

Wisconsin Student Exchange Report 2018/19

Introduction:

My name is J. and I am 16 years old. I am from Hesse and participated in the Hesse-Wisconsin exchange in fall 2018. My stay there was 5 months long, from August 25th until January 19th. I lived in the USA with my host family and right now, in spring 2019, my host partner is living in Germany with my family. I will try to describe everything about my exchange as good as I can here.

Motivation:

Being in America for a longer time had always been a dream of me. I don't exactly know where it came from but the idea of going to an American college after I finished school always sounded really exciting to me. Then I was told about the Hesse-Wisconsin exchange and I was very interested in it. The program sounded exactly like what I wanted. I had already thought about an exchange before but most of them are for 10 months so I would have had to repeat the whole school year and that was something I didn't want. I had actually never heard about Wisconsin before but I just wanted to get those America experiences no matter if it was in California or Wisconsin. One thing I was curious about was if life in America would exactly be like it is often shown in movies and if all those stereotypes were true. I'd been to America before for 10-day-stay in New York, but those were just normal tourist holidays and you didn't really get to know any of the daily life culture or meet new people. But the exchange was perfect for that so that's why I decided to apply for it.

Preparations:

I was told that I was chosen for the exchange in May but it was still a long time until the actual flight. That is why I always looked at it like it is a really long time away. One or two weeks before I was going to go to America, I just really realized how soon it was and I was kind of shocked. I was looking forward to it, of course, and I obviously still wanted to go but didn't pack anything yet and just realized that I would have to leave everybody, everything so soon. I obviously had all the paper stuff done already but it was just a mind thing and a little part of me didn't want to go but there was a way bigger part of me that wanted to go.

Flight:

Everything worked out completely fine at the airport for me. There were no problems with the luggage, tickets or anything else. The only thing was saying good bye to my family but I just always kept in mind that I would see them again and that the time would pass faster than I expected it to. When I was on the plane, I had some mixed feelings again but there was still a bigger part of me that was really excited and couldn't wait to meet his host family and in general the people or the culture.

First Day:

After the nine-hour-flight and the two hours of waiting in the pass control line, I finally got to meet my host family like the four other students that came with me. My host family already seemed likeable the first moment I saw them. They had already been at the airport for four hours but they still treated me very nicely. One of my worries was that I wouldn't get along with my host family or that they would be super weird but on the drive home from the airport all my worries dissipated. I know that I was lucky because there are always some cases where the students are not getting along with their family but in my case, it was perfectly fine. The whole drive home was good for me after the worries on the plane. I already got to experience a part of the American food culture when we went to a fast food pizza place in Milwaukee before we went home. At home I settled in and unpacked everything and felt very welcome.

First school day:

On the next Monday we were driven to school early because the German teacher wanted to meet and introduce all the exchange students. She gave us our schedules and said we could always come to her if we had any problems. After that we were able to change our schedules as we wanted. I had Japanese in the beginning, for example, and had it change to gym later. In the first period another exchange student showed us around the school but it was hard to remember everything because every hallway looked the same. However, it didn't take me long to know my way around. The first day was kind of weird for me because most of the teachers didn't introduce me to the class and I didn't know anybody but it got better really quick.

School differences:

The first school difference I saw was that there were all the lockers in the hallways. It is not that special but it was just the first difference that stroke my eye. Another thing was when I got my schedule. In American high schools they only have a schedule for one day that means there are the exact same classes every single day which can get boring sometimes. And the school day ended way later than in Germany. We got off of school at 4 pm every day. That was something I had to get used to in the beginning but it wasn't too bad because school started an hour later. School started at 8.40 am and we got to school with the school bus every day. The busses were also different. Here in Germany, I use the normal public transport bus but in Milwaukee, they have their own school busses. That means the bus only picks up students and it picks them up at their street or really close by. A difference about school that I liked was how much I had to study. In my school here, I have to study for almost every test I take, but at MSL, my school in Milwaukee, I never really had to study at home. I was able to get good grades just from paying attention in class. The only class I had to study for sometimes was history but I am still not completely sure if it was because the stuff, we did was easy or if the teachers gave me better grades because they knew that I was an exchange student.

Living differences:

The biggest difference was that I shared a room with my exchange partner but it was fine. We didn't even spend that much time in our room and when we did, we got along fine and I got used to it easily. The only problem was that when I wanted some privacy it was not really possible but that didn't happen that often. Another little difference was that the house of my host family was smaller than what I was used to and I figured that that is common for America or at least for the houses I have been at.

One thing I was a little sad about was that I wasn't able to be as independent as I am here in Germany. Since Milwaukee is a big city, places are much further apart, so walking as I was used to from a village life was never an option. Busses or trains weren't an option either because the public transport system isn't as good as it is here. That means that my host parents had to drive me everywhere and I sometimes didn't want to ask them because I felt bad that they have to drive me. But every time I asked them, they didn't have any problem with driving me and it was always possible and I really appreciated that.

I don't know if that is just my feeling or if it is because of my host family but I felt like life was more relaxed in general. My host parents, teachers or just people I met in the supermarket were nicer and weren't so serious, but that's just my opinion. You could even have nice small talk with people on the streets you had never met before, so you got to know people more easily, even if quite often small talk was just a singular event with that person, but it helped making you or the other person happy sometimes. On the other hand, there are obviously also people that don't like the typical small talk so you can't generalize it.

The probably biggest thing that was similar in Wisconsin was the food we ate every day. When I thought about American food, the first thing I and probably many other people think of is fast food so I already expected that I was going to eat a lot of fast food in America but that wasn't the case. The food we ate there was pretty similar to what I eat in Germany and not because I eat fast food

here. My host parents cooked very frequently. On average, I would say we had fast food once a week. That was something I was really happy about because I imagined it being hard to get used to eating more fast food and it is obviously not that healthy either.

Surprises:

I actually wasn't surprised that much by a lot of things. It was almost always what I expected it to be. What I said about the food was of course one thing, but I believe that was only because of my host family. Another little surprise was how wide Wisconsin actually is. I was told before that the population density of Wisconsin isn't that high but I didn't expect it to be so rural. Milwaukee is obviously a really big city with 500.000 people living there, but when we drove up north once, there were only fields and some farms on the sides of the highway almost the entire drive.

Challenges

When you think about an exchange you sooner or later end up thinking about all the challenges you have to get over and so did I before the exchange but once I was there, there actually weren't really hard challenges. The probably hardest challenge was leaving my family at the airport but that is just what participating in an exchange program means. There were a few little challenges in the daily life like the weather for example (It was damn cold) but there was nothing where I would say it was hard to overcome or to get used to. However, I have to add that I am good at adapting to new surroundings, so that might not be the case for everybody.

Holidays:

Holidays are pretty different in the USA. In Germany, we have spring, summer, fall and winter holidays which add up to 13 weeks, but they only have summer and winter holidays from what I know plus an occasional day off on holidays like Thanksgiving. I obviously missed the whole summer holidays, which are 3 months in America, but I was able to enjoy the 2-3- week-long winter holidays. It is 2-3 weeks depending on if you have to take the final exam, which you can exempt when you have a B or higher in that class. On Thanksgiving we had 3 days off and it was really nice. The Thanksgiving family dinner can be compared with the typical German Christmas family dinner. The whole family comes together and makes a huge dinner with the obligatory turkey, eats together and just has a good time. For me personally, Thanksgiving was even better than Christmas. Christmas was kind of different than what I was used to. The first thing was that my host family celebrated in the morning of the 25th and I believe all American do it like that. The second thing was that there wasn't any big Christmas dinner or anything similar plus we didn't even have a lot of Christmas decoration, but that was definitely just a thing in my host family. I was a little bit sad about it but it was really fine. I still got to see other houses that were amazingly decorated.

Free time:

When I thought about the exchange, I worried that I would have too much time and I wouldn't know what to do with it, but that was definitely not the case. I basically only had the weekends as free time. I left the house at 7.40 every day and school ended at 4. After school officially ends, students are able to participate in clubs like chess or math for example or they can do sports like volleyball, basketball, tennis or something like that. The only problem is that there are certain times for the different seasons and when you do a 5 months exchange you might not be able to do the sport you want to. I was lucky, though; I play basketball and I was able to join the team there. The basketball season started in November so I played soccer before, because they needed players and I wanted to stay fit. Soccer practice ended at 6 so I got home at around 6.30 every day which was already a long day for me. Basketball practice was even later. The girls team had practice before us which meant that we had 90 minutes study time for studying and doing homework and after that we had practice. I had basketball practice every day after school and I got home around 7.45pm. Luckily, homework was already done then but I had to eat and shower and then it was already kind of late and I always

just wanted to lay down in my bed because the days were that exhausting. On weekends I was able to meet friends if we didn't have anything planned with the family.

Feelings:

I already mentioned that, prior to leaving, I had worried way more than I had to and that it was really fine once I was there. It only took me a week to get used to the school and the new people and I got into a routine very quickly. During the first week it sometimes felt like the time would pass really slowly and it would take forever but once everything seemed normal to me it just passed so quickly. I personally didn't feel very homesick. I always knew I was going back eventually and that the place I was at was the place I had to leave for good at some point, so I just tried to enjoy my time there. I think my parents actually felt worse than I did.

When it came to leaving, I had mixed feelings again. I would have stayed longer because it was really nice there but I was also happy to go home again. It was kind of hard to leave because since the time passed so quickly it felt like I just got to know everything and then I instantly had to leave it again.

Conclusion:

When I got back from the States, I felt quite content. It had always been a dream of me, which had come true. The exchange not only gave me a lot of new experiences and impressions of a different culture it also helped me grow as a person a little bit. I am more willing to say yes to new things now and I feel like I developed a bit more. If I could travel back in time I would instantly do it again. I don't regret participating in the exchange at all and can recommend it to everybody that is open for something new.