I am a third year Linguistics student who participated in an exchange to Basel, Switzerland. One of the great things in preparing for my exchange was the fact that, apparently, the Swiss really like Canadians. Getting my visa was not a problem at all. In fact, I had my application submitted, processed, and a visa in my hands within about 8 weeks over Christmas break. That said, you still need to be prepared to fill out a couple of forms and sign a few documents when you arrive in order to get your resident’s permit, but it’s all very simple. The application for the scholarship offered by the university is similarly simple: it is done automatically, and deposited into an account of your choosing in 1000 Frank lumps on a monthly basis through the semester.

The semester system at the University of Basel is similar to that of SFU, except that it is about 2 months later; the spring semester for me didn’t begin until February 25, and ended mid-June. This could potentially be a problem for someone who wants to work for the entire summer after returning home, but I found it quite nice as it allowed me to see some of Europe during the summer. Even though the semester starts in February, the weather is extremely mild. I found that I rarely even wore sweaters outside, and people were complaining about how unseasonably dreary the weather was. Normally spring is well under way by March, and there is not nearly as much rain as we get in Vancouver.

Arriving in Basel is fairly simple. There is one large airport that services the general area for France, Switzerland, and Germany, and buses that take you from the airport to anywhere you need to go. I personally travelled extensively before my semester began and so arrived by train, and that was just as easy. There is no centralized student housing system like there is for SFU students, but there are many places where students live. The university also partners with a business abbreviated as Wove, and I was able to find shared housing through their system quite painlessly for approximately $550 a month, quite near to the university campus. Living expenses are essentially the same as they are in Vancouver, but eating out or going to bars costs an absolute fortune.

Academically speaking, the University of Basel is quite different from SFU. Most students have some sort of double major/minor program, and they often take only 3 years to graduate. They do this by taking more than what we would consider a typical full time load during the semester. This is possible because, for the most part, classes are based primarily around class participation and group/solo presentations. There are also many classes which assign a term paper which is to be completed over the break between semesters, so any student looking to do an exchange should be wary about taking such a class. As far as languages go, the university is officially bilingual with English and German, and the classes seemed to be fairly evenly split, with a bit of a heavier lean towards the German half. A lot of the older staff at the university are not terribly adept with English, and so that can cause problems, but it would certainly be possible to get by without knowing German.
One thing I found surprising about the school was how busy the musical scene was. A short distance from the main campus is the “musical campus”, where there were hundreds of students walking around with violins, cellos, and the like. One of my roommates attended classes there as a Master’s student, and I was able to attend one of his performances at a local symphony orchestra.

In the city itself, English, French, German, and variations thereof are all extremely common. Someone who spoke French fluently would be in just as good of a position to succeed in Basel as someone fluent in German; there are even some supermarkets where the employees tend to use French instead of German. Basel is an extremely beautiful city, but it must be admitted that it is small. As a tourist, you could do everything interesting in a day without working too hard, but it’s a hard place to get sick of. The university is located in the old-town area of Basel, right next to the Rhine, and the lecture halls and classrooms are mostly in very old, renovated estate buildings. There are public fountains everywhere from which you can fill a bottle with delicious water, and the stairs by the Rhine allow you to get within petting distance of some extremely unafraid swans (at your own risk – they bite). There are also many small and large parks throughout the area, and public transportation of marvelous, but I never needed it because absolutely everything was within walking distance. There are also plenty of cities in the area that are very much worth visiting, especially Luzern and Interlaken.

Pictures:

Below is a picture of myself in Interlaken. Me and my girlfriend took a three hour train ride from Basel and arrive here by lunch, and after we climbed up some trails and followed them back down we found this wonderful view.
And cows!
This picture is from the same trip, about halfway up to as high as we got. The lake in the picture is Interlaken Ost, and you can see a smaller lake in the bottom right corner in the middle of all the trees. Right beside that lake are the ruins of an old fort which has been converted into a cemetery. It’s a beautiful place.

This is one of the infamous swans, and is one of several hundred pictures my girlfriend took of them.

They were about a 10 minute walk from where I lived.
This is a picture of the Münster Cathedral. You can’t tell from this picture, but I’m already about 75 feet up walking around on one of the spires. We were able to go all the way to the top, which was probably about 125 feet. It was definitely my favorite cathedral in Europe.