

PROMOS Experience Report Semester Abroad

Cornell University
Ithaca NY, USA
Summer Term 2024 (January – May)



Pauline Kerkmann
CEMS Master in International Management
University of Cologne

Preparation

The term abroad is a mandatory component of the CEMS Master in International Management at the University of Cologne. Resultingly, the application process is very different from other exchange programs. During the first semester of our studies, we had to submit our exchange preferences, ranking the 33 CEMS schools. I was fortunate to receive my first preference, which was Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

When I learned about my allocation, I immediately started gathering information by contacting past exchange students, reading experience reports and attending a virtual consultation hour offered by the department for international mobility (Abteilung 93 – Internationale Mobilität) of the University of Cologne. They also advised me to apply for the PROMOS scholarship. Additionally, I attended an online meeting with the CEMS program director at Cornell.

An essential aspect of preparation is applying for a US student visa. To apply, you will need the I-20 form, which is issued by Cornell University as soon as you are enrolled as a visiting student. I received detailed instructions from the program director around the end of July. In order to enroll as an exchange student at Cornell, I had to show proof of sufficient financial resources. For a one-semester stay, the university required proof of \$13,000, as they expected monthly living expenses of \$2,700 and health insurance costs of \$2,200. Nine days after submitting the required information for enrollment, I received the I-20, which I used to apply for the F1 student visa at the U.S. Consulate in Frankfurt. After filling in some information on their online portal, I had to schedule an in-person interview appointment at the consulate. During the interview, the officer approved my visa application, and my passport was sent back to my home address one week later.

As already mentioned, Cornell charges around \$2,200 for their “Student Health Plan”, short SHP. It’s the university’s proprietary health insurance and from 2024 onwards, international students are obliged to enroll in SHP. To be on the safe side, I also signed up for a German-based international health insurance (Auslandskrankenversicherung).

By the end of October, I had to register for classes. Be sure to check the class schedule (“Cornell Class Roster”) early, as popular classes tend to fill up quickly. Also, Cornell's course offerings can be a bit overwhelming due to its size, so take the time to do your research and find some exciting classes that match your interests. If a class is full, you can usually opt to be waitlisted. Unless the waitlist is very long, you might get in before the semester starts, or you can attend the first class to ask the professor to take you off the waitlist. On top of the initial enrollment period, there is an add-drop period at the beginning of the semester as well, where you can still switch courses.

I booked my flights several months in advance and ended up staying two nights in New York City before traveling to Ithaca. To get from New York City to Ithaca, which is 350 km away, most students take the bus, which usually costs \$30-\$90 and takes about 4 hours. Try to book the bus as early as possible, as prices increase over time. Especially at the beginning of the semester, prices can skyrocket. I recommend using Flixbus as they offer a student discount through UniDays and include one piece of luggage. Other options are OurBus or the Cornell Campus-to-Campus Bus Service. While the latter is the most convenient, as it includes two pieces of luggage, is very modern, and makes several stops in New York City and on the Ithaca campus, it is also the most expensive option. Alternatively, you can rent a car or fly into Ithaca.

Accommodation

I lived together with three other exchange students in a shared flat in Collegetown, specifically Dryden South. We connected beforehand to jointly seek an apartment and were lucky to find a furnished apartment with four bedrooms, two bathrooms and a big, shared living room with a well-equipped kitchen.

Cornell University does not offer on-campus housing for graduate students, so I had to look for a private sublet or housing agencies. Popular platforms for finding housing in Ithaca are Cornlet, Craigslist, and Facebook. After researching the most popular and well-connected neighborhoods in Ithaca, I focused my search efforts primarily on Collegetown, but also Cayuga Heights. Collegetown is the most popular neighborhood for Cornell students. It is located south of campus and within walking distance. It also has the best infrastructure of cafes, restaurants, and small grocery stores. Cayuga Heights, on the other hand, is located north of campus, within walking distance, and is a quieter, more residential area. It is also very close to several dining halls. Other classmates also lived in Downtown Ithaca and Maplewood. However, they usually had to rely on buses, which are not the most reliable or convenient option. So they often had to walk or take an Uber/Lyft to get around.

You can expect to pay between \$700 and \$1,200 for a room in a shared apartment if it's in a decent location and good condition. Pay attention to the length of the lease and whether or not the apartment is furnished. Several students thought they were getting a bargain by signing a cheaper lease but ended up paying much more because they had to buy kitchen appliances or furniture, and also had to pay for more months than they actually stayed in Ithaca.

Studying at Cornell

As mentioned earlier, Cornell offers a variety of classes. True to their founding principle “I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study”, you will be able to enroll in classes from all disciplines, however they might not be transferred to your University of Cologne transcript. If you follow along and actively participate in class, you can expect to receive good grades.

Unlike the University of Cologne, most classes take attendance and grade participation. As a result, they tend to be quite interactive and usually required me to prepare before each class. The classrooms are also smaller than in Cologne, so most teachers eventually knew everyone by their name. The instructors also take a strong interest in their students' development, so it is quite common for students to attend office hours or meet with a teacher for coffee.

I ended up taking the following classes:

Consulting Essentials: This course was taught by the first female partner at Deloitte in the US. As a result, she draws heavily on her experience and shares many insights about the consulting industry. She also invited several guest speakers related to consulting. The class began with a deep dive into case interviews and then covered the entire consulting process, from proposal writing and data analysis to client presentations. The class was very interactive and required a lot of preparation. At the end, there was also a final consulting group project that had to be completed in teams of four students. I really enjoyed this class because it was very practical, helped me prepare for case interviews, and gave me a clearer picture of the consulting industry in the United States.

CEMS Business Project: This CEMS-exclusive course revolves around a real-life business case that is solved in groups of five or six students in collaboration with a corporate partner. In my case, our team got to consult with a company in the automotive industry. This was the most

time-intensive class I had that semester, yet I highly enjoyed it. We usually had a weekly check-in with our client plus a weekly 3.5-hour class where we discussed our progress with the two instructors. On top of that, we usually worked several hours a week conducting primary and secondary research, analyzing data, writing the report, and creating a final presentation. I was very fortunate to be in a team of highly motivated and skilled classmates. The final grade was based on client satisfaction, a final presentation, a final report, and peer evaluation.

Global Leadership: This course is also a CEMS exclusive and included two classes per week. Each class was assigned a different leadership topic, and most of the sessions revolved around student discussion. Other classes included simulations, guest speakers, HBR cases, or personal case studies. The final grade was based on your participation in class, a personal essay, and an individual leadership case study, as well as your responses to the HBR case studies, which had to be prepared prior to each session.

Strategic Management of Technology and Innovation: The instructor of this course has extensive knowledge in the areas of entrepreneurship, innovation management, and organizational change. The class covered several case studies from the technology industry and included guest lecturers from companies such as Amazon, Corning, Google, and GE. Robert Langer, the founder of Moderna, was also among the guest speakers and joined us for a class. After most classes, the professor would offer to join him and the guest speaker for dinner, which is a great networking opportunity.

The professor is very well connected in the technology industry and often emphasized the value of networking in innovation. As a result, one of our assignments was to analyze our own network and the efforts we had made to shape it throughout the semester.

He also encouraged us to attend one of the few weekend-long hackathons during the semester. I ended up participating in the Cornell Digital Agriculture Hackathon, which was an incredible experience. I worked in an interdisciplinary team of four students and we ended up being a finalist. Another deliverable was an analysis of this experience, focusing on my role in the innovation process and team dynamics.

Spreadsheet Modeling: This class was a half-semester MBA course and turned out to be incredibly valuable in fine-tuning my Excel skills. It started at a very basic level, so I did not find it challenging at first. However, it soon moved on to more advanced topics. Each class usually had 2/3 spreadsheets that we worked on and completed together with the instructor. He always made sure that everyone could follow along. Although this was the only class that would not require attendance, I usually went to ask questions, meet other students, and practice in class. After each session, there was a graded online assignment to practice the class content and show that you understood the concepts.

Global Citizenship Seminar: This weekend-long seminar is required for CEMS students but was also open to students from other programs. The instructor was highly motivated and shared many insights ranging from research to historical events and case studies. The seminar took a very exploratory approach. It did not include assignments or deliverables, nor was it graded, so anyone who attended both days passed the course.

Everyday life and free time

Life in Ithaca is centered around university, so I spent a lot of time on the beautiful campus, which is a microcosm itself. Surrounded by waterfalls and located on a hill above downtown Ithaca, it has several libraries, restaurants/cafés, a concert hall, a cinema, a museum, even a hotel, and facilities for sports and hanging out with friends. I ended up taking a weekly volleyball class which was a lot of fun. There is also several hundred student organizations which you

can join. During club fest, which is organized at the beginning of each semester and allows students to explore this diversity of organizations, I engaged with “Eyes for the Blind” and “Cornell Hunger Relief”, two social organizations that offered volunteering opportunities. But there were also other organizations, ranging from cooking clubs to sports, arts, tech or spiritual communities. I also signed up for the Cornell concert series, which organized five concerts at Bailey Hall throughout the semester. For a total of \$25, I was able to see and listen to musicians from all over the world and various genres.

In addition, the CEMS club, the student union board, the different schools and Big Red Barn frequently organize events and activities on campus, such as quiz nights, dance classes, arts and crafts, parties, trips etc. To keep track, I recommend following them on Instagram.

I also attended a volleyball tournament and an Ivy League hockey game, both of which were a lot of fun. You can rest assured that there is always something going on around campus.

Food on campus exceeded my expectations. Although it is pricier than the cafeteria in Cologne, it offers something for every taste. For lunch, I recommend Trillium, Atrium Café at Sage Hall, The Terrace at the Statler Hotel and Martha’s Café in Martha Van Rensselaer Hall. If you want to go for an all-you-can-eat style buffet, you should visit Morrison dining. I particularly recommend their grill, pizza and pasta bar, and the Cornell ice cream.

If you are a graduate student, I also recommend stopping by the Big Red Barn in the morning hours to get your free coffee to start the day.

The city of Ithaca also has a small downtown area with some restaurants, shops, bars and a movie theater. North of the city is a small shopping mall (The Shops at Ithaca Mall) with a Target and a Best Buy. However, this mall is slowly becoming obsolete, so a lot of students had not even heard about it. Most of the large stores are located on the south side of town, where they are connected by large parking lots. There you will find a TJ Maxx, Walmart, Dicks Sporting Goods, Ulta Beauty, Trader Joes and Barnes & Noble, plus some franchise restaurants like Chilis, Chipotle, Taco Bell and Five Guys.

Throughout the semester, I had the privilege of traveling around the US for both leisure and educational/networking events. At the beginning of the semester, I joined about 20 other CEMS students for a weekend trip to Boston, which is conveniently only a six-hour drive from Ithaca. In March, a meetup organized by the CEMS Clubs of Canada and the USA took us to the stunning Niagara Falls, which was a great opportunity to reconnect with friends. In April, our entire cohort traveled to New York City for a Cornell Awards Ceremony and a skills seminar hosted by Sanofi in Bridgewater, New Jersey. I was also able to visit Florida and Nevada during the semester breaks.

Cost of Living

The cost of living in the U.S. exceeded German standards, and Cornell's financial requirements proved to be realistic. I ended up paying a total of \$4,400 for housing and between \$1,000 and \$1,500 per month for other living expenses, such as food, study materials, and recreational activities.

Eating out is slightly more expensive than in Germany, as you are usually expected to leave a 20% tip on top of the restaurant bill, same goes for cafes. If you want to eat on campus between classes, you can expect to pay around \$10 for an average meal, while a coffee to go costs \$3 - \$6. Many classes required the purchase of materials, which in my case totaled \$400. Fortunately, I was able to waive the university's SHP, but since this will no longer be possible in the future, you can expect to pay another \$2,200 for U.S. health insurance. If you plan to travel around the U.S. a lot during your stay, this can also add up.