

Report from Robert Meier, University of Ulm, about his year at the Portland State University

Course of Studies: Physics

Hmm, how should you start writing a report about such an eventful year in Portland, Oregon? Maybe let's first start with the preparation phase: The University of Ulm is part of the exchange program between Baden Württemberg and Oregon. I already knew that the Northwest of the United States has a very beautiful landscape with all the possibilities a person, who likes being outdoors, needs. Next I had to decide between the different universities in Oregon. For a physicist there are three different places in Oregon: Oregon State University in Corvallis, University of Oregon in Eugene, and the Portland State University in the biggest city in Oregon, Portland. After talking to former exchange students from the different universities I decided to go to Portland, although the department of physics is pretty small and does not offer so many courses as the other two bigger universities do. But I never regretted my decision and the support from the PSU was always very good. After making the decision where to go you are already in the application process. Although the trip was still a year away I was running from one office to the next one in order to get all the application forms filled. The International Office in Ulm was really helpful in this time. All the students from Baden-Württemberg, who participated in the exchange program, also met in Bad Herrenalb to get to know each other and to share their experiences. This meeting was great and it was good to see that everyone was having the same kind of problems. But finally I can really say that if you take care of all the forms early enough and don't hesitate to ask somebody, you should not run into big problems. In my case everything worked fine.

Most of the students who were going to Oregon were in the same flight from Frankfurt to Portland on the 9/4/2006. Arriving in the States the International Office from the PSU organized a great orientation program during our first two weeks. We had some classes about American culture and the American university system. This really helped me getting along in the jungle of bureaucracy. They also helped us

looking for apartments. Only the group of students who stayed in Portland had some problems finding an apartment. All of the other students who were going to Corvallis, Eugene, Ashland or La Grande found an apartment easily. But in the end also the PSU people were successful in finding a place to stay. During our two weeks of orientation we were also going rafting and camped for four days at the coast of Oregon. The orientation is a lot of fun and hence is absolutely recommendable for every Oregon exchange student.

I found a place to stay on www.craigslist.com. This website is crucial for every exchange student because there are not only many offers for rooms but also for all the things you need for a successful year in the US (e.g. furniture, bikes, etc). I finally ended up in a very nice house in the Southeast of Portland, where I lived with my landlord and two other roommates. I can only give every future exchange student the advice to share an apartment with native English speaking persons. None of my roommates had a car. This is very untypical for the US. But in the city of Portland you don't need a car. Because of the high parking fees it is actually quite expensive to own and use one. Also the public transportation (especially the bus system) is really good. Unfortunately if you want to travel around a car makes everything much easier. That's why some of the students in Portland shared one and we always split the expenses on our trips. Which leads me to the next point I want to write about: Places to travel to in the Northwest?

Everybody definitely has to go to the big cities in this area: San Francisco, Vancouver B.C. and Seattle. But after coming come to Portland you definitely recognize that also Portland itself has its own lovely alternative character and for me is still the best city to live in the US. In order to go skiing I joined the snowboard club of the PSU. I also found a lot of new friends on my skiing trips to Mt. Hood, Mt. Bachelor, Red Mountain and Whistler. If you are also interested in summer outdoor sports the PSU outdoor club is a very good choice. They offer many trips to various spots to a fair price. The PSU also has its own small climbing gym where you can always meet new people. I for myself got to know most of my American friends from sport.

You should also try to go on a longer road-trip through the West of the US. All the state and national parks are really amazing (Yellowstone, Bryce Canyon, Grand

Canyon, Zion, Yosemite and so on). But also the smaller parks in Oregon are definitely worth a weekend trip: Crater Lake, Hell's Canyon, Painted Hills. If you are interested in live music you should go to the annual Sasquatch Festival. The landscape around is amazing and it is a great spot for a music festival with well-known American bands. I also travelled to bigger cities on the east side (Toronto, Hamilton, Chicago and New York). NY is really a must. I have never seen such an amazing city. Unfortunately after one week in the big apple you need another two weeks of rest!

Now you might start wondering whether I also studied. I did most of my trips on the weekends (sometimes including Monday) and in the big break before Christmas. The period between March and September 2007 was really very busy for me. I decided to make my Master of Science at the PSU. That's why I had to spend a lot of time in the lab. Therefore it is really important to decide right at the beginning of the year whether you want to get the M.S. or not. Therefore you need a professor from the physics department who supervises and helps you. In Portland the department of physics has two different research areas: Environmental physics and Nanophysics. I worked with Dr. Koenenkamp and we were interested in organic solar-cells and LED's. For me doing research was definitely the most valuable experience I achieved and it was a lot of fun (not always, but often). In order not to run into troubles with the bureaucracy you should check with the International Office if they have to change your visa status or not. I extended my stay in the US to the September 2007 so that I was able to write my thesis at the PSU. Therefore you have to do an internship so that the International Office can also extend your visa, which normally ends in the middle of June. You can also fly home and then come back after you finished writing your thesis and defend it in front of the thesis committee members. But I also have to say, if you decide to do your Master, your life is a little bit different to the ones of the other exchange students. You will end up with at least 15 credits per term and you should work in the lab almost everyday. But it is definitely possible and back in Germany you can apply directly for an PhD position!

If you don't want to pay fees for your money transfer from Germany to the US, there are two different ways: You can open an account at the Deutsche Bank in Germany

and one at the Bank of America. These two institutes have a cooperation agreement, which allows you to withdraw money from your German account at an ATM from the Bank of America without paying any fees. Almost all of the exchange students in my year have chosen this way. A second possibility is to have a "Sparbuch" from the Postbank. But I am not familiar how it works. I only know that you have one withdrawal every three months for free. At the beginning I also brought traveller cheques (around 2000\$) from Germany with me. You often have to pay a deposit for your apartment etc. Due to the nice exchange rate I would say that the living expenses are roughly the same as in Germany. I would say that the prices for housing and food are higher, but on the other side clothes and travelling is much more affordable. I was in the lucky position to get a scholarship from the "Landesstiftung". I am really thankful about it!

Finally it was a great experience for me. I am happy that I was allowed to participate in the exchange program. Getting to know so many new friends and being allowed to study at the PSU was definitely worth it!



Oregon coast



Portland



Mt. Hood



New York