CALS Exchange Student Participant Report

Personal information

- Name: Ariel S.
- Major: Natural Resources
- Name of Host University: Massey University, Palmerston North campus
- Period/Time of Exchange: Fall 2011
- I did keep a blog, although I didn’t update it regularly, and am still way behind on it (I’m planning on catching up though!) The URL is: http://ariels-nz.blogspot.com

Studying abroad through CALS Exchange gave me the opportunity to pick up and experience a new place without delaying my college education. I found the classes I took to be of comparable quality to those I took at Cornell, and I was able to spend my free time during breaks and after the semester was done exploring an incredible country. I feel that the experience as a whole has opened me up to a broader perspective and allowed me the opportunity to travel in a place I was unlikely to have been able to visit otherwise.

Visa information

It was very easy to obtain a visa. I waited until after I bought my plane ticket to get the visa (I thought this was necessary, but I could’ve done it before buying the ticket). The form is straightforward and there were no unusual requirements (I didn’t need to get any vaccines or specific medical forms). It took between two and three weeks from when I sent in the application until when I received my passport with the visa.

Immigration on arrival in-country was easy. The most fuss was made about preventing the introduction of invasive species, as New Zealand is very geographically isolated and home to many endemic species. For example, at customs on the way in, my hiking shoes were hosed down to get rid of little bits of dirt left on the bottom that could potentially carry seeds.

Packing

Generally, most things you need are available (except for standard folders for organizing papers, and of course, red Solo cups), although cosmetics are extremely expensive. Also, standard non-prescription medications like Advil are quite expensive, so I was glad to have brought a bottle from home.

I did not feel that I brought anything notably unnecessary. However, the university does offer a “bedding pack” for dorm students that includes a blanket, duvet (quilt), and pillow to purchase when you’re applying for housing. Though it’s convenient, I could’ve gotten nicer bedding for less money fairly easily instead.

International office at Host University

Upon arrival, I was picked up at the airport by a representative from the University (kind of like a professional RA, a lot of other students were picked up by similar staff and international office staff). I was given a general tour of campus, brought to the necessary offices, and taken to my dorm.

I was not offered a buddy, and there wasn’t a buddy-obtaining system that I was aware of.

There was an informational orientation for new students, however there was not much in terms of orientation activities (in the fun bonding sense). I was told by other students that the first semester orientation involves much more fun activities, and that international and first year students take part in it together. There was no orientation of any form that integrated international students with the rest of the student body for second semester (fall), which was very disappointing, and also made it somewhat difficult to meet local students at the start.

The international office staff are very friendly, responsive, and helpful.

Academics

The university

There is a centralized campus, with a main area where students hang out when the weather’s nice, and an indoor student lounge with couches and games. The campus itself is very small (a five to ten minute walk across). However, because it is largely a commuter campus and because there are many extramural students (they take courses online and only are physically present at exams), the campus is generally empty during the weekends, and often uneventful.

There is a library and computer labs with free computer and internet use. There is WiFi available, but only through a paid subscription. Internet access for personal computers in the dorms also relied on the same paid subscription.

Courses

We enrolled in courses manually by filling out a form stating which courses (called “papers”) we intended to take. Unfortunately, there is no "Schedulizer" equivalent for Massey, so we had to schedule classes by hand to determine and try to avoid time conflicts. This is made especially difficult by the fact that lectures generally do not have regular time slots (i.e. a lecture may meet at 8 AM on Tuesdays and 2 PM on Thursdays and 11 AM on Fridays, instead of 10 AM M,W,F). However, it is generally acceptable to take classes that have lecture overlaps, and to not attend some of your lecture slots.

I took three courses. I would have liked to take four, however, I chose to drop one because I didn’t have the correct pre-requisites. The add-deadline for courses is the end of the first week of class (and the drop deadline the end of the second or third week), so I wasn’t able to
choose another course in time.

Classes were structured similarly to classes at Cornell, with mostly lectures, and lab or discussion. In general, attendance at lectures was optional, but labs and discussions mandatory (or more commonly said, “compulsory”).

Homework was given in all of the courses I took. For one course I took (Vertebrate Zoology), our only work due was drawings for our lab, but we had fairly in-depth quizzes every one or two weeks. Another course, Communication in the Sciences, had assignments as steps of a project generally due once a week. My third course had five assignments (lab reports) due over the course of the semester.

Exams were similar to those given at Cornell. The main difference was that final exams were worth a much larger portion of the final grade (generally 45 – 65%). However, a long study break is given between the end of classes and finals. There is a full “study week” before final exams begin, and the exam period runs a full two weeks. I had 16 days between the last day of class and my first exam, which was more than enough time to do some traveling and study plenty.

Life Abroad

Banking

The university did not recommend opening a local account for students only abroad for one semester. There are many ATMs that accept most major cards (probably all?), and I was able to use my debit card like a credit card (with a signature instead of the pin) in most stores.

Housing

I stayed in a dorm on campus. Though my dorm was almost exclusively Freshman (about 80 freshman and 12 exchange students), I would recommend dorming, as the exchange students I knew who didn’t dorm found that it was very difficult to socialize and build friendships while living far from campus. Other dorms were reserved for international students, but had filled by the time I applied for housing. I applied for my housing through the host university. Housing cost about $210 (NZD) per week (which translates to about $650 US/month) and included utilities and a breakfast and dinner meal plan at the campus dining hall. I paid for my housing and meal plan for the semester in full before I left abroad (by credit card through fax).

Transportation

In Palmerston North, there’s a public bus that runs fairly regularly during the day on weekdays (and sporadically on weekends) between the campus and the downtown area that all Massey students are able to take for free with a student ID card. Otherwise, the bus costs $1.50 (paid on the bus). There are also commuter passes available (but not necessary for students).

To get from Palmerston North to other cities, there are coach buses similar to Megabus and Greyhound called Nakedbus and Intercity bus that run daily. Tickets can be purchased online, over the phone, or at i-Sites (information sites located in most cities) at varying rates.

Communication

I did buy a cell phone, as did most other international students. I used 2degrees, and added a balance to my account online as needed.

Social activities

I mainly met students from the host country through my dorm, as a portion of the international students were placed in a dorm with first year students. However, I didn’t meet very many students from the host country through programs hosted by the university (which were minimal), or through most of my classes.

I was involved with the MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) club, which was a great experience, and gave me the opportunity to meet and interact with several students from the host country.

There were a great variety of clubs and social organizations that provided great opportunities for students to go on trips throughout New Zealand.

There were not very many special activities arranged for exchange students throughout the semester, and the ones that were arranged were minimal (pancake or pizza nights).

Local students do a variety of things for fun, including many outdoors activities in the areas around Palmerston North. However, the main recreational activity for students within Palmerston North is drinking.

Health and Safety

I felt extremely safe in my host location, both at the university and throughout the country when I traveled around during breaks and after the semester was over. I did not have any personal need for medical attention, but there is a medical facility for students on campus.

Overall exchange experience

Through my exchange program, I felt that I got a good picture of the country. However, most of these valuable experiences were a result of traveling on my own during breaks and after the semester was over, and not directly through the university exchange. Unlike the other Massey campuses in New Zealand, which are located in Wellington (the capital) and Auckland (the largest city), Palmerston North as a city has very little distinct (or interesting) culture of its own. This made the time spent at the university seem somewhat wasteful from the perspective of experiencing new local culture. Had I a better understanding of the country prior to applying for the exchange program, I would have chosen to study in Wellington or Auckland instead. Palmerston North is advertised as the “student city,” but has no student culture in the way that we are used to thinking about conventional American “college towns.”

The exchange experience really broadened my ideas of what I can do and opened me up to a new world of traveling. I don’t think the experience had much influence on my future career possibilities, except for affirming my desire to pursue a line of work that enables me to continue travel and see new places.