During the Spring 2016 semester, I studied abroad at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) in Uppsala, Sweden. I am really glad I was able to have this experience and I think it has had a meaningful impact on my life and worldview. When first considering studying abroad, the process seemed daunting and I was more than a little anxious. Thanks to the exchange coordinators and my parents, I was able to work through the process in manageable steps. The following are details of my experience.

Preparation

The CALS International Exchange application and application for SLU were very straightforward and fairly easy to complete. Picking courses to take in Sweden was a bit trickier since they use a slightly different schedule system. Courses usually run for half the semester and most students take only two courses at a time. Depending on how many credits the course is, you might (generally) have one course on all day Mondays & Tuesday morning, then the other course the other days of the week. Applying for a visa (actually called residence permit) was probably the most stressful part of the preparation process. There were several issues with my application (regarding scholarships/ bank accounts) and I had to submit additional documents several times after my initial submission. I received the permit only a few weeks before I left for Sweden. My advice is to start the application process as soon as all documents are in order because things could go wrong and it takes longer than you expect. After I actually arrived in Sweden, I needed to go to Migration Services (Migrationsverket) to have my photo/ fingerprints taken for my temporary residence card. I received this card a few weeks later.

I did not really have any difficulty packing for my trip. For luggage I had a large checked suitcase, a carry-on case & a shoulder computer bag (both carried-on), and this was plenty for me. I am a very outdoorsy person and a lot of my luggage space was for outdoor clothes/ gear which I am glad I packed. Sweden is really great for all sort of outdoor recreation and it’s fairly cold so pack warm. A really cool thing about Sweden is that there are lots of second-hand clothing stores where you can get very nice everyday clothes for cheap. So don’t pack more clothes than you need.

Travel/ Arrival

My travel to Sweden went very smoothly. I flew KLM from Montreal to Amsterdam then to Stockholm. I took the train from the airport to Uppsala (only took 20mins) and then I stayed with family for a few days before I was able to move into my apartment. The wife was a professor at SLU and she actually met her husband at Cornell when she did an exchange there during her student days. I am very lucky to have had that connection because I was not able to move into my apartment until after the first day of class. There were some issues with moving into my apartment and I wish the Swedish exchange coordinator had made the transition smoother. Another issue was that I was supposed to have free housing as part of the exchange...
agreement, but the details of this were not worked out beforehand so I had to pay all my rent out of pocket. I was finally reimbursed, but I hope things are simpler for the next Cornell student at SLU.

A housing assignment was given to us exchange students. I had my own little studio apartment in a residential complex (Lilla Sunnersta) a few km south of the main campus. My accommodations were really nice (clean, new, close to the forest & store & university). However, I was about 8km from the city center so it was a bit of effort to get to into the city where most of the student life was.

University

Studying at a Swedish university seemed much less stressful than studying at Cornell. Overall, students have more free time and there is very little out of classroom work compared to Cornell. I took a full a schedule and actually ended up with more credits than students usually take each semester (32.5hp instead of 30hp). There are far fewer assignments than US universities (at least for life sciences). Grades are based on a final exam, final project/report & maybe some lab reports. More emphasis is placed on working in groups and discussing the material, which I found helpful. It was different having just one class for a whole day sometimes. Some lectures/seminars were long (3+ hrs) and rather boring, but the great thing was that every hour you got a 15min break and at least an hour for lunch. Oh and sometimes free coffee & fruit! Swedes really value their “fika”! The university atmosphere is very relaxed and casual. Professors go by their first name and you can always get an extension for a paper/project. Initially, it did take a while to figure out the university logistics: lots of electronic hurdles, access cards, etc.

The difficulty of the exams was comparable to some Cornell courses though I was taking masters level courses. Being a native English speaker I did have an advantage because the courses were in English. In general, Swedes are very fluent in English, so I had no problem in that respect. However, I do wish I had been able to take a Swedish course to learn the language, but SLU did not offer one. I took four courses: Plant Microbe Interactions, Agricultural Cropping Systems, Biology/Production of Crop Plants, Bees, Apiculture & Pollination. I feel like the courses I took really helped my progress with my plant sciences career. I was exposed to cutting edge research in the fields of sustainable agriculture and agronomy. It was especially interesting to visit Swedish farms and compare their practices with American farms.

Life Abroad

I really enjoyed living in Sweden. While its not utopia, Swedish society is admirable. There is more respect for others and the environment than I feel like there is in America. Gender equality is very high and people enjoy many benefits from their work. Sweden is very rule structured and Swedes respect these rules. I honestly felt safer walking around the city at night in Sweden than I do sometimes in the US. I never heard of women having issues, either. I can’t comment much about using medical services in Sweden since I never needed to go to the doctor, but I heard it was easy to do.

I loved how Uppsala was so bike friendly; there are amazing bike paths everywhere and I biked a ton. Having a bike is crucial and you can easily find a used one for under $100. Biking also saves money since taking the bus quickly gets expensive. Just be prepared to bike in all sorts of bad weather… You can take a bus most places in Sweden or a train to the more major towns. I
enjoyed traveling by train (pretty low stress) just remember that Sweden is fairly big so it can take a while.

Daily life for me was not really much of a culture shock. There are big supermarkets to buy groceries and you can get similar products as in the US (perhaps less junk food and smaller sizes!). Food is a little more expensive than the US. Banking presented some issues for me. You cannot create a Swedish bank account unless you live in Sweden for at least one year so I had to pay rent with cash (through a bank service). I did have some success using XE Trade but it was not very simple. Having a chip credit card is essential in Sweden, but cash is still widely used. The cell phone situation worked out perfectly for me. I made sure that I had a phone that would work with a GSM network and I bought a Swedish SIM card (COMVIQ provider). Then I paid about $12 per month for prepaid 1gb data, unlimited texting, 200mins calling.

The student life in Uppsala is particularly nice. At its heart are the student Nations. There are 13 nations, which are organizations open to any university student each with a pub, restaurant, dance club and library. I had some great times with the other exchange students at the nation parties. The food/ drink at the nations is much cheaper than other places in the city, but it can get expensive if you have to pay a 10$ entrance fee for the club. There is also the SLU student union, which has a beautiful old building on campus and is worth joining if you want to go to their events.

I spent much of my free time enjoying the great outdoors of Sweden. It seemed like every weekend I went on a hike with the other exchange students or went skiing, skating, etc. BBQing & campfires are very popular and there are many excellent places to have a cookout. So is renting cabins; we had good luck renting cabins through AirBnB. I was able to travel a fair amount around Sweden without spending too much money. Some places I would recommend visiting are: Lapland (Kiruna & Narvik), Stockholm, Gotland island & somewhere in the Dalarna region. I would also recommend taking a cruise from Stockholm to the Baltic states. These 2 night cruises are really cheap (about $15 if you split the cost of a cabin with 3 others) and the Baltic capitals are very neat. The boat is fun and you can stock up on cheap alcohol if that’s your thing. I do wish I could have visited southern Sweden and some other places in Europe, but time did not allow.

General Challenges

Learning my way around the city and how the public transport worked was challenging in the beginning. I was glad I had a smartphone. All the systems are very high-tech and perhaps more complicated than necessary so I would recommend finding a Swedish buddy who can give advice. Swedish took some getting used to; everyone spoke very good English, but of course many things were written just in Swedish. Finding some everyday products like laundry detergent was tricky. As mentioned above, there were issues with the housing scholarship at SLU that took a while to resolve. The program description stated that students studying at SLU would get free housing. However, the exchange coordinator at SLU was not aware of this initially and I had to pay for my rent (about $515/month) out of pocket to the housing company. Eventually, after many back & forth emails, SLU was able to transfer the total cost of rent and a food stipend to my bank account at the end of the semester.

Conclusions

Studying in Sweden has had a major influence on my life, making me a more well-rounded, open-minded person. In addition to the academics, I gained much practical knowledge
about travelling and how to live in a foreign country. I made close friendships with people from all around the world; now I feel that I am welcome in many countries because I have a connection there. I feel that I am more open to travelling or living abroad in the future; it is easier than I thought it would be! To anyone who is considering studying abroad at SLU, I would say go for it! There are some challenges, but in the long run it will be very worth it.