Personal information

Name: Sophie Smith
Major: Communication
Name of host university: IESEG, Paris Campus
Period/Time of Exchange: Fall 2016

Practical Advice

Visa

It is necessary to get a French visa. In my opinion, the French visa process was unnecessarily difficult. I began the process in April or May by applying to Campus France with the help of the CALS Exchange Coordinator. After my application was approved, I signed up for an appointment at the French consulate in NYC a couple of months later. Prior to the appointment, I had to gather about 10 different documents and put them in a very specific order according to the (outdated) website. At my appointment, I waited for a while and didn’t end up actually needing all the documents the website told me to bring. I was instructed to come back a week later to pick up my stamped passport, which I did. For those who cannot make it to NYC twice, you are allowed to bring a stamped envelope for them to mail it back to you but the person I was dealing with didn’t recommend doing that. Once I got the Visa, I was concerned by some of the labels on it because documents I had already received from IESEG said that they meant I couldn’t travel out of France for my time there. These labels didn’t end up being a problem for traveling within Europe as the border control officers never checked my visa stamp when I crossed borders, only the first page of my passport. Much of the time, my passport wasn’t even checked and stamped. All in all, the process, which took about three months in total, was much more tedious and nerve-racking than it needed to be.

(Comment by the CALS coordinator: The French Administration is known to be ludicrous and this story is a good example. Fortunately, IESEG helps with all other administrative procedures once you arrive in France! )

Housing

IESEG listed a variety of housing options when they initially contacted me about it. I chose the one they listed as the most popular for students, which was Pythagore Grande Arche. The residence was very popular because it was close to the school’s campus in La Defense and IESEG acted as students’ financial guarantee. Although I was living very close to the school, I would have also liked to live in the center of Paris. (Comment by the CALS coordinator: If you are interested in private housing or or the French guarantee system, talk to me)

Arrival

Getting through immigration was no hassle at all. I took a taxi from the airport to my residence which was quite expensive but easier than using public transportation considering the number of bags I had. All other times I went to the airport, I took the metro/RER which was pretty direct.

The Orientation program started a couple days after I arrived. It was mostly meetings on administrative things like class registration, student transport cards, French social security, and language tests. We took a tour of the campus with the international club, a group of French students who plan events for exchange students. They planned other outings for that week to see Paris and socialize.

I did have a buddy that I was connected with a few weeks after I arrived. I only met with her once because she was required to film a video with me for her class. She didn’t invite me to any social events but I know other exchange students who did have more friendly experiences with their buddies.

Academics

The University

The IESEG campus is located in La Defense, Paris’ business district. This is the only area of Paris that has skyscrapers and looks more modern than the rest of Paris. The main building is located in the iconic Grande Arche and there are three other buildings dispersed in the vicinity. Most of the people you will see walking around, however, are French people working at the
companies in the area. A major plus of being situated in La Defense is the huge mall that is steps away from the school building. If you are feeling homesick for Chipotle or McDonalds, Les Quatre Temps is right there. The mall also has an Apple store and multiple phone companies if you need assistance setting up a plan.

The main IESEG building is very different from Cornell. There are not many quiet places to sit and study (with good wifi and outlets.) It has a small cafeteria for buying breakfast and lunch and a couple computer labs. The offices of the exchange student coordinators are here and they are usually around if you need to talk about anything.

Courses

Classes at IESEG are either extensive or intensive, meaning, they either meet once or twice a week for three hours throughout the semester, or they meet four hours a day Monday-Thursday with an exam on Friday. The intensive ones (which last a week) are two IESEG credits (or 1 Cornell credit). Thus, I took 12 intensive classes and 3 extensive classes. The intensive classes usually included lectures, group projects, papers, and exams. It was common to take some of these courses at the Masters level and I did not find a significant difference in difficulty.

I enrolled in classes during my first week in France, during orientation. We were given an up-to-date list of courses offered and had about 48 hours to make our schedule according to requirements from our home universities and personal preference. It was an adjustment to have to figure out everything on paper and not online. A few days later, the add/drop period began even though most of the students had not begun any classes yet. The timing of this system was frustrating to me and the other exchange students because many people didn’t have ample time to communicate with their home universities and confirm that the courses being offered would fill their requirements. Luckily, I did not have this specific problem but I did have a few hiccups with registration as once the narrow period for add/drop ended, the coordinators were very strict about changing anything in our schedules.

Difference between studying at Cornell and at your host university

The courses at IESEG did not require the purchase of textbooks. There was rarely reading assigned. The work was much more hands-on than the classes I have taken at Cornell both in class and out of class. We had many class discussions and group projects.

Exams were either essay questions or multiple choice. On multiple-choice exams, the grading resembled the SAT in that wrong answers meant points deductions and no answer meant no points. This made exam grades lower.

Lecturers were very approachable and came from very diverse backgrounds. Many had worked in business before teaching and were very encouraging of networking.

Life Abroad

Language

You will find that the French are more wary of speaking English with tourists than in other countries. Whenever you attempt to talk to a French person (especially those working in the service industry), try to start your conversation in French. When you reach a point in which you can no longer explain yourself in French, ask if they speak English before you start speaking in English. French people will get offended if you do not try to speak their language and just start a conversation in English. That said, very basic French will get you through your daily life and many French people speak English.

IESEG offers all levels of French classes. You will have to take a test to be placed into a class which can be done online or in person during orientation week.

Health and Safety

I didn’t have any health instances when I was in Paris but I believe IESEG will put you in contact with doctors if anything should come up. As far as safety, pick-pocketing is very common in France, and Europe in general. Always keep your bags zipped and within sight. Be cautious on the metro/RER late at night and aware of your surroundings. Don’t be afraid to move away from anyone who makes you uncomfortable. Many of the touristic sites in Paris have a lot of police security so it is unlikely you will ever feel unsafe.

Overall exchange experience

Paris is an incredible city that will never fail to provide you with something to do or see. If you are prepared to have a very international experience in a business environment, you will enjoy IESEG. This is not a typical study abroad experience where you only interact with Americans. Your view of the world and yourself will probably be broadened. Have an amazing semester!
Additional Tips for future students

Packing
Pack less than you think you’ll need. Paris is usually cloudy and cool so pack minimal summer and snow weather clothes. If you don’t want to stick out as American, don’t wear sweatpants, sweatshirts or leggings outside. Also, the cobblestone streets are not very conducive to heels. Be sure to have a comfortable pair of sneakers that you won’t mind walking around in for hours. Parisians are very well dressed people and you’ll want to look as nice as they do. Leave room in your suitcase for shopping! No need to bring toiletries or other disposable products—France has many of the same drug store brand you’re used to.