Partner University - Université de François Rabelais  
Country - France  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences - French Cohort Program - French Major  
Exchange Terms - Fall 2014 and Spring 2015  

Preparation for exchange:

First thing’s first, do not wait to apply for your student visa if you are needing one. I was very lucky in that the turnaround for when I submitted mine in the mail and when I received it back was a little over a week, but it was a very stressful week waiting for it. Make sure to have all your papers in order when submitting your application, but if you are ever unsure send the office an email and in my experience, they were always very quick and clear with their responses.

If you are travelling somewhere where you are in need of power adapters or plug in adaptors, I strongly suggest buying them before you leave for exchange. It was also great having two so that I could charge my phone and laptop at the same time, or you can get creative and charge things through your USB outlet on your laptop if need be.

My Dad had some packing advice that saved me a lot of hassle by the end of exchange. He told me to realize that I was undoubtedly going to buy clothes and other items while on exchange, so instead coming home with twice as much stuff as I left with, to bring some things with me that I could use or wear for the year and be able to part with before returning. I found out where I was able to donate those pieces or give them away to friends I had made along the year.

Make sure to check in with your own financial institutions to find out what sort of charges you can expect when using your cards abroad. I was lucky in that mine had a great international community and that I was not charged in taking out money from certain partner institutions. For the most part, cash was always happily accepted as well as cards for the most part, just not necessarily in smaller shops if you are not making a large purchase.

During exchange:

When things get overwhelming, just take a moment to step back and think about how amazing it is that you are studying abroad in a different country, in a different culture and taking part in an opportunity and experience that not everyone has the chance to. Also try and take part in the “parrainage” buddy program that is offered by the university. We met up a few times over the course of the two semesters and they helped show me around the town and was able to help me get settled as well as field any non-academic questions regarding things such as where to go for the best baguette in town.

Residence move-in and orientation:

Having taken part in orientation in residence and for SFU in my first year here, orientation in France had a lot to live up to. One thing that I will say was extremely helpful was that they almost always had someone available who spoke various other languages, so for me the english-speaker was helpful, and they also has languages such as spanish and german to name a few. With it being the first day, even though I could have gotten through the whole move in process in french, it was helpful to know that if I had any confusions there was someone who I could double check them with in english. Residence also set-up a few
trips into town to guide us through buying housing insurance and setting up a french bank account.

As for orientation with the university, there were a few informative meetings that were set up over the course of the week as well some events such as a bike ride around town. The meetings were helpful, but the more fun events had limited spaces and I unfortunately did not get to participate in many of them. The most help was our assigned academic advisor who was happy to answer any and all questions I had as well as get me set up with my class schedule each semester.

Classes and marking:

This may be specific to France, but everything is marked on a scale out of 20 points with 10/20 being a pass in that class. This being said, especially in classes that are not geared towards exchange students, a mark of 14/20 is great and anything higher is hard to attain. So my advice when receiving marks isn’t to aim low, but just to remember that it’s a different marking scale and that a lower grade than you are used to is not the end of your academic career. It was explained that some of the reasoning behind this marking scheme is that post-secondary education is a right of passage to french students whereas for us at SFU, we needed a certain academic standing to be able to attend university here. This means, instead of selecting before entering, they select by failing-out students. To clarify, this is not something that is directed at international students as the professors understand that we are only there for a semester or two, but it is something to keep in mind.

Country information:

Something that is helpful to know is that tipping at restaurants is not an expectation as it is here. In France, the cost that we normally associate with tipping your waiter is built into the prices listed on the menu.

I would definitely suggest taking advantage of both the tourist attractions as well as the more local events. One of the best days I had was spent with a few other exchange students bicycling around the french countryside. It was great being able to really see the country and the landscape from a different point of view than a walking tour downtown or a tour bus full of people taking pictures of everything you pass. We were able to rent a bicycle for about 15 euros for the day and biked around 80km through the countryside and other small towns that surrounded ours.

Reflection after exchange:

There is not a part of me that regrets taking the opportunity to spend nine months abroad on exchange. I can definitely say that I learned a lot about myself and had a great experience.

Don’t feel bad if you make friends with other students from the same country as you or that speak the same language as you. I had a group of fellow canadian friends from various parts of the country, and at the end of a long day in french, it was relaxing and refreshing to have the connections to be able to relax in english. Living in your second language can be tiring, so take the time to watch a movie where you don’t need subtitles or watch your favourite tv show if you are feeling drained. I can definitely say that having that support system in a way was something that helped keep my sanity through some of the
more strange and confusing developments along the year, it was helpful to be able to talk through those frustrations with others having the same experiences.

Don’t disregard reverse-culture shock. I didn’t realize just how much I had integrated into the new society and culture until I returned to Canada. Culture shock works both ways, and it’s good to keep that in mind. I’m not saying, don’t integrate while you’re abroad, but just be conscious of the fact that things will have changed while you were away and that you will have grown tremendously as an individual.