Preparation for Exchange

When planning for my exchange at UC Berkeley, I considered several living alternatives. One challenge I encountered, which is very common in the Berkeley area, is an insufficient selection of off-campus housing. If you are interested in staying off-campus, start searching early and expect to pay higher-than-average rent. I decided my best option was to stay in a residence hall. I made this decision based on two factors; the guaranteed proximity to campus, and the knowledge that I would be rooming with fellow students. When you apply for housing during your registration, there is also the option of selecting a meal plan, which gives you access to all of the campus’ dining halls and restaurants that accept meal points. I opted into the meal plan, not realizing that my dorm room would have a full kitchen. However, it was still very nice to have the option to grab a snack or a quick dinner and not have to worry about cooking all of my meals myself.

I chose to fly into the Bay Area so that I wouldn't have to worry about parking or driving while I was there. There is relatively good access to and from Berkeley from the City and other areas of the Bay. Additionally, with your CalID, you get unlimited access to AC Transit, much like the U-pass system in Vancouver, but slightly less inclusive. I would recommend flying into Oakland, rather than San Francisco, if you want to keep your time on BART shorter when you arrive with all of your luggage.

When packing for your semester at Cal, anticipate cooler weather than typical Vancouver summers. Because Berkeley sits across the Bay from the Golden Gate, there is almost always a strong breeze blowing up the hill. It’s fairly common to have cooler summers in San Francisco, so pack in anticipation of frequent overcast, as well as chilly mornings and evenings.
During the Exchange

Living in the Bay Area offers so many opportunities to explore, but there is little argument that it comes at a cost. Much like Vancouver, the cost of living is quite high, so it is important to budget accordingly if you want to get the most out of your time there. By staying in a dorm, I didn't have to worry about paying for utilities, and by not bringing a car, I could avoid paying for insurance, parking, and gas.

Because there are fewer students in the summer, I was lucky enough to get one of the apartment-style dorm rooms. This meant that I had a private bedroom, and shared a full kitchen and living space with three other students. It was a fantastic setup, with enough privacy to study, but also a great central area to spend time with my roommates.

Berkeley runs its summer semester as separate sessions, each of varying length. I chose to do two, six-week sessions. I took two classes for the first session, and then one for the second. Because it is such a condensed schedule, lectures average at about four-hours per day. Depending on the class, you may have separate lab time, or discussion periods immediately after lectures. I had classes Monday through Friday, but I was able to enjoy my mornings and evenings each day. Another consideration when selecting your sessions is that very few courses are offered in more than one session. Anticipate a heavy reading load to keep with the pace of the classes. Most programs at Cal are curved, and each professor outlines the expectations and grading scales of their class at the start of the session, just like any class at SFU.

When organizing your course schedule, try and plan so that you have plenty of free time to go and explore the Bay Area. It is such an incredible place, with so much to see and do. If you’ve never been before, be sure to visit Alcatraz, walk across the Golden Gate Bridge, take a cable car
up California St. and hike Twin Peaks. Take a trip into Marin to see the Headlands, Sausalito, and Muir Woods. Dolores Park, Golden Gate Park, and the Presidio are all fantastic spots to sit and people watch. Be sure to head out to Ocean Beach and Lands End, visit the ruins of Sutro Baths and soak up some sun. San Francisco has an amazing food scene, so make sure you get out of Berkeley and grab dinner in the City.

Even during the summer, when the campus is at its quietest, there is still so much to do. It’s fun to participate in all of the activities your residence hall offers, but be sure to go out and meet people outside of your building. Get to know students who study full-time at Cal.

**Exchange Reflection**

Spending a summer studying at Berkeley has been one of the most gratifying experiences I have ever had. The campus is unbelievably beautiful, the history of the institution is incredible, and the professors instructing my courses were extraordinary. San Francisco, and Berkeley specifically, have such a unique culture of inclusiveness and diversity. My studies introduced me to many of the challenges of race in the United States and how they directly affect the different areas of research in which I was involved.

I met some amazing people, who I know I will be able to call friends for years to come. Everyone was so welcoming and inclusive. I took classes which were unique to UC Berkeley, and I am excited to apply them to my future studies, allowing me to look at things from a unique perspective. I felt at home from my very first day of class. Having a good group of friends opens us so many more opportunities to enjoy everything the Bay Area has to offer.
As difficult as it may be at the beginning, don't be shy to introduce yourself to students in your class, in your dorm, or just around campus. Your time at Berkeley is an opportunity to step outside of your comfort zone and explore entirely new ideas, perspectives, and people. Most importantly, have fun.