**Partner University:** Université de Strasbourg  
**Major:** Double Major in Political Science and Philosophy, Extended Minor in French (with the French Cohort Program)  
**Term:** Fall 2018 (from September 2018-December 2018)

I found my time on exchange in France at the University of Strasbourg extremely fulfilling and didactic, although not for the reasons I initially expected. I believe I gained a great deal of independence, capacity for travelling alone, and overall, the ability to resolve my own problems without unnecessary reliance on others. This was a valuable element of my undergraduate career and I would recommend all students to consider taking the time in their schooling to experience the change in pace and environment that an international exchange would provide.

My time on exchange was not my first time travelling alone, I had in the same year already taken part in a field school taking me to Latvia, Italy, and Belgium – but it would be the first time I would spend such an extended period of time alone in a foreign country, operating primarily in a foreign language. The first hurdle in my travels was to obtain a student visa to France, the process to which was fairly convoluted and to which I was offered very little assistance – in fact the office handling my application would eventually mail to me someone else’s passport, a bureaucratic catastrophe I had no choice but to resolve independently, in the handful of days leading up to my departure. Beware, future students – start the visa application process early, at least two months before departure, and don’t book flight details until your visa has been processed and your passport returned to you.

Arriving in Strasbourg was a smooth procedure, I was settled into my residence and adapted fairly quickly. On the matter of university residence – I must say that I was eventually impacted by the small living quarters in a way that was very unexpected, I believe that being coped in a miniscule room, with very little motivation to keep organized, had damaging consequences on the psyche in the long term. As such, I would advise that students be especially wary of their lifestyle, keep to a regular rhythm and maintain healthy habits, even if the crowded atmosphere of university residence does not encourage such diligence. I wish I knew that university housing is unique in its sense of loneliness – there, students are at once alone and very overcrowded, it can create a strange, unsettling sense of discomfort and solitude. More practically, I would suggest setting up a French bank account, the procedure is mostly painless and you will qualify for housing support from the CAF, up to 150 euros monthly.

To continue, unfortunately, slightly towards the negative, I will comment on the quality of the teaching and course material at the University of Strasbourg. Although it was presented as an elite institution regrouping a competitive student body, I found the teaching conventions thoroughly indigestible. Professors would frequently neglect to pay any attention to student engagement or comprehension, and present course material in a confusing, rambling narrative that evaded any form of systematic notetaking. Furthermore, few professors used technological or visual support to enhance the material, and there would be no form of electronic material passed from the professor to the student body. Class discussions seemed to be discouraged, and independent study was the norm. Syllabi were seldom provided to students, and class planning seemed haphazard and entirely dependent on the whims of the professor. Regarding exams and evaluations, even exchange students participated in oral final exams, which were all worth 100% of their respective courses. This exam format was unfamiliar to me, and I confess that evaluating the learning outcomes of an entire course from a single question, conducted in an impromptu presentation format, seems stringent and more than somewhat unfair. Even written exams were formulated with a single essay response question, and did not provide opportunity for the student to demonstrate the richness and variety of their acquired knowledge. And since the evaluation for most courses were determined by a single exam or a single paper – academic distress rises exponentially towards the end of the term. Plan accordingly. On matters of academics, although I am grateful to have been able to study a vast cornucopia of topics unavailable to typical north-American institutions (economics in the EU, aesthetics, French cultural policy, etc.), to future exchange students, I would advise to be realistic in expectations concerning the quality of education – and select courses based on whether you are likely to encounter the same topic taught back at home, and not based on the quality of the teaching you may expect from it.
On practical matters, I must recommend that travelling students, especially those who are travelling alone, to invest in insurance. I made the decision to fly down to Barcelona alone, to celebrate my 20th birthday – and immediately after settling into my hostel, my wallet was stolen. Had I the foresight to purchase travel insurance, I would have been paid some quantity of the damages I sustained. Additionally, try, if possible, to avoid travelling alone. Petty crime in large cities is oftentimes uncontrollable, and being alone renders you exceptionally vulnerable and an ideal target for thieves.

All this is not to say, emphatically, that I did not relish and cherish and thoroughly revel the time I spent away on exchange – that would be to misconstrue my intent. Strasbourg is a beautiful, wildly dignified and culturally endowed city – a smaller, quieter Paris. The weather is mild and pleasant, almost incessantly sunny. I loved wandering the streets of Europe, immersed in the old world, passing a medieval cathedral on my way to buy groceries – the lifestyle I enjoyed in France was luxurious in its cultural depth. We think of our home and its enclosed vicinity as a comfort zone not necessarily because it comfortable, or particularly pleasant – but because its easy. Going to France was not easy, no, it was merely wonderful. I have never seen so many little curiosities (French girls really do ride bikes with baskets full of flowers), or had the time to walk around every evening next to a canal ripe to inspire the next Disney storyboard executives, or wake up one morning and decide to hike over to Germany on a whim. I would hate to describe any of this as a soulful sabbatical – but sometimes, what is most accurate happens also to be the most poetic.

Best of luck to all the prospective exchange students!