In the fall of 2015, I participated in an exchange term in South Korea. As an International Studies student, it was required of me to study abroad. I picked Yonsei University because I was aware it was part of the top 3 SKY universities of Korea. As far as planning goes, I would recommend students to have an open mind and be excited for the exchange. At the same time, I met some friends who had huge expectations for going to South Korea who I think were disappointed in their experiences, but relying on media mediums as a way of building your expectations (eg. Liking K-pop) is something I would not recommend. Packing wise, I would be economical about the number of suitcases you have to bring. While the transportation from the airport to the dormitory of Yonsei is only one bus ride, the walk from the stop to the front door was a difficult road. Roads are also not as smooth as one would expect, so moving around 2 suitcases and a backpack was already hard work, I saw some students having 3 or 4 suitcases and they were struggling. I ended up bringing a lot of things that were not necessary and that I ended up not using, so if in doubt of whether to pack or not, I would not pack it. From personal experiences, I rarely used cash unless you are the type that likes to do street shopping and eat street food. Otherwise, a debit card is sufficient and there are many atms around in case you should need cash. Furthermore, on campus, the school has a bank branch that provides service for opening a bank account, so only bring enough cash for the first two weeks if you are paranoid about carrying a large sum of money with you on person.

As mentioned above, from the airport to the school bus stop, it is just one bus ride. However, the walk from the stop to the school will take a good 15 minutes. So be prepared for walking. In general though, I walked a lot since the area that the dorms was some distance to get to from the train station. At orientation, the study abroad staffs provided valuable information that was extremely helpful to me (eg. Library access information, Alien Registration, Bank, and other student services). The campus in general is big so I had to give myself a good amount of time before my class started to account for the walks up and down hills. Cars and traffic in Korea is known to be bad, but cars do not stop for you to cross as they do in Canada. I was in the Seoul campus in the Sinchon area. The area around there was very convenient as it was close to two other universities, Ehwa and Hongik. These areas are generally populated with young adults and create a good atmosphere. Since these two university stops are only 1 stop away, they are within walking distance, about 20 minutes. There are tons of restaurants and cafes in the area. During midterm and finals, 24 hour cafes are packed and the library on campus was also a good study area.

The dormitory I was in was called SK Global House and there was a laundry room and gym available. On each floor there were study rooms that I frequented. There were many areas to study and gather, including the Kitchen downstairs. While the SK Global House has individual rooms and in-room washrooms, from learning about friends’ experiences, the International House, the other dormitory, had a very friendly atmosphere and people on their floors created great bonds. The dorm administrators disinfected our rooms every month. I also know that their fire alarms work similarly with the ones back home as we had the alarm go off the first week of classes. There are two elevators in the SK Global House that is used primarily by everyone. They are not fast or efficient elevators as everyone has to use them so I would use the stairs even if I was on the top floor (7th). Especially when the language classes finished in the evening, the queue for the elevators was horrible!

Although SFU did not require me to take a language course in Korea, I took the Intensive Korean course that the school was known for. The experience was worthwhile but extremely difficult and stressful. Seeing the same group of people five times a week for two hours each day naturally created a bond for all of us. These were great friends that I made and the teachers that taught us the language courses were
brilliant and patient. These language classes were really intense with almost vocab quizzes each week and grammar learned each day would not necessarily be reviewed the next day and required students to remember the vocabulary. Teachers also talk to you in Korean regardless, so if students want to enhance their experience, I would recommend learning at least hangul (Korean alphabet) before. There was also a placement test held the first day of school to put everyone in their classes. Other classes that I took, while they were interesting topics, does not compare to the quality here at SFU. I believe part of the reason for this is because professors understand that exchange students are often times distracted and want to go around and explore the country, therefore, they are more lenient towards us.

The 4 months of school that I spent there passed by really quickly. I did not believe it when people told me that exchange trips like these will both change a person and also make one learn a lot about themselves. This held true. On this exchange, while learning what it meant to be independent, I also made me reflective of the luxuries I had before at home. The feeling of being homesick never did strongly hit me because I was to make great friends that really supported me. If I were to give any tip for future students, I would tell them not to be afraid of doing the things you really want to do and to not let anyone hold them down.

Photo of me and my friends in the lobby of our dormitory
The campus on the way to classes.
A really popular dessert place near the school (20 minute walk from dormitory).

The famous Yonsei and Korea University games that happen each year during the Fall semester. It was an amazing experience.