dish – pasties – at the town bakery, have sushi at the library, or just cook something for myself, I decided against purchasing an unlimited meal plan. On the last day the dining hall was open, I proudly used the last of my 150 meal passes.

Community

I had never lived on campus before, and I absolutely loved it! Here, everyone around you – literally everyone – belongs to the same community and is somehow connected to the university. Every third person is dressed in university-branded hoodies, T-shirts, hats, jackets, and even pajamas. It's an incredible sense of belonging and unity, which was one of the main highlights of the whole experience for me. I went to games and cheered for my team, bought my own hoodie, learned the chants and finally became a Husky myself.



Additionally, the university offers plenty of resources for students and pays close attention to their physical and mental well-being. You can sign up for therapy sessions, there's a 24-hour mental health chat, and posters about the benefits of healthy sleep regularly appear on the dorm walls. Once, during finals, the library handed out pancakes to help us take a break from studying and feel better. Throughout my time at Michigan Tech, I felt incredible community support, respect, and acceptance.

Impressions

It's hard for me to remember a period of my life when time seemed to pass so slowly. Each week was so full of impressions that it felt endless. And yet, four months isn't really that long if you want to do, see, and try everything. So, when someone asks you if you want to go on a day-long hike early the next morning, you pack your hiking boots, even if you wanted to finally get some sleep and rest at home. And when someone tells you in the middle of the night, "We're going to see the Northern Lights in fifteen minutes," you're standing in the parking lot in ten. Because you know: it's now or never.

Summary

New classes, new friends, late night assignments, bonfires, fall colors, sunsets on campus, walks downtown, New York and Chicago, the Northern Lights – that's what my exchange semester at Michigan Tech was like and it was absolutely amazing! As a student of Leibniz University, Hanover, I spent four months being a part of the very welcoming Tech community, surrounded by the stunning nature of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and studying my favorite subjects in a completely unfamiliar exciting academic environment. It was challenging, mind-blowing, motivating and extremely cool! I got to know another culture, made great friends and unforgettable memories, improved my language skills and faced challenges that made me more independent and confident and that broadened my mindset. I brought home new knowledge and skills, some good grades, gigabytes of photos and a strong belief that the world is huge, and everything is possible.

