

# Erfahrungsbericht: Boise State University, von Alexander Schütz

## I. Introduction

Over one year ago (November 2014), I decided that I wanted to do a semester abroad. I did not only want to do it, but my *English* minor also required it. From the beginning, it was not difficult at all for me to figure out where I wanted to go: to the USA. I had been there a couple of times before, however I wished to know a lot more about the people, the culture or the education system. So first of all, I collected information from the University of Saarland and about which other opportunities there are to go abroad. After asking Mr. von Lutz about American universities, he sent me to Mr. Heintz from the International office, who was responsible for studying abroad overseas. I was interested in two of the programs right away, because they consist of a partnership with Saarland University: Missouri and Boise State. Frankly, I liked Missouri better first and I read a lot of reports from other students on the Internet. However, I went with a fellow student to a presentation of a former student later, who studied abroad at Boise State and the information he gave us about the life and the university sounded great. So it did not take me a long time to change my mind and apply for the Boise State program. After I had applied for the program, it lasted a couple of weeks until we became the message that we were selected for an interview, which was crucial for the selection process. The interviewers were Mr. Heintz and Professor Fellner, who asked questions about several topics that were relevant for the program. Two hours later, I got an email that I was chosen.

Although the application process required a lot of paperwork, it did not actually take a long time to complete all of it. Also, the communication with the partner university went smoothly, including the whole visa process and the course selection. After 4 months of application process and preparation, and 4 months of waiting, I finally left for the USA.

## II. My university

Boise State University is located pretty central in Idaho's capital. Almost 20,000 students are currently studying at Boise State that is why it is the biggest university in Idaho. The campus is approximately as big as our Campus in Saarbrücken and it also reminded me of it a lot by its

appearance. It is not extensive, but you can get to all the buildings within a short walk. I only had to ride my bike to two of the sports classes, which were more or less 10 minutes away. A big difference to Saarbrücken is that there is no bus or car traffic allowed on campus. Boise State University is also very close to Downtown Boise, which is different concerning Saarbrücken. I would also appreciate if there were more cafés on campus like in Boise. In almost every building, people can buy food or drinks at Starbucks or different chains.

The campus borders at the Boise River, and on the other side of the river, Downtown Boise is located. On campus there was a sufficient number of parking facilities, which are needed especially on days with sports events. The biggest sports events, such as basketball or football games, take place at Taco Bell Arena or Albertsons Stadium. Boise State University is mainly known not only for their high-level business program, but also for their Spanish program, which ended up being a privilege for me. The college sports at Boise State are very popular in the country too. The “Broncos” how they call their teams are quite successful in American college football. The coordinators who were responsible for all the international students attached a lot of importance to making us feel comfortable in the new environment from the beginning. Throughout the first week of the semester, they offered an orientation, which took place at the university. It consisted of events informing all the students about locations and other events. The most important day of the orientation was probably the one, when I got to know all the international students, because they were the first contacts that I made.

### **III. My courses**

Before going to the USA, I selected overall 6 courses, which I wanted to take during my semester abroad. To receive all the 12 credit points that I need to pass the semester, I took 3 conventional courses (Communication 202, English Linguistics 397 and Spanish Linguistics 420) and 3 sports courses. For the first 3 courses, which took place twice a week, I got 3 credit points each and for the sports courses, which took place once a week, I got 1 credit point each. Overall, I needed 12 credit points to complete the requirements.

In my communication class, the topic was the introduction to the principles and applications of technical communication with an emphasis on audience characteristics and methods of performing research, analyzing data, and writing persuasive documents. Furthermore, it was

about audience analysis, the writing process, graphics, document design or the ethics of technical communication. I had to write memos, letters, instructions and the biggest project was writing a recommendation report. However, I did not have to do this course all alone, but with my team members that I had to work in-group with. The research consisted of reading chapters in the course book or looking for information about our topic: the optimization of transfer student admissions. Due to the fact that I was not that familiar with the Boise State admission process, I worked on the topic about how to improve the admission process for international students including communication with the coordinators. Almost all of the tasks were team assignments, but there were also individual assignments throughout the whole semester, such as reading quizzes or creating graphics. As a team, we also had to communicate with employees from our school to receive the needed knowledge for our project. I liked this course a lot, because I was able to improve my writing skills in English, which I will need a lot considering my program in Saarbrücken.

The second course that I took was English linguistics. It was very challenging, since it was a high level course and the professor expected a lot from the students. The purpose of the course was to give a wide overview about all the varieties of English in the world, including small countries like Singapore, Jamaica, etc. Another topic was English slang that exists around the world. I enjoyed the course a lot, because I explored so many new ways to look at English. Furthermore, I would have never expected, that English is that big in the world. I mean as a local language in so many different countries, not as the world language. We had to do one big group project, which consisted of a paper and a presentation. In this paper, we were able to select a country, and afterwards, we had to analyze it considering all the different languages or dialects spoken there. We also had to look at socio-economic aspects and the development of the language. Additionally, we had to give a short presentation about our topic in front of the class. Homework in this course consisted of informal writing, or writing on an online discussion board. It was the first time that I had to deal with discussing seriously on a high academic level. Answering the threads or questions of my classmates ended up being challenging.

The third course that I selected was Spanish Linguistics, which ended up being my favorite course. The main topic was the study of Spanish linguistics organized around a topic in Applied Linguistics, such as sociolinguistics, variations of Spanish spoken in Spain, Latin America, and

the U.S., bilingualism, or advanced theories of Second Language Acquisition. We were only 4 students, so it was easy to participate and we were forced to communicate in Spanish a lot, which was great. I also had to write my first academic Spanish paper, which helped me improve my writing skills. In the project, I had to interview a Spanish speaking person who did not speak the same variety that we did. Then, I had to include this interview in my research paper and give a presentation about it. I had a lot of homework to do in this class. For almost every lesson, we had to read a chapter in a course book and answer comprehension questions. The professor used multimedia to visualize the topics we talked about, such as PowerPoint slides, Skype, audio samples and especially the application iBook on the iPad. This was completely necessary, since she was able to show for example the phonological features of Spanish very easily. The most challenging in-class activity was debating about a topic with my classmates. I have never done something like this before, and for that reason it was difficult to always have appropriate answers right away.

All the sports courses were very helpful to receive a first impression of how the different sports work, since I had never done any of those. I already noticed after a couple of weeks, that I was starting to improve. The sports courses emerged as a welcome change from all the projects I had to deal with at the university.

At the beginning, it was difficult for me to get used to the American education system. The biggest difference to Germany is that I had to do homework that were graded throughout the whole semester and were basically the most important part of the final grade. After a while, I could deal with the situation very well and I always completed my assignments in time. I think the American system is more appropriate than the German one, because in the U.S. your final grade does not reflect only one exam. The personal evaluation is more detailed and also the distance to the professors is closer. The professors take a lot of time for the students and I could just pass by their office whenever I want to. I also believe the professors are very tolerant. If their students need more time to finish an assignment, it is likely that the professor will extend the deadline.

#### **IV. Conversation Labs**

Besides studying, I took the opportunity to be a conversation lab assistant for some of the German students at Boise State University. I would recommend this everyone, who will go

there. Before I had started working, I first had to deal with the American bureaucracy. I had to go to the tax office, to human resources, to international student services, but also to the place where I had to apply for my social security number. I needed this number in any case to be even allowed to start the job. It took more than 4 weeks to receive the number due to name issues (my name is spelled with an "Umlaut"). So those were annoying five weeks, and I was glad when the social security number arrived in the Mail.

The purpose of these labs was to help the students improving their German as a foreign language. There were 12 hours throughout the whole week, which I had 6 lessons of. It was a great opportunity to meet new people, but also to gain more experience communicating with people and to get to know to the American culture. In those labs, I had students who just started learning German, but also some who have taken German for many years. For me as a linguist, this was highly interesting, because I could see in which ways they make mistakes, but also in which ways or how fast they improve. On the one hand, with the persons having a higher knowledge of German, I could discuss about economy and politics, comparing U.S. topics to German ones. On the other hand, with those who just started learning German as a new language, it was difficult to speak slowly or even in German at all, so that they could understand something. Very often, it was essential to explain aspects in English. There were bilingual English speakers who were very good at German, and I liked seeing how they behaved when they were talking in German, since they have lived in the USA for a couple of years before leaving Germany. That is why their language changed in a certain way. The small amount of money that I earned there helped me a lot offset my financial costs throughout the entire semester.

## **V. Campus life**

In my opinion, the location of my apartment building (Lincoln Townhomes) on campus was great. I could walk to all the university buildings within 15 minutes, but right at the beginning of the semester, I bought a bike, which made everything easier. I lived with 3 other men in one apartment, 2 Americans and one German. We got along very well and there was not any trouble throughout the semester. The apartment was very large and on two floors, so that there was enough space for all of us. I had never shared an apartment with other people

before, so at the beginning, I was a little bit nervous about the situation and about how the roommates' characters were going to be like. In the end, I did not regret at all deciding to stay in an apartment with more persons.

Supermarkets were a little bit further away, so that I had to borrow my roommate's truck to go there. Sometimes I also used my bike, but that was very inconvenient when I bought a lot of groceries. The university offered a huge number of free time activities, such as bowling, pool billiard, table tennis, and many more types of sports that you could participate in for a student price. I went to the gymnasium and the pool a lot of times. Both were reachable within 5 minutes by foot. Once in a while, there were also free food events provided by our resident assistants or the university. I was positively surprised by the frequency of the events, because I wasn't used to it since there are no such events at all in Saarbrücken.

Downtown is the best place for people to go out. There are many excellent restaurants, bars or clubs (bring your passport/ID), however European students need to get used to partying "only" until 2 in the morning, because everything closes then. Even if you never heard of Boise before, the town is very nice, maybe because of the park area, located right in the center, but maybe also because of its atmosphere. There are also bars near the stadium, and this is especially comfortable for those who live in the Lincoln Townhomes, since it is very close.

At the beginning of the semester, the university did everything that the new students could get used to the new environment very fast. There were campus tours, but also other events, such as learning the university anthem that everybody has to sing at the football games. Football home games took place almost every two weeks and even college football is as big as soccer in Germany. It was incredible that a small university in the U.S. has a stadium for 35,000 people. The games were like a huge ceremony with cheerleaders and marching band. It became a tradition to go to all of the games with the international students who I met there. Before the game, the area around the stadium was very crowded, because many people did "tailgating". I have never heard of it, but it means that people stay around the stadium during the game to barbecue and to watch the game on TV with friends.

## **VI. My cultural experience in the USA**

During my semester abroad, I met a lot of new people from all over the world, especially from the U.S. In this chapter, I would like to compare the experience that I gained from the American culture to the German. But it is also worth mentioning the “international” culture, how I would call it, which all the international students and I created.

#### **a) American culture – Differences to the German culture**

Although I had been to the U.S. many times before my semester abroad started, I still experienced a lot more about the American culture. The largest aspect is probably the kindness of the American people. Phrases such as “how are you?”, “excuse me... sorry”, or “nice coat” seem like the most normal sentences of the world. However, when I arrived back in Germany, I actually noticed that Americans are probably not more polite, but they express it more often than Germans. I would say Germans are just polite in a different way.

Another aspect would be college sports. Most of the basketball, ice hockey or football games are sold out. However, it is also important to consider how rich the universities are, that they can afford having the appropriate locations and prerequisites, not like in Germany.

Once you arrive in America and meet new people, it does not take a long time until you become invited for dinner at someone’s house. After two weeks I was there, my roommate was invited over at family friends’. Before, he told them that he has a German roommate and they did not hesitate to invite me as well, because they love international students.

A huge part of the American culture symbolized the organization that a man leads at Boise State University. His name is Steve Dunne and the organization is called “International Students Inc.” He organizes events for all the international students. The most significant event I will always remember is “International Friendship Friday”. Every two weeks, Steve invites all the international students (around 70) over to his house for dinner and cultural discussions. I was impressed how he enjoyed having all the students over and talking to us. Also his wife and his children participated in our meetings.

## **b) “International” culture**

The largest part of my time in Boise was the time I spend with the international students. I would call it an own culture that we created there. We were a group of people from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Wales, France, Spain, Germany, Indonesia and Australia. I spent most of my free time with the international students, but we also had a couple of local Americans in our group. We went on many trips together and went out for dinner once in a while. Furthermore, we played beach volleyball or other kinds of sports together in summer time, which strengthened our social cohesion in a certain way. It was important to me to make a lot of contacts to people all over the world and it is priceless to have them now, because I can experience more of many different cultures.

## **VII. Traveling**

Although Idaho seems to be located “in the middle of nowhere”, there are a lot of opportunities for traveling. From Boise, it is possible to visit Utah, Yellowstone National Park, or Seattle. In August, before the semester started, I did a road trip with some friends starting in Las Vegas, going up via the Grand Canyon, Zion National Park, Park City, and Salt Lake City to Boise. It was interesting to see what the American nature had to offer and how diverted it was. I was especially impressed by the view down the Grand Canyon. However, it was also interesting to see what influence the Mormon Church has on the culture in Utah and especially in Salt Lake City.

During Thanksgiving Break, I did a road trip with three Australians for one week. We started planning this journey already in September and it was very much worth it. We flew down to San Diego and drove up the west coast visiting Los Angeles and San Francisco, and finally flying back from Sacramento. Even there, I could experience a lot of cultural differences compared to Boise. Maybe it was only, because we visited mainly big cities, but the mentality in California seems a lot different from Idaho’s. It is probably the influence of Latin people living there. Spanish influences media, radio and the people. That is why almost everybody is bilingual with



Spanish and English over there. I liked Los Angeles the most, probably not because of the city's appearance, but more because of its impressing and very special atmosphere. I was especially impressed by Beverly Hills marked by the richness of its inhabitants. Afterwards, I was glad that I immediately took the initiative at the beginning of the semester in asking my international friends to do the road trip. There was also the social conflict that I had with myself, because I wanted to include everybody of the new people I met. However, doing a road trip with 20 different people is not possible. That is why I only asked randomly 3 of my friends. I thought the other ones would consider it as impolite not to tell or ask them if they wanted to come. Nevertheless, they did not feel offended or anything similar when I told them about our plans, so I was very thankful.

In the middle of the semester, I could do a couple of short trips to different places in Idaho. I went to hot springs, the Boise National Forest, Bogus Basin or some sand dunes located in a National Park. We also went floating on the Boise River for one day. And there are so many more places to go to. To be honest, I had not expected Idaho to offer such amazing places in the countryside before. I would have had the opportunity to go skiing as well, but unfortunately, at the end of the semester, there was not enough time, but also not enough money.

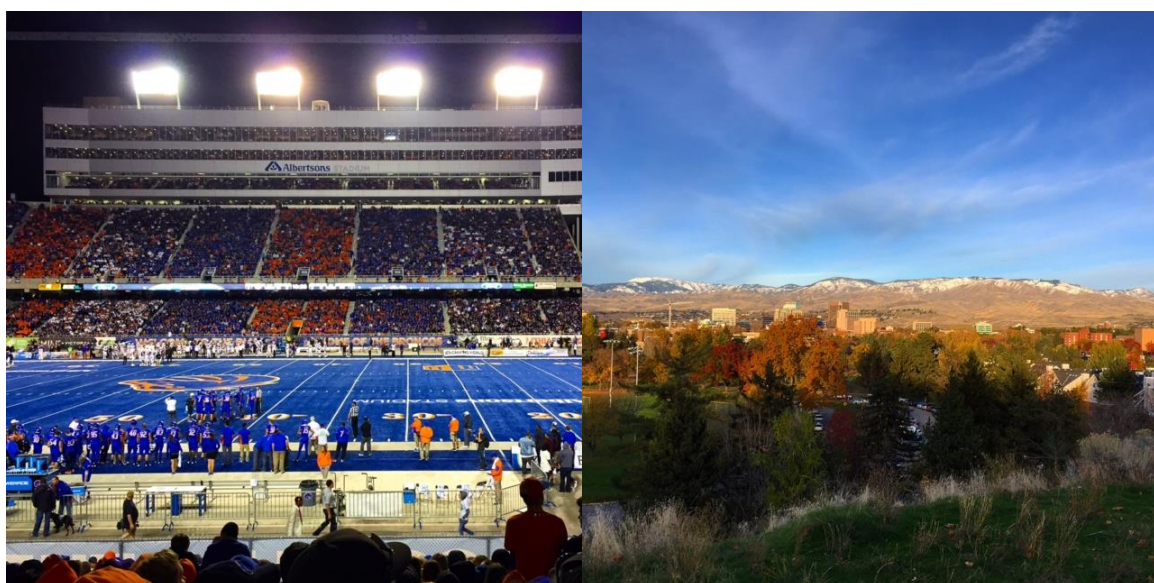
## **VIII. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the semester abroad in the US was the best experience I have ever had so far and I would do it anytime again. I experienced a lot of different cultures coming together in another culture where I did not even grow up myself. I enjoyed not only the time traveling to many different parts of the US that I had not been to before, but also the time during the semester doing research for my projects and homework. As I explained above, I wish the German education system would be a little bit more like the American one. Maybe, there will be a time when the grade of a course will not be based on a single exam anymore. I liked the balance between stressful college life and having time for sufficient leisure activities, which helped to make it through the whole semester. The housing situation was a great experience and I would consider living together with more people in an apartment again in the future. I was happy about being accommodated in a great city with a lot of international students

whom I had a lot of in common with. These relationships that I build up to the international students seem priceless, because I will always have contacts to different parts of the world that I would like to explore at some point. However, I am also glad to have met many local American students who I will be able to visit and I will be able to host anytime. I hope I could convince many of my German lab students to study abroad in Saarbrücken. Overall, I would like to come back to Boise as soon as possible and I also consider going there for studying another semester abroad or for attending graduate school. **To summarize, I would recommend everybody to go to Boise State. It is a perfect city for students and the people are very helpful when it comes to moving in or orientating oneself in the region!!!**



Boise State University (Campus)



Football Stadium & view towards downtown Boise



Taco Bell Arena (Event hall)



View from Bogus Basin