The best thing about my semester abroad was meeting new people that had different upbringings and viewpoints to my own, but still being able to find common interests and make friends.

The most challenging thing about my semester abroad was the arrival and departure. It was somewhat hard to travel that far across the world by myself and relocate to a strange area without knowing anyone, although I settled in very rapidly and didn’t get homesick. The departure was difficult because of the friends that I had made, and dealing with the idea that I might not see them again, and having to close that chapter in my life.

The NZ visa was very easy to obtain, the application was simple and straightforward, and no health exam was needed since the U.S. is low in incidences of malaria or something. I got back my approved visa within only a few weeks, a month at the most. I was worried that I wouldn’t get it back in time before I had to leave, but it was very quick, quicker than visas for other countries that I heard about.

Immigration upon arrival was pretty standard, I had to fill out an arrival card, and put all of my baggage through a screening machine. Since I didn’t bring any hiking boots or camping equipment, my customs experience was pretty quick because they didn’t have to hose off or check anything special. I only brought some gum, chocolate, and granola bars as far as food, but they didn’t even want to see any of it, and said it was alright. The customs officials seemed very nice and efficient.

I didn’t miss anything from home that I couldn’t buy in NZ, except maybe an umbrella, since they are somewhat expensive.

I would recommend not bringing a power converter. I brought outlet converters and a power converter, and ended up not needing the power converter. Check all the electronics that you plan to bring, as most of them do fine with NZ power output, such as a phone charger, camera battery charger, and computer charger. I guess a power converter would be useful if you wanted to bring a hairdryer, but since I opted to not bring one to save space, it was a waste of quite a bit of money.

I had filled out an airport pickup form, so upon arrival to the local airport in Palmerston North, I was picked up by a volunteer. He was very friendly, and drove me as well as other international students straight to our dorms and helped get our luggage into our rooms. I was not offered a buddy, and I don’t think a buddy would have been necessary.
There were orientation activities for both international students, and then later for all new students. The international student activities were informative meetings, and also a couple field trips to the local wind farm and also a sheep farm. There was a shearing demo and a sheepdog herding demo which were fun, and good photo-ops. The later orientation activities for all new students were mainly just talks on different subjects such as enrolling in classes, budgeting, how to use the library, etc. I didn’t feel that I needed to go to any of those info sessions.

The international office staff was very personable and available. I didn’t ever have a need to go visit their office, but if I had, I have no doubt that they would have been able to help me.

There is a centralized campus in Palmerston North, and Massey also has other campuses in Albany and Wellington, as well as extramural classes that you take online [NOTE: CALS students are not permitted to take online classes]. All of my classes were internal, at the Palmerston North campus. I lived in Egmont Court, so many of the students who lived there hung out in the court’s common room and kitchen. There wasn’t really a big social scene on campus, rather on the weekends students went into town, and at night students went into town to the bars and clubs. There are computers available at the one library, and also in the court’s common room. There is wifi available most everywhere on campus, and free wifi available at the Center, the on-campus religious center.

The course enrollment process was very straightforward. As an exchange student, I had to pick my classes when I applied to study abroad, and list them on the Massey application. I got all the classes that I had initially listed, and had no reason to change them, so I’m not sure how the enrollment process is for local students.

My classmates were the normal college-age students, mainly New Zealanders, with a few Maori, Maori-descent, or foreign students.

The classes were structured similar to those at Cornell, with mostly lectures, and some having either discussion sections (called tutorials) or labs once a week.

Homework was sometimes given, and mostly online. I had regular homework in Physics, which was a once a week online assignment from MasteringPhysics, the program that many physics classes use in the U.S. For my Human Genetics class, we had online review tests and quizzes usually every week. In two of my other classes there was a project of making a poster, and it varies by class whether it is a group project or individual, and the size, etc. For my Creative Writing class, we had assignments of writing poetry, short stories, and peer reviews of others’ work.

For most classes there were final exams and a mid-semester test. They did not have prelims in the sense that they did not have more than those two exams. The exam difficulty depended on the class, but in general was on a similar level to those at Cornell.
Grades for the class were determined by exams, online homeworks, labs if applicable, projects if applicable, and participation if applicable. I took four classes, which was a normal workload. I very much enjoyed all of my classes, as they all were subjects of great interest to me, and I feel that I learned a great deal of information in the semester.

I did not need to take any exams early, so I’m not sure of the process to do that. I didn’t hear of anyone having exam conflicts, and the study period was an entire week, with two full weeks for exam time. I felt that exams were spaced well, with plenty of time to study for each of my exams, more so than at Cornell.

I didn’t have any language problems while in NZ since their main official language is English, and everyone speaks it. It took a bit to get used to the NZ accent, especially in town or rural areas, but after that I had no problems. My professors were either New Zealanders or American, and one of my lab TA's was Asian. The Maori culture and language is in resurgence, and there is a TV channel exclusively spoken in Maori, but apart from that I had little contact with the language. Street and place names are sometimes Maori, which makes for interesting tongue-twisters that the locals can laugh about when the exchanges try to pronounce.

I would highly recommend opening a local bank account, simply because I was charged fees every time I used my American debit card at an ATM or in stores, for either foreign ATM fees or currency exchange fees. Eventually your cash will run out, and the fees from cards add up after a while. I opened an account with National Bank because it had a branch on campus, which was very convenient, and were used to dealing with students and international students, so had a specific package for international students. Other popular banks are KiwiBank, Bank of NZ, ASB, ANZ, or Westpac. When I opened my account with National Bank, I was given an EFTPOS card, with is like a debit card that you use with ATMs and also in store with a PIN. Having an EFTPOS card is the best way for purchases in a store, as I think I remember hearing that soon everywhere would switching to requiring a PIN with even a credit card, which would mean American credit cards without a PIN would be out of luck. I opened my account with some of the American cash that I had brought over. Before opening my account, if I needed more money, I had my parents deposit some money in my checking account back home, and then withdraw cash from an ATM. That method even with the ATM fees was cheaper than having them send me a wire transfer, as those can cost upwards of $50.

I applied for university housing, and got a room in Egmont Court, which houses many international students. There were many other dorms on campus as well. I would recommend living in a dorm, and I don’t think there was really any alternative for international students. I never met anyone who lived off campus other than local students who were commuting from home. The Courts included utilities, and had free laundry and free computers in the common room. You had to pay for internet on your own computers in your room. The cost of dorms was per week, and depended on your meal plan. International students had to pay the entire semester up-front. Egmont Court was catered, so you had the choice of either only dinner, breakfast and dinner, or breakfast, lunch and dinner. Some other dorms were self-catered and did not include any meal plan. There is one dining hall on campus, with assembly-line style
serving with a couple choices for each meal. I started off with the breakfast, lunch and dinner plan, but later downgraded to only breakfast and dinner, because I didn’t particularly care for the lunches, which consisted of a packaged sandwich, a piece of fruit, and a dessert item.

There are busses that run from campus into and around town, which are free for students. A student ID is all you need to get on the busses. The bus schedule is online, and posted at the bus stops. The busses stop running around 8pm on weekdays, and around 4 on weekends, so on drinking nights, students sometimes call taxis into and from town. There are a few taxi companies that are popular, and the phone numbers are posted in the dorm common areas. Taxi fares are reasonable, especially if booking a van taxi and the fare is shared among many people. The university also has special busses on Thursday and Friday nights, with the times into and from town posted in the dorm common rooms. These are preferred because they are free. The busses on these nights are very crowded, so it is recommended to get to the bus stop as much as half an hour early to be at the front of the line.

I talked with my parents at home using email, Skype, and also my cell phone. Skype is free, but my parents were rarely online and weren’t sure how to use the program. To call home using my cell, it cost about 49c per minute, which isn’t too bad for short conversations. I bought a cell phone when I arrived, which was not absolutely necessary. You can also just buy a SIM card, and use it in your existing phone [NOTE: not all U.S. phones will work in New Zealand], but I chose to buy the cheapest cell phone + SIM card that I could. Since internationals cannot be on a plan, and everyone else on exchange was on a prepay system. I got my phone from the local mall, from the 2degrees provider. The phone I got was the absolute cheapest one, and very simple. You bought credit either online or from a convenient store as “top-ups,” and rates per minute and text varied depending on if you were calling another 2degrees customer or not. Other popular providers were Vodafone and Telecom. In my opinion it didn’t really matter what provider you got, since I was only over there for a few months and just wanted the cheapest option. It was the same as in the U.S. in that I used my phone primarily for texting, and called only my parents.

I rarely sent or received mail, but I did have some insurance things that my parents had to mail to me from home, and I ordered a couple packages from Amazon that I had sent to me. It took a while for mail to make it from America, I’d say about a week after it was shipped, at least. I sent one letter home, and it cost me only a dollar or two, and took a week to get home. There is a small post office in town, as well as a post office inside the campus bookstore, which is where I went.

I met many students from the host country, as many of the students living in my Court were locals, and students in my lectures were also mostly locals. I went to the first few meetings of some of the campus clubs, but had conflicts after that so had to stop going. They had a variety of clubs, but certainly not as many or as much variety as Cornell does. They had a clubs day where all the different organizations set up booths in the main part of the campus, but apart from that I felt that there was no real push from any of the clubs to join.
Throughout the year, there were some special activities for international students, but none specifically for exchange students, which was fine. There were dinner events, a Kiwiana event which showcased native foods, pancake nights, and an end of the year send-off event, as well as others that I didn’t have time to attend. They were fun, had good food, and the faculty was personable and tried to get everyone involved and talking.

In general, the local students simply go out and drink on weekends for fun. There isn’t really a strong social life apart from that. In my Court we would usually have a movie night every Saturday in the common room, since the TV in there could hook up to a laptop and play movies. The different dorms also plan activities using the money from their social funds. Our Court used our money on a couple outdoor BBQ dinners where we reserved a couple grills, a trip to a local pool, and a themed party night.

I bought all of my groceries and other items in town, at their local discount warehouse supermarket, Pak’n Save, which had the lowest prices. There was another grocery store inside the mall, Countdown. The prices are more expensive as compared with the U.S., which I was expecting because of the exchange rate and the fact that everything is imported. Initially I used the cash that I brought with me from home that I exchanged at the airport, but after opening my bank account I mostly used my EFTPOS card to make purchases. I didn’t encounter any outdoor markets, but then again, I was there mainly during their fall and winter seasons. I got the impression that store hours were more restrictive than what I was used to in the U.S., with some closing fairly early in the evening. There was a small convenient store section in the Residential Services Office (RSO) building on campus, with was very convenient because it was right across the street from my dorm. I usually only went there for snacks. In the main part of campus, there is a larger convenient store, but the hours are fairly restricted, and they were closed on weekends.

One item that I found to be either surprisingly nonexistent or grossly overpriced was index cards. I wanted index cards to make flash cards to study for my final exams, but the small pack of index cards for sale at the campus bookstore cost about $14 NZD, as compared in the U.S. where I know you can get them for a dollar. I went into town to Pak’n Save, but they didn’t carry index cards, and the same was true for every other grocery store, bookstore, and stationary store I tried in town. Eventually I gave up and made my own flashcards on notepad paper. Another thing NZ doesn’t have is deodorant/antiperspirant in the solid bar form, which I knew before going there, so I brought plenty of my own. They only sell spray or the gel roll-on type. Other than that, they had all the normal items, if only with different brands, and sometimes odd flavors. I heard that there was an American foods store somewhere, but I never went to it. I suppose if you were craving something from home, it would be possible to find in a store such as that, but I never found myself missing anything from home.

I felt very safe in my host location. The campus was very relaxed and safe, and even in town I felt very comfortable walking home by myself. I don’t think I would have walked in town at night alone, but only because of drunk students, and not because I would think I would be in danger. All of the people I met, either store workers, bar bouncers, teachers, and local police
were very nice, and made me feel that Palmerston North is a very safe, small town. I had no health issues while I was there, I only caught a cold once which only lasted a few days. I drank the tap-water frequently with no issues. I was not aware if there was any sort of medical facility on campus since I was never in need of such services.

I traveled around the North Island during our two week Easter vacation. I went with a group of friends, mostly other internationals, and bussed to Taupo, Rotarua, and finally Auckland. In Auckland we met up with more friends and rented a minivan to have a roadtrip the rest of the way. We drove along the pacific coast highway, hugging along the eastern shore of the north island from Auckland all the way down to Napier and then from there cut back to Palmerston North. On the way we stopped off at Cathedral Cove and other beaches on the Coromandel Peninsula, as well as Gisbourne, the city that first sees the sunrise. It was a very picturesque journey, although I’m sad that I didn’t have time to see any of the South Island. We didn’t use any travel agency to plan our trip, but later I found out that the university had organized a trip for the internationals that went into Taupo as well. We tried to keep our spending to a minimum while traveling, opting to buy camping equipment and stay at campgrounds instead of staying in hotels every night. However, some of the tourist activities were too much to pass up for some of my friends, such as bungee jumping or the high swinging. I opted out, simply because those things were very expensive, and I had no interest. We were able to find lots of things to do and places to go in each town that were relatively inexpensive, such as going to the beach, hiking to Huka Falls, or taking a short sailing tour of Lake Taupo. In every major town or city they have what’s called an i-site, or information site, that has information about the town, as well as maps, travel guides, and information about where to stay. We stopped there first in almost every city we went through, and they were very helpful. We didn’t end up needing any guidebooks or websites.

I think that I got a good picture of the North Island, although I would have liked to travel to the South Island. The local school culture was very similar to home, and I enjoyed the change of scenery, meeting new people, learning about a new culture, and the travel experience. From a cultural and social viewpoint, this exchange made me appreciate how strange and yet familiar another culture can be, even one on the opposite end of the world. This exchange sparked my interest in travel, both for experience of other cultures and learning about other animals and ecosystems. I don’t believe that this experience will strongly influence my future career possibilities, except that I will be less reluctant to move to new places or experience new things.

Overall, my exchange experience was very positive, and I would do it again in a heartbeat. I enjoyed the classes I took, the people I met, and the places I got to see. I feel that this experience was personally rewarding, but did not further my future career goals.