When I went on exchange the University of Lausanne was a relatively new exchange partner with SFU, so information heading into my exchange was limited. If there was anything that I’d underestimated (after thinking that I’d overestimated) when heading into my exchange, it was the cost of living in Switzerland. There are plenty of ways to cut back costs while studying in Switzerland, but regardless, I would not recommend this particular exchange destination if finances are of any concern. Prior to the start of my semester, I travelled through Europe for 2 months. I was able to find a FlexiBus (I would highly recommend this company to everyone!) for 9 Euros from Munich, Germany directly to Lausanne. Below I will outline various aspects of studying abroad in Lausanne.

Travel and Transport

As previously mentioned, I would recommend making a couple of stops in Europe before arriving in Lausanne. I flew into London, Heathrow (Approx. 650$) and shipped my larger suitcase with SendMyBag directly to my dormitory in Lausanne (Approx. 150$) allowing me to travel lightly and more cost efficiently for the 2 months prior to the start of my exchange. If you would like to ship your luggage, I would recommend doing so from larger cities (ie. London) as it is cheaper and it is not possible to ship out of certain countries (ie. Belgium). Transport within Lausanne is moderately expensive. Firstly, if you intend to buy monthly transit passes and you plan to travel by train around Switzerland during your semester, I would highly recommend buying a 1/2 fare card. Purchase this RIGHT AWAY when you arrive, this pass allows you to receive 50% off of all transit/train tickets and there are other discounts provided sporadically as well. This pass costs around 300$ and can be acquired from the main train station in Lausanne (or any other Swiss train station), you will require 1 passport sized photo for your ID card. The cost of this card seems quite high, but the savings really do add up in the end. I would recommend acquiring a travel debit card, or having an international withdrawal plan. Grocery stores and SOME restaurants accept credit cards, but most small shops only accept Swiss Francs. Also, I had to pay rent in cash only. Rent and taxes as well as any other fees you will be paying while in Lausanne are paid by cash at the post office. Lausanne is noticeably more expensive than Vancouver. There is one Starbucks, and a Grande black coffee costs the equivalent of 12$. During my entire time in Lausanne, I ate at one restaurant and this cost almost 50$ for a very basic meal the would not have cost more than 20$ in Vancouver. There are ways to cut back on costs, but it is quite difficult. Switzerland is a country that I would love to go back to in the future, but only if money is not an object. There are plenty of beautiful things to do and see, but so many things that I had to say no to due to financial constraints (and I gave myself a very large buffer heading into exchange).

Note: There is a bike rental program that allows for 1 hour of free use. I was able to bike between my dorms and campus on most days free of charge. However, Lausanne is unbelievably hilly, so being able to bike is very dependant on was part of the city you
are living in, and where you are trying to get to. It would have been impossible to ride up the hill that led to the grocery store, for example.

Accommodation

Location: Cedres Building
Security Deposit: 1200 CHF (1600 $)
Taxes: 120 CHF (160$)
Monthly Rent: 530 CHF (700$)

The Cedres dormitories are fairly basic. It is very clean and were a 3 minute walk down to Lake Geneva (the best part of my time in Lausanne). Heat, hot water, wifi and hydro are all included. There is a monthly living tax of 37CHF, this was not disclosed at the beginning of my stay, and I received a bill from the city detailing that this had to be paid. I had a private room and bathroom (this is assigned to you, you do not get to request a private or shared room) and a kitchen that I shared with the 4 other people on my floor. From what I learnt from other students, living situations were very dependent on which dormitory you were assigned to, I still do not know where the other 5 dormitory complexes were, as they are spread out throughout the city. The kitchen area has a shared dining and lounging area, and it is all very dependent on who your floor mates are, whether or not this is a social space. Bedding is provided at an additional cost (I believe it was 40frans/ month). I brought a flat sheet from home (mostly for questionable hostels along the way), but purchased a pillow and thick fleece blanket form Migros (the most affordable store in Lausanne). I ended up saving over 80CHF by doing this.

Culture and Living

Switzerland is very unique, in that different regions speak different languages and each region is quite set on only speaking that particular language. Lausanne is a French speaking city, but an hour north in Bern you are expected to speak German, and 2 hours east you will find Italian speakers. It is not easy to get by in Switzerland without speaking the language of the region, particularly in the smaller French speaking towns. I would recommend a basic knowledge of French (you should be able to ask for directions and order food for example). There were a number of times where I could not find a single person who spoke English during dire situations, so quick learning is vital here! Similar to Vancouver, Lausanne seemed to have a strong focus on being outdoors and being active. Rain or shine, there were always people running along the waterfront. In terms of healthy eating however, eating the same foods I do in Vancouver seriously impacted my living costs. It cost around 100CHF/week to buy groceries that only consisted of meat, fruit and veggies. The cost of carb based grocery shopping is far less and far more typical in Switzerland.
Studentlife

I was enrolled in the English Literature department at UNIL, as these are where the majority of classes taught in English are found. There are some other classes taught in English in the linguistics department. For the most part, other than the occasionally joke, all of my English classes were conducted exclusively in English. Classes consisted of around 20 people, and participation was highly encouraged though we were not graded on it. The grading system is quite different than SFU. For 3/4 of my classes, the entire grade was based on a 2,000-4,000 word final essay, though the workload/reading-load is on par, if not more, than an English class at SFU. The campus is quite beautiful, and 1 metro stop away form the science campus where all of the fun and excitement happens. Typically students spent there time at the on campus pub on the science campus, as it extended into a vast courtyard and was open and serving all hours of the day.

Getting Settled

If you are not comfortable speaking French, there is a 3 week intensive course prior to the semester conducted through UNIL. Because the campus is so international, and you will be enrolled in English courses, it can be tough to pick up the language organically. You will find that most students are as excited to practice their English as you are to practice your French. Pick up a basic English to French phrase book, the locals always appreciated the effort (though they appreciate being able to fluently speak French quite a bit more). Make sure to attend orientation week! It is 7 days of fun and practical information. I was only able to attend the last 2 days, and it made adjusting far more difficult! During orientation week, you can meet everybody who is at UNIL or at the science campus on exchange and it makes adjusting so much easier. Spend as much time by the water as you can. I found that the weather in Lausanne was surprisingly warm, I was able to catch a tan in March (though it snowed 3 days later). Bring a bit of all kinds of clothing, the weather is as unpredictable as Vancouver. As you will (and you must) spend a large amount of times in the Alps, bring snow gear and boots, clothing in Switzerland is very very expensive. If you are lucky enough to make friends with someone who has a car, arrange a drive over the border to France with a group of people. This only takes a couple of hours, and you are able to stock up on dry goods, cosmetics and clothing for far less money. There is also an IKEA in Geneva (1 hour away) to purchase any household items you may need.

Fig 1 : View during my daily bike ride to school
Fig 2 : UNIL Campus
Fig 3 : Boardwalk minutes from my dorm
Fig 4 : Cloudy days in Lausanne
Fig 5 : Swiss Lawnmowers. Sheep could be found roaming the campus munching on grass