I chose to study abroad in the Spring semester of my junior year, though after several long bike rides to class in the middle of a snowstorm, I wished I had been abroad in the Fall. While the application process can seem overwhelming, I found everyone on the Cornell and Wageningen side to be reachable, informative and most importantly helpful in terms of getting everything filled out correctly on time.

Tips for Future Students

1. Don’t immediately reject things that feel foreign, try to embrace them, as silly or nonsensical as they may seem.
2. Don’t be an obnoxious American – people will avoid you.
3. Do whatever you have to do to open a Dutch bank account, especially if you plan on doing lots of travelling or not having cash handy.
4. Don’t leave the Netherlands only having visited Amsterdam on the weekend! Go to Utrecht, Den Bosch, Groningen, Maastricht, Arnhem; there are TONS of great cities.
5. Keep in touch, but don’t let it get in the way. People who ditched social activites to Skype with friends or family missed out on some great times. It can be tough, but push yourself to get out there and meet new people. You’ll be thankful you did!
6. Don’t let a foreign city or country intimidate you. Everyone speaks English and public transportation in Europe is designed for tourists who don’t know where they’re going.
7. Take a course in period 6 that has at least a 5-day excursion.
8. If you pay more than 70 euros for a bike, you’re getting very ripped off. Definitely get a used bike at the Weds. or Sat. market or on the Wageningen Student Plaza on Facebook. Don’t worry about what it looks like or the noises it makes. No one cares.
9. Pass your classes, but don’t let school dominate your life. Good grades aren’t as rewarding as making friends from all over the world and seeing Europe (who will let you stay with them when you travel in the future!)
10. Don’t have great expectations and you’ll be pleasantly surprised 😊

Practical Advice

Visa

While a visa is not required by US residents to spend six months in The Netherlands, I did have to fill out a great amount of paperwork to apply for a residence permit. The permit was 300 euros and did not require me to visit a consulate (like some require for obtaining a visa). Lucky for anyone who studies in Wageningen after me, the university is now taking care of all of the paperwork for future exchange students! (I do not know if this also includes the fee.)

The residence permit was not ready for me to pick up upon my arrival in the country. You must first register with the municipality (a short bike ride away, depending on where you live) and then you can get a BSN number. A few weeks after I registered with the municipality someone emailed me to inform me that I could pick up my residence permit in the Forum (the main building at WUR.) Unfortunately they only give you one specific day to pick it up at the school, and I happened to be travelling outside of the country at that time. I had to pick up the permit in Den Bosch as a result, which was several hours away and cost 40 euros to reach.

Make sure you do pick up your residence permit, though, as it makes returning to The Netherlands easier after travelling to other countries. You also need to present it to return home to the states.

Packing

I brought one enormous suitcase from home, and though it was a challenge to transport I think bringing two would have been an ever larger burden. I was glad that I brought photos and some decorative things from home so that I could set up my room and make it feel like home right away. I definitely packed too many different coats and completely forgot to bring warm weather items (which ended up being fine because we had the coldest spring in years here). Most of the skirts and dresses I brought were not suitable for riding a bike, rendering them useless. There weren’t many things I couldn’t find here that I would have at home in the States. Except for books in English, perhaps. I stocked up on books when I visited the UK, because even the WUR library doesn’t have a single fiction novel.
Arrival

Upon my arrival at Schiphol airport, I passed immigration and did not even have to show my passport, acceptance letter, nothing. No stamp in my passport, nothing. In fact, the booths were closed...it seemed as if the immigration folks were on lunch break or something. Pretty bizarre.

I arrived too early into my building – classes started on Monday and I arrived the Thursday before. I did not move into my room until Friday though, after a mix-up with the trains cost me four hours and by the time I got to Wageningen the office where I was supposed to pick up my key was closed. Luckily I had booked a bed and breakfast in town for the first night and they even arranged to pick me up at the train station—I highly recommend this! Even with this all set up, it was still an extremely stressful experience and the fact I hadn’t slept the night before didn’t help.

Because 99% of people were still on Winter break, the building was completely empty. I was alone in my hallway, bumping into a Chinese married couple in the kitchen a few times per day. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday morning were the toughest for me. I was living in Bennekom and had no idea how to bike to Wageningen. Also, my assigned Ethernet cable took me a day to find, as it was tucked in the bottom drawer of a cabinet, so for the first day I had no working phone, no internet and basically no human contact. Thankfully I had already arranged to buy a bike from a former student on the Facebook Wageningen Student Plaza page (I recommend this!), so at least I had a bike. On Sunday night people started arriving and I was able to eat and sleep again like normal.

I requested to have a buddy but never heard back from the orientation folks. We did not have an orientation until the start of period 4 (in February) so it was really up to each of us to figure out things for ourselves. Once I had located the other exchange students who were as confused as I was, things became easier. I would recommend studying abroad at WUR in the fall, or coming for period 4 and staying for all of period 6.

Academics

The University

Wageningen is located at the northern tip of the [small] city of Wageningen. It is in between downtown Wageningen and Bennekom, a very small suburb where I lived in a building with over a hundred other international students. I’d say The Forum is the centralized campus, though it is unlike the American college campuses I’ve visited; the campus is not a place to hang out. There is a cafeteria open for a few hours around lunch and a café in the ground floor, but I only ever went to campus to go to class or to meet my group members. This building and the other buildings scattered throughout Wageningen always have wifi. There are at least 2 libraries, but that is miniscule compared to Cornell. Many of the computers are defective- it seemed like no matter what time in the semester it was you always had to arrive early to snag a computer. I always brought my laptop but this was an issue when you needed to print something (for which they have a pretty sophisticated system, but I would definitely have someone give you a demonstration so you don’t waste time and money getting very frustrated)

The academic calendar works on a period system, where you take one or two classes per period. Most periods are 4-5 weeks with the exception of period 5, which was 8. I liked only having to focus on one subject at a time, and it was so much less stressful to study for just one exam each finals week. While I found the courses challenging, I was much less stressed overall than I am at Cornell. The lifestyle is different and school isn’t seen as something all-encompassing. Every 45 minutes of lecture we would break for 15 minutes to grab a coffee. If you are enrolled in a course that meets only 3 days per week, be prepared for lots of reading. On the other hand, if you’re in a course that meets days a week, you can expect much less out-of-class work. Around my building and amongst the other international students, it was customary for us to sit and have dinner for 2-3 hours at night. It isn’t expected that you’ll be churning out a big paper, cramming for an exam or pulling an all-nighter. I felt like here you could have more of a life and meet new people- which is the whole point after all!

The international office... doesn’t exist. Several times I went to the student services desk at the Forum asking where the International Student Office (whom I’d been receiving emails from since I began applying) and no one knew what I was talking about. Turns out the ‘international student office is one person who I never met. Once I arrived in Wageningen I was disappointed in the lack of support I received. I had as assigned advisor that never checked in with me, asked how I was doing etc. Once I initiated a meeting and he was responsive, but I still found it odd that other than that he wanted nothing to do with me. Furthermore, there is one therapist for all students. One friend wanted to make an appointment with her after his grandmother died, but when he attempted he was told that the therapist was too busy and his issue wasn’t pressing enough.

Social activities were offered frequently by ixESN, an international student organization. I attended the first few but after I had made friends I stopped. They were always held somewhere downtown which was a 25-30 minute bike ride away from home, often in the freezing cold and snowy conditions. If I had lived downtown I would have gone, though, they were fun. I hung out with the people in my building the most. We were a bit isolated from everyone else, but luckily those who I lived with were very social and up for anything.
Classes

Enrolling in classes was really simple, it could be done online and was never a big rush and getting up at 7AM like it is at Cornell. It is rare that there is a strict cap on a class, except for in period 6 when classes go on excursion, for anywhere from 5 days to 3 weeks and in The Netherlands or abroad in France, Spain, Norway, etc. Stay for period 6 if you can!! That’s when the fun happens.

My final grade was typically based on one written report and one final exam. The written report is often a group paper, which I found surprisingly challenging to put together (especially when your group members have difficulty writing academic prose!). I never had a quiz or handed in anything before the last week of the course.

Life Abroad

Language

I did not have any major language problems with faculty, though some lecturers were difficult to understand. Luckily if you just reviewed their powerpoint presentations after class things made more sense. The other students had great conversational English. Some were terrible at writing proper English, resulting in me putting in several hours of extra work to intensely edit our group paper when entire paragraphs were incomprehensible. I am almost positive that Dutch lessons were offered here, but I didn’t take advantage of them. I found Dutch to be very strange sounding and had little incentive to learn it because I lived in an international house with people from all over the world and Dutch is only spoken in The Netherlands.

Banking

It took me two months to get a bank account established, but I’m glad that I did because it cost about 10 USD for me to withdraw money from my checking account at an ATM. Also, nowhere in Wageningen accepts Mastercard, Visa, Amex, etc! Just a Dutch Maestro card. Some places in big cities accept credit cards, but only if they have an international chip in them. There are several benefits to having a Dutch bank account, such as applying for a personal OV-Chipkaart (used for travel on the bus and train). The personal OV-Chipkaart can give you discounts on the train and allows you to get refunded if you forget to ‘tap out’ of the train (and then they automatically deduct 20 euros from your card). Furthermore, the food places at the University do not accept cash, only a Dutch bank card or a prepaid chipknip card (which get really annoying to keep trading in).

To get funds from the States deposited into my Dutch account, I had to use PayPal because depositing checks can cost as much as 100 euros and electronic transfers were not possible.

Housing

WUR arranged my housing. I live in a building with 140 other students. We each have our own room and own bathroom. Even though it is out of the way, I loved the people and the atmosphere. I don’t know what it would have been to live downtown, but I probably would have met more people living closer to the nightlife. I paid 420 euros per month and that included everything, including laundry.

Still, 420 euros is expensive for Wageningen. Each floor had a huge kitchen with lots of stovetops for cooking. There wasn’t a single oven in the entire building, but I got used to that. There was no such thing as a meal plan, but I was lucky enough to join in a cooking rotation with 10 other people so one of us cooked each night for everyone.

Transportation

My bike was my best friend here. I only paid 35 euros for it, which is a lot less than others paid. I would ride my bike to class, to downtown, the grocery store and the train station. Other modes of public transit are the bus system and the trains. The buses cost about 2 euros one way, and the trains are expensive but incredibly timely and efficient (most of the time). I easily spent 80-100 euros per month at least on the train, even with my discount. You can find all of the train info at the website ns.nl to get an idea of how much travel costs. Everyone here uses an OV-Chipkaart (a plastic card that you load money on electronically or at a service desk and then tap in and out on each trip) but getting paper tickets is possible. It is simpler and easier in my opinion but more costly. Also if you are travelling in the evening the ticket desks and closed and you must use a kiosk to purchase tickets (kiosks that only accept coins or Dutch bank cards).

Shopping

An estimated monthly budget while on exchange (excluding travel to other countries):
-Housing: 420 euros
-Food: 300 euros
-Transportation: 30-60 euros to initially purchase a bike.
-Repairs like a flat tire because of a punctured inner tube or broken chain were 15-20 euros (luckily I only had a broken chain once). For the train, it is 17 euros one way to get the airport, 13 euros one way to get to Amsterdam, and 20+ euros one way to get to further cities such as Groningen or Maastricht. I easily spent 80-100 euros at least on the trains each month, even when using my discount.
-Books: For only 2 out of 5 courses I was required to purchase a reader, which was never more than 30 euros.
-Miscellaneous: adding minutes on your phone (I think I used about 10 euros of minutes per week), buying a phone and sim card (30-40 euros), cappuccinos (2-3 euros), a meal out obviously depends on where you go, cost can be anywhere from 5-25 euros, some social events had a cover charge of 3-5 euros. There is a second hand shop open Weds and Saturday.
mornings that has pretty much anything you could want – I found hiking boots for 6 euros, shorts and tops for 3-5 euros, and cheap furniture too.

**Health and Safety**

I felt incredibly safe in Wageningen. I think the worst crime that happens here is someone’s bike getting stolen. Seriously.

In terms of health care, it was a bit strange and I never quite figured it out. There was a small pharmacy in town where I could ask questions about minor issues, but for anything major you must register with a house doctor who visits you (or sometimes has a location to go to in town). I never registered with a house doctor because I thankfully had good health during my stay but I might recommend doing that as soon as you arrive just in case. The hospitals are different too, because in order to be admitted your house doctor has to admit you. Also, you must call the hospital ahead of time to make an ‘appointment’ in the case of an emergency. In short, I am very thankful that I didn’t have to use this system.

**Overall exchange experience**

The best thing about my semester abroad was meeting new people and exploring new cities and new countries. I loved having the ability to reach Paris, Florence, Prague, London...in a matter of hours! And I loved the people I lived with who came from all corners of the world and had different worldviews, cultural traditions, interests, etc.

The most challenging thing about my semester abroad was simply being away from Cornell and from my family. Being at WUR made me recognize just how lucky I am to study at a place like Cornell. The resources are extensive. I wish I spoke Dutch because I found it incredibly difficult to get to know Dutch students and Dutch culture. It was hard to join a conversation when I didn’t understand a single word! I will say that I was homesick but I’m glad that is didn’t keep me from seeing and travelling to all of the places I wanted to visit. I missed the States but I found things in Europe that I appreciate too. You have to have an open mind!

My semester abroad changed my perspective on a lot of things. Americans tend to have an unpleasant reputation and this was definitely a challenge at times, but I think those of us who choose to study abroad can change this stigma. One of my German friends (who spent a year living in Michigan in high school) remarked that “Americans just have a sense of comfort in their own country and never want to leave and see or experience something else.” Being abroad has made me realize how comforting, but also how messed up, the States are. You just become so much more knowledgeable and open minded after living in Europe for six months with people who speak other languages, eat different things in different ways, sing different songs, have different routines, etc.