Tom Parsons – Exchange to Oregon State University, USA in 2008

Before leaving Australia:

I found that the most important thing to remember when getting yourself ready to go on exchange is to not do everything all at once but don’t leave everything till the last week. The best way to do this is to make lists from an early stage, containing any kind of thing or task that needs to be done before your departure date. This will refresh your memory consistently and will help to reduce any panicking fears you may have.

One of the more important things is to get the VISA procedure nailed down as soon as possible. Be prepared for a long and somewhat pointless wait at the US consulate (somewhere in the 4-5 hour range). Don’t make mistakes on any forms either or it will just take you longer. (Again, make a list of everything you need for your VISA interview, and tick it off, to guarantee you don’t waste your time).

As for insurance, I bought the given CSU insurance but also had the Oregon State University insurance included in my student fees once I arrived in the states. Ensure that you organize your medical information well before you head overseas. It took me too long to get my documents organized because I thought it would be processed quickly, but I ended up having to get several blood tests for immunizations and only got it completed about a week before I left. As for medical forms, or any information that your host university requests via email, my advice would be to do it as soon as you receive the email. Telling yourself that you will do it later usually means you will forget about it.

Getting to the US

I bought a round-the-world ticket, purely because I planned to visit the United Kingdom after I had completed my US exchange, but it is up to your own plans with where and what you want to do, although if you do plan to travel further overseas, a round-the-world ticket will save you money. I went through my local travel agent who had done our family vacations so that if anything did go wrong with my travel plans, my family were able to fix it easily.

However, one possible concern with buying a round-the-world ticket is that you need to stick to your original plan or it will cost you extra money to change the dates of your flights. I decided to travel to the UK earlier than I expected, and this cost my $97 Australian to change the date. If you are not expecting to travel outside of the US during your time, I would recommend just getting a return flight from the major city near your university. I travelled to Los Angeles and San Francisco a week before I went up to Oregon, and found this a positive experience because it allowed me to see a bit of America before term started and to get used to things such as American spending, travel and customs such as tipping before I went to Corvallis.

Doing so much travel over a short period can get tiresome and stressful. Always make sure you have the most crucial bits and pieces on your person all the time. By this I mean your passport (with VISA), wallet and travel documents, even your phone. I would always check every 15 minutes that you still have them. It may sound ridiculous but you can’t put a price on how important these things are to you. If you want to get a travel wallet, make sure you test drive it first to see if everything fits and that it’s comfortable. I bought one at Sydney airport before leaving and the documents didn’t fit and it dangled about uncomfortably, so I got rid of it and had everything in the travel folder my travel agent gave me.

Flying is different for everyone. There is no one way of surviving a flight or avoiding jetlag. If you can’t sleep, don’t try and force yourself. If you want to sit up and watch movies the whole time, do that. You may be jetlagged when you get off, you may not. It’s a fact of life and you just have to deal with it. I, for one, love flying and never sleep.
\textbf{The Campus}

I studied at Oregon State University, in Corvallis, Oregon. It is about a 1 and a half hour drive from Portland, the capital of Oregon. Oregon is a really beautiful place, which I hadn’t heard much about before I left. It’s filled with huge green trees, gorgeous lakes and amazing scenery. It is one of those places where the possibilities for outdoor adventures such as climbing, walking and rafting are endless. I’m not a big outdoor sports person, but the opportunities are there.

The weather was great whilst I was there. People warned me that Oregon is famous for its consistent rain but we only got about a week of constant rain. Usually, once the rain starts in mid-October, it doesn’t stop for months. A typical day saw cold mornings, with a biting chill to the air, but the sun usually came out during the day and it got warmer and then much colder again at night. Towards December, it was freezing at nighttimes.

The town is basically a college town. Everything revolves around OSU and there isn’t much on offer besides the university, which sounds bad, but all the things you can do are just structured at students. It’s really a town designed for students. OSU had about 10-15 different living halls, I lived in Halsell which was aimed at upper-class, older students but we still at 18 year old freshman in our dorm. Halsell was a lot nicer and roomier though than the other halls. Take the time to work out where you want to stay; it does have a huge impact on your time there. If you know you don’t want to share a room with another person, ensure that you have that on your application form. I was relaxed about this, and whilst my roommate was a nice person, I didn’t enjoy having to share a bedroom with another person for an entire term. The campus is filled with all sorts of facilities, such as an enormous gym and recreation centre, tennis courts, soccer and rugby fields, convenience stores, clothing shop, bookstore and more, so pretty much anything you need you can get of Campus. As for the surrounding area, Monroe St was located right next to campus. Monroe St has restaurants, a small supermarket, bars and pubs and a number of cafes. For everything else, you would need to walk downtown which was about a 15-20 minute walk.

Food on campus was generally not great so you have to learn to be smart about what you eat. The 2 basic dining centers normally had the usual hot food, sandwiches, Mexican bar, burgers, soup and a salad bar. You could learn what was good and healthy and stick to that. Some places on campus offer decent sandwiches and hot food, but generally if you want to stick to healthy cooked meals, you should try visiting the supermarket on a regular basis and buy vegetables, fruit and other particulars. The cooking facilities in our suites weren’t great, but they were enough to cook a healthy meal. Otherwise, you can get stuck in a routine of eating greasy food for lunch and dinner every day. Try going out for a meal downtown at least once a fortnight. It may be a little pricier but you'll enjoy it. We found a nice Sushi place downtown which some mates and I went to quite a bit, and really appreciated the change from the usual campus dining experience. Meal plans depend on how much you eat really, I went down from the Premium plan to the Preferred plan, and ran out of money with 1 week to go. If you run out on these plans, you can always add more money through a credit card and it’s not a big deal.

\textbf{The Course}

The main piece of advice I would give about the subjects that you will do overseas is don’t panic if there are loose ends or unanswered questions before you get to your host university. I went through the same process and everything gets answered for you with your advisor once you get there. OSU was very helpful in getting international students set up with a number of seminars and introductions to people who can help you with your course. Make sure you do take the time to get all the documentation for your classes and find out where your classes are before you go (The campus is a bigger place than you think).

There was a significant difference between work in Australia and in the US. I found that the work itself was easier than and not as challenging as the work I had been doing in Australia but the
workload itself was a lot more. You will usually have at least one essay a week for each class, throw in a few midterms across the term and you will often find yourself still doing assignments when the time comes to start studying for finals. Essays at CSU are much more dependent on research and citing whereas most of my essays at OSU were based around class material.

Be prepared to do classes that are different to what you are used to back home. You are not going to find classes that directly match what you are studying or what you are looking into as a career. You need to be able to take what you are learning and adapt it to your studies from back home. This may require you to do a little bit extra reading or thinking when it comes to your own work, but it is definitely necessary. For example, I took a class in Sports Administration that was structured around people looking to become sports directors or sports coaches. Being in sports media, this was hard for me. After speaking to the professor in the first week, I simply approached the class from a media perspective, did all my assignments and essays from this perspective and it benefited me in the long run.

Take advantage of the opportunities to study or try new things. American Universities provide chances that Australian universities simply can’t give you, such as Physical Activity classes that you get credited for. If you need to fill in extra credit or simply want a way to stay active, join a PAC class. I was playing football twice a week and flag football on the weekends and got credited for this, based on attendance and class participation.

**Money**

This all depends on what you want to do whilst you are on exchange but most of your money should be primarily your disposable income. Your tuition, accommodation and food along with insurance and university fees should already be covered by the time you get to university so whatever you have left goes towards whatever you want it to. It is best to start planning any trips around the country early so you know what you can afford. You should try and spend as little as possible whilst you are on campus, so you have enough to travel with but be prepared for unexpected costs. I bought things like a university jumper, tickets for NBA games and so on throughout the term. Also, if you are over 21, you will be tempted to go to the bars, especially after football games, so try not to spend too much there.

When it comes to buying text books, try and buy everything second hand and then make sure you remember to sell it back at the end of your stay. I bought my books for a total of 100 dollars and then sold them back for 50 dollars.

Keep an eye on the exchange rate before you go to America. I didn’t. Two weeks after I got to university, the Aussie dollar crashed against the USD and I actually lost money. So, make sure you follow its form in the weeks leading up to your departure. I got a VISA debit card from NAB before I left, this meant I paid no extra ATM fees but paid $12AUD a month. You can do this or open up an account in Corvallis depending on how long you are there for but this can often be a frustrating process.

**Travelling Around**

Depending on your financial situation, make sure you check out as much of the USA as you can. It’s a big place and there is definitely plenty to see. Around Oregon, there is an abundance of beautiful scenic places with things to do. Crater Lake was one of the most amazing places I’ve ever been to, and that was less than an hour’s drive to get to. Around Corvallis, you can drive to Salem if you are in need of a slightly bigger town and Salem also has a bigger variety of shopping choices.

Portland is a great place to go to, especially for its nightlife and music scene. It is only 1 ½ hours drive from Corvallis so if met anyone with a car, make friends with them and get them to take you to Portland. I went a couple of times for shopping, NBA and for the general atmosphere of a big
city. You can also get to Seattle, Washington quite easily and if you fly Southwest (cheap American airline), you can get to places like Nevada, California and Canada easily and cheaply. (TIP: If you need to get away last minute, check Southwest Airlines online about 1-2 days before, and flight costs will plummet to about $50USD, a steal in my books)

Don’t be disappointed if there are places you want to go to but you never manage to. I really wanted to get to Boston and New York on the east coast but time and money didn’t allow me to. You will always get another chance, if you make the effort.

Weather

I was only there from September to December so I only experienced the months leading into winter. When I first arrived, I was able to wear shorts and a t-shirt with flip flops on for quite a while. But as term wears on, you will feel the cold and will need winter gear. I recommend a pair of comfortable shoes that will survive wet and damp conditions, beanies, scarves, a jacket, a rainjacket and some good hoodies or jumpers. You probably won’t need snow or thermal gear, but if you can fit them, they certainly won’t hurt.

My usual dress was jeans, boots, singlet, t-shirt, jumper and then a nice jacket over the top. Don’t be too worried about fashion sense; you are from another country so America won’t be worried about what you look like. Bring a pair of sunnies as well. It is cold, but sometimes the winter sun glares right into your eyes. If you don’t have enough room for jackets in your suitcase, buy one over here. There is a much bigger selection at any of the outdoor retailers you can find.

Important things to bring

- A digital camera
- Stuff and photos from back home because you will find Americans will love to see where you came from.
- Laptop – the library is amazing, but you also get amazing internet capabilities in your room and you can use it for music, email, networking and watching movies or television in your own time.
- IPOD – if you have one.

DON’T BRING!!

- Too many cords and cables – you are bound to lose one.

As for the mobile phone dilemma, you are better off buying one in the states then taking yours over. My phone is a tri-band phone which allows you to put a Sim card from anywhere in the world into your phone. I kept this and just bought an American number, and will do the same once I get to the UK. These phones can be quite expensive though. If you are not worried about appearance, buy a cheap AT & T phone with credit once you get there. Be prepared though, in America, they charge you to receive calls and text messages.

Transport

Corvallis is a small town so transport wasn’t really a massive concern. It is also a massive biking community so if you can get your hands on a bike, it’s a big help. Everyone seems to bike around campus and then bike around downtown, there are bike racks everywhere. If you don’t have the money to buy a bike, there is a bike centre on campus which will rent you a bike for the time that you are on campus. Make sure you buy a lock for the bike. I found it easy to walk everywhere, to class and downtown. Walking to classrooms and lecture halls can take up to 5-10 minutes whilst it is a 10-15 minute walk to get downtown. There is a shuttle bus that operates around campus and downtown which can be useful at night, but I found that sometimes I was closer to downtown than I was to the bus stop.
If you wish to travel around Oregon, you will need a car so making friends with someone who owns a car can be a huge advantage. If you need to get to Portland, the Hut Shuttle operates to and from Portland but costs $50. It is a much cheaper option to go with the Greyhound bus which leaves from downtown but will only cost you about $20-25.

**Cultural and Social Information**

There are an abundance of clubs and activities to get involved with at Oregon State University. The huge amount of sport clubs and tournaments are available and you can get involved in intermural sport leagues. I played in a 3 on 3 soccer tournament, tennis doubles tournament and played flag football every Sunday with a group of friends. You will find there are a huge amount of different social clubs that you can also join, from dance clubs, country clubs and clubs to suit any sort of interest such as gaming, sports, book reading, and wine culture and so on. The international group at OSU also hosts and engages in a number of activities such as coffee hours, Oregon tours and parties that are really good for getting settled at a new university in America but you may find you are too busy to attend international events as the term wears on.

Be prepared for a change in culture and way of life from what you are used to in Australia. First of all, as much as you don’t think it, people will be fascinated by the fact that you are from another country and that you talk differently. Don’t be alarmed; your Australian accent will grow to be your biggest asset in the US.

Things are done differently in the US, you will notice the huge dependence of consumerism and that Americans probably aren’t as laid back as Australians but my best advice is stick to your guns and people will be not only interested in you but accepting you as an important member of the community. Don’t worry if you get confused or annoyed about the way something is done or if you just get that feeling that you are in the wrong place, its natural and it disappears. Be sure to represent Australia properly; you may get fed up of ridiculous questions about whether we ride kangaroos or people asking you to say classic Australian sayings, but it’s only because they are interested. If you can go home knowing that you have made a small portion of the world aware and impressed with Australia, then you have done a good job.

Be sure to mix up your friendships groups. A fellow Aussie can be a great asset but it can also be a hindrance to you. I ended up friends with a couple of Aussies but also a lot of Americans, some British people and a fair few Europeans. Remember, exchange students from other countries are in the same situation as you so don’t ignore them just because they are not from America. You should be fine with the language barrier as all Americans speak English but often you will find other groups of exchange students speaking together in their own native tongue, such as Europeans or Asian students.

**Relationships**

As for homesickness, the key for me was to keep busy and make friends early. If you throw yourself into everything the university has to offer, you will find you are so excited that you don’t think too much of home. Keep in mind that whilst things may go on back home, it is always going to be there and you are only in another country for a short time. It is always good to keep some photos or things from home to remind yourself where you came from and what you are going back to. I’ve always maintained that homesickness is a part of going away, whether you get it bad or it’s doesn’t really affect you, so there is no shame in missing home. Just remember that even though you may not see it, people will miss you back home and you don’t want to go back to Australia regretting time you wasted overseas because you were too busy missing home.

Relationships with new people are really important when you go on exchange, at least I found so. Making good friends opens up your experience to so many opportunities such as travel, fun nights out, hanging out and for the most part, enjoying the experience with other people. I was initially worried about the type of friends I’d make but you will find that things like that just fall into
place. It is such a plus having people over there that you trust and confide in, that can help you with getting settled and when you look back on your experience, you were happy to share it with them. As for more serious relationships, I guess there is no rule to it once you are overseas but I would just say that from experience, it can be a great thing but be wary. No matter how great a relationship you may find yourself involved in, you are always going to have to say goodbye so be ready to have to say goodbye to people who have become a big part of your experience of exchange. However, I made friends overseas who I know I will see again, even if they live on the other side of the world.