

Final Report

Fall Term 2016 at McDaniel College



University of Heidelberg

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## 1. Preparation

Shortly after being notified of my acceptance to McDaniel College, I got a letter in the middle of May containing all the information and paperwork necessary for me to prepare my stay abroad. The first and most important step was to get my visa, which after obtaining the forms from McDaniel College was quite easy. After filling out forms online, I took a short trip to the General Embassy in Frankfurt where my visa got approved and sent to me two days later. I then was able to book my flight and confirm my date of arrival with McDaniel college so I could be picked up at the airport.

I had also booked an additional travel health insurance that covered more than the health insurance provided by the college. While it turned out that the college health insurance covered everything I needed during my stay, such as anti-allergy medication (the pollen around McDaniel College are very aggressive), or cold medicine, I felt nevertheless safer with the backup travel insurance in case something bigger happened.

I also had to fill out a detailed health form for the wellness centre and get my immunisations up to date. This is something I would advise others to start as early as possible, since the Hep A vaccine requires two shots in a 6-month interval. The medical information provided in the form was transmitted directly to the wellness centre and kept confidential. The wellness centre is a small medical centre on campus that offers everyday medical services as well as counseling and is free for the use of all students. The personal there was always very friendly and I recommend anyone going to McDaniel to not be shy about going there. You won't regret it.

The associate dean, international and intercultural programs, Dr. Amy McNichols, provided me with additional information and helped me enrol in classes, and find all additional information I needed; she was my primary contact while preparing my stay abroad, as well as during my stay and I found that she always had an open door and was usually able to come up with quick replies and solutions to every problem that occurred.

After being enrolled into classes, I was already able to order my books online at the College bookstore, which not only price-matches online sites such as amazon, but also offers renting and used-books options, so that the expensive textbooks are more affordable. Depending on the classes taken, the books needed are the biggest financial investment one has to make after arrival, everything else will be taken care of.

Within the first two weeks of arrival, Amy also made sure the house directors got their social security numbers so that the stipend payments could be processed as soon as possible. It usually takes, however, until October for the first check to arrive, so one should make sure to have enough money for textbooks, school supplies, hygiene and personal care articles etc. to last until then. After the payments begin, it is more than comfortable to live off them, especially since additional to the stipend taking care of housing and food, there is \$20 for printing and \$50 for other expenses on campus available on the McDaniel card for the students.

Near the college are several markets in walking distance, but most students prefer to go to bigger markets such as Target or Walmart by car. Since there is no public transportation in Westminster and no Uber available, one relies on expensive taxis, other student drivers, or the weekly shuttle, whose schedule is available on the website.

McDaniel College has a big cafeteria, called 'Glar', which offers a wide variety of meals, including vegetarian, vegan, and allergy-friendly options, and a salad bar.

Additionally, there is a pub and a pizzeria, at which food can either be purchased with meal exchanges, the McDaniel card, or cash, providing ample opportunities for eating on campus.

## 2. Orientation

After landing, I got immediately picked up by a driver from the college, met the other house directors, and got the keys to my house and room. Since there was a large amount of students in the German house this year, we did not have an apartment in one of the bigger mansions like the previous years, but a complete small wooden house that had preserved its original rustic charm. My room was filled with the boxes the previous house director had left and contained useful things such as cutlery and dishes, but also laundry containers, used bed sheets etc. so that everything was taken care of for the first night.

Throughout the next week, there was an intensive orientation program not only for the house directors, but also the peer mentors. As international students, the house directors had their own international peer mentors who also helped us orient ourselves on campus and made sure we knew how to find everything and offered to drive us to near supermarkets in order to buy supplies.



The orientation program was one of my favourite things about McDaniel because it showed its efforts to reduce discrimination and embrace diversity. There were lots of events focussing on how to use our roles as house directors to solve conflicts and be mindful towards minorities of all kind. A few weeks into the semester, we additionally completed a safe-zone training especially aimed at being inclusive towards the LGBTQ-community.

### 3. Academics

American classes differed to what I was used to from Germany in several aspects. While classes in Germany distinguish clearly between lectures and seminars, these boundaries are blurred in the US. The class sizes in the courses I took, were all small, seminar-sized classes, but some of them were very heavily lecture-based while others were discussion-based as I was used to from seminars in Germany. With increasing class level, the classes seemed to become more discussion based. So the 3000-level classes I took resembled more seminars, and the 2000-level classes lectures. This was also true for the amount of work required for the classes, despite them being accredited the same amount of hours.

Whereas in Germany the grade depends mostly on the final paper written in the lecture-free period in seminars, this is not true for American seminars. There were low-stakes writing and reading assignments for every week, mid-term exams and essays, as well as final essays

and exams. Participation in the seminar and in discussion also accounted for significant parts of the grades. Participation and homework is therefore much more important and ensures active classroom discussions. The spreading-out of assignments led to an overall increased workload per class during the semester compared to Germany, especially during mid-term and finals week, but the essays were also more relaxed because they were shorter and did not account for 100% of the grade as in Germany, thus reducing the pressure. Also, handing in assignments over the course of the semester, allows for much more feedback from the professor and helped me thus improve my writing and argumentation style much more than the short feedback I was used to in Germany.

The climate in the classroom was usually more casual than in Germany, but it also heavily depended on the professor teaching the class. Some are on a first-name basis with their students and swear in the classroom, whereas others, much like in Germany, prefer to be addressed with their proper title and keep a more formal climate in the classroom. But all the professors were very approachable with lots of flexible office hours and were very generous in providing feedback and consultations regarding academic matters, often having close ties to students they have known over several years.

#### 4. Creative Expression and Sports



I was also able to take some more creative classes such as the College Choir, where the atmosphere was of course totally different than in other, more traditional classes and performed a concert with the choir at the end of the semester. Additionally, I modelled in life-drawing class for the art department, which was a very enriching experience. Creative expression and extracurricular activities on campus play a much bigger role at McDaniel than in Germany, and almost every student is at least involved in one or often more clubs.



Collegiate sports are also taken very seriously, especially the football games. But all other sports, as well, are performed and practiced much more rigorously than one is used to in Germany. I had the opportunity to join the track and field team, that conducted 7-8 workouts a week, and practice with them, even though I sadly was not able to compete with them since I attended the college as a non-degree seeking students, who are banned from competing in the NCAA. It was nevertheless a great experience to train with a motivated group of performance-orientated college athletes and start at the home meet, the Green Terror cross-country challenge.

For less ambitious athletes, many opportunities to do sports and stay fit are offered in intra-mural sports, offering everything from Badminton to belly-dancing to Ultimate Frisbee, classes in the Exercise Science department, or just by using the free fitness centre and swimming pool.

## 5. German Language Assistant

A central aspect of my stay was of course my work as the German language assistant. The main task was living in the German house, interacting with the German students, having conversations, planning and conducting activities, but also the regular conversation hours in the house as well as for an intermediate German class. Additionally, I had to fill in occasionally for Professor Esa, and help him organize activities connected to the German department.

The first activity that had to be planned was the involvement fair in the first week of classes where the German club tried to get people to join and advertise itself. We sat up a stand

and distributed pins, wristbands, and German chocolate. While we initially got a lot of members to sign up on our email list, the club president sadly did not organize any meetings during fall term, so we only got together on the events planned by the German house.



Life in the house is one of the most interesting aspects of the job. It is the job of the German house director to get the inhabitants to talk in German, to do activities together, and help them improve their German by immersing themselves, while the students of course are often busy themselves because they are involved in various activities across campus. Getting the students to talk German outside of the scheduled weekly conversation hours proved to be one of the most challenging parts and the most inventiveness. While the students usually did well once they were talking, getting them to that point was the hard part.

While the conversation hours inside the house consisted of a wide range of topics that I chose freely according to the interests of the students in the house, games, and films, the conversation hours for the intermediate German class were more focussed on Grammar. We often revised the grammar they had learned in class, because they had different backgrounds from high school, did role plays and other language activity games, or even went outside to practice. For me, this was one of the most fun parts of my work as the German language assistant.

Next to a few movie nights, I organized in the German house, we also hosted two food



related events throughout the semester, the first of which was Dr. Esa coming to the house and cooking Spätzle. He took command of the kitchen and prepared the Spätzle from scratch before serving them with onions, grated cheese, and fresh salad. The second event was organized by me, and we baked pretzels



from scratch. After preparing the dough, the students had the opportunity to form their own pretzels. Both events drew a crowd of over twenty students and we had lots of fun sharing the culinary aspects of German culture.

The single biggest event was the German American Day in fall break. At this day, over 700 high school students came to McDaniel College to learn about German culture, and we advertised studying German. For days ahead, we began sorting T-shirts, brochures, lunch tickets, and name tags for the big day.



In the morning of German American Day, after a welcoming address, the students dispersed into several workshops before having lunch. One of the workshops was organized by me and was on contemporary German music. I provided a survey of German songs and artists that won prizes in different categories and genres. After the workshop, it was time for lunch, and a culminating event in the theatre where one workshop that had practiced German folk dancing performed.

## 6. Global Bridge and Host Family

McDaniel college offered throughout the semester a variety of social activities and events from *Chamber Music on the Hill* to interesting lectures by renowned professors. Many clubs and interest groups also organized banquets and events so that it never got boring on campus.

One of the groups on campus I was involved with was the international students group *Global Bridge* led by Dr. Amy McNichols that aimed to make the transition into American culture easy for the international students. We had lots of fun discussion and activities, such as apple picking, but also more serious events such as a panel after the presidential election.



My host father, Dr. Paul Mazeroff, a psychology professor at McDaniel, also took great care of me and the other house directors and we had fun trips to Fort McHenry, the birthplace of the *Star Spangled Banner*, the American Visionary Art Museum, and many small trips to the cinema. Before Halloween and Christmas, he invited us over to decorate the tree and carve pumpkins, which was also a lot of fun.

For Thanksgiving, I had been invited and welcomed by Kyle, the owner of the book store, to his house, and I had the opportunity to experience a traditional family thanksgiving dinner firsthand.



Before flying back to Germany, I spent winter break travelling to Washington and spend a week there to see all of the great museums there, making for a great final experience. Other international students opted to use fall break and thanksgiving break or day trips organized by the college to see Washington, Philadelphia and New York.

I did not only make memories during my stay at McDaniel, but also great friends. The community at the college is very welcoming and resembles a small town in its closeness. Everyone seems to know everybody else somehow, and a lot of people are very friendly and open-minded. While a lot of the friendliness is of course part of the American culture that differs in that aspect significantly from what I was used to in German culture, I also managed to get close with a few of my fellow students, and hope to stay friends with them for a long time. One of my dearest memories of my time in America was definitely having great discussions with them and learning a lot about American perspectives on many issues.