

Jackson Board – Exchange to Western Illinois University, USA in 2008***Pre-departure***

The most important thing is to be organised early. The whole process of getting a visa can be quite painless if you're aware of what forms you need to fill out, and what information you are required to have for the visa interview in Sydney. If in doubt, take it anyway, you just never know what they might need. Be aware of the costs of getting a passport (if you don't have one already), and for the visa- there are a lot of small costs that really add up, so be prepared. After the visa interview it took me about two weeks to get my passport back so make sure you leave enough time. Recently renewed passport should last for ten years, but if you haven't done that recently make sure you have at least six months remaining from the date you intend to leave the country.

Once you have all your documentation organised, make sure you leave a photocopy back home with family, especially passport, visa, insurance, drivers license. Try and make regular contact with your host university before you arrive. My experience was that WIU staffs were particularly helpful with any questions I had, and efficient in getting everything sorted for my arrival.

However, your greatest resource will be the CSU exchange staff; this is what they do, so take advantage of their superior knowledge and their contacts at foreign institutions.

Travel

I booked my flight early and saved a lot of money. While it is a gamble, I would recommend trying to get your flights booked before your visa comes through, or even before official confirmation of your acceptance at the overseas university, because the savings will be huge. Again, if in doubt, talk to Louise about how your acceptance is progressing. The later you wait, the higher the taxes will be.

I found STA to be by far the cheapest options for booking flights, especially if you want to incorporate other travelling into your trip. They are particularly cheap with multiple destination flights. However, try and finalise all your flight details before you leave. I have changed my mind some of my flights, and trying to contact STA from overseas has been frustrating, and the changes have been expensive. Invest in a STA international student card (for around \$15), the savings for flights, public transport, museums, galleries etc will pay for themselves.

Within America, STA (USA) and Student Universe are best for domestic flights, or into Canada or Mexico.

When you're finally at the airport, again it is important to be organised and have everything ready- most tickets are electronic now, but having accommodation details, acceptance letters, visa forms will most likely be needed at some point. Just bring all your documents with you in your hand luggage. Also invest in a travel wallet that can be strapped to your body, you don't want to lose your travel documents!! At the airport seems to be the cheapest place to buy power converters for your electrical appliances as well.

Try to arrive at the airport for international flights about two hours before departure, you normally will need that long to get through the various security and get to your gate, and shop if you're into that! If your flight is not full, ask if you can get a seat towards the back of the plane and sit alone. Having a spare seat next to you is heaven, especially for long flights, like being in first class almost. Make sure you eat when they serve because even if you're thinking you should be sleeping, it's essential to reducing jetlag.

Most airlines (in the US anyway) have introduced extra fees for baggage. So in effect you will be paying for anything more than cabin luggage. I would recommend bringing one small/medium bag to take on the plane, and then two larger bags to check in. You will be allowed to have two bags up to 25kg each. It is a better option than taking one huge bag that weighs 35kg because you will get slugged with excess baggage charges.

On the plane all you need is a book/magazine, iPod, a full change of clothes in case things go wrong, and all your documents. I took my laptop to keep it safe. Don't take toiletries.

Insurance

Insurance was an issue for me because I was required to purchase both insurance to satisfy CSU's requirements as well as college insurance at WIU. This can be expensive! However, I was able in the end to get the WIU insurance waived because the other insurance I bought was superior, but that was only by chance and I was quite lucky. Make sure you know what your host university requires so that you don't have to double-dip as many others were forced to. If your overseas exchange coordinator doesn't know, ask for the contact details of the university medical clinic and find out.

I took insurance with World Nomads, which was only \$400 for seven months. This is comprehensive and vitally includes emergency evacuation, and they have an office in the US. I would recommend it. WIU required a range of medical forms which they sent in advance for a doctor to fill out before I left. If you haven't had all the immunisations required you can have them in Australia, or get them for quite cheap at the university when you arrive. The cost for a measles injection for example was around \$11. But having everything sorted beforehand does give you a bit of peace of mind.

Campus

I was at Western Illinois University in the mid-west of Illinois funnily enough. Illinois is close to the middle of the country, flanked by Iowa and Indiana and south of the Great Lakes. Chicago is the biggest city in the state (the third largest in the country) and where the closest major airports are. The university is located in a very small town called Macomb about three hours south west of Chicago, which has a population of around 20,000. Don't be fooled, about half of this is student population, so the town is much smaller than Bathurst. It has many restaurant, bars and large outlet stores which cater for everything you require, but nothing you really desire if you catch my drift. The WIU campus is quite large and spread out, and unlike at CSU, students must live on-campus for their first two years. There are ten residence halls, most of which are large multi-story buildings (I lived at Tanner Hall on the 16th floor). Most of the buildings are more modern than at CSU and are reasonably comfortable if you have your own room (highly recommended). Most residence halls are at least a five to ten minute walk to the academic buildings depending on your major. This makes for a pleasant walk most days, but if it's too cold or raining, there is an extensive and regular bus service that stops at all major buildings on campus.

There are many sporting fields, tennis courts and other facilities that can be used by students, but most impressive is the football stadium which seats around 15,000 people and the modern basketball arena. The surrounding area is covered with cornfields and forest, and during the autumn this makes for a spectacular view.

There are a lot of international students, some of them live in International House which is a small residence off campus, but most are simply spread out. There is not too much reason to have to leave the campus all that much, aside from a weekly trip to Wal-Mart, a huge store which is like a mixture of Woolworths and Big W. The meals in the dining rooms are fantastic. They operate a lot like small food courts, where you simply order what you want.

The range of food is great, and you can choose to eat as healthily as you like. There are also a number of small convenience stores, as well as fast food outlets including Burger King if you choose to eat there (for whatever reason).

I would suggest buying the Dining Meal Plan Plus Option, which gives you about \$750 of purchasing power at any one of the five dining areas on the campus. You simply swipe your student card and are charged for whatever food items you take. I eat two meals a day at the dining room and will probably run out of money still. Buying your own breakfast foods is certainly worthwhile. Your card will also allow you to buy from vending machines, to operate washer and dryers and to borrow sports equipment or library books.

Course Information

I found the staff at WIU very efficient in getting me enrolled in my subjects. They were also quite versatile, and allowed me to take a subject as directed study with the professor because it wasn't offered in the fall. Overall, I wouldn't be too worried even if there are registration delays or anything like that, upon arrival there is a lot of time to get organised, and the staff are very understanding in

this regard. At WIU you are able to add or remove subjects up to three weeks into semester. One thing I would definitely consider is taking an extra fifth class, you won't pay for it, and the credits will count back in Australia. This might just save you some stress later on in your degree. Talk to Louise and your course coordinator for advice.

I think it is important to introduce yourself to your professors when you arrive so that they are aware that you are 'the one' for Australia. Don't expect any concessions, but they all seem fascinated by the fact we're international students. Get involved with class discussions; it's interesting to share these international differences.

You are generally expected to complete much more regular homework than at CSU. Every week there will be some kind of assignment that is due for each class, which certainly will keep you quite busy. However, the work is much easier, so there is less effort required to complete the work to a superior standard (I've been amazed at the marks I've been able to get). Most teachers are keen on having regular quizzes as well, so attending class is a must. Major assignments, as we are used to at CSU, are still required, but are less common and less comprehensive. There is a preference to accumulate yours marks over the semester, which in a way is more draining (considering you work for 16 weeks), but there is less pressure at the end of term.

There are many opportunities to score extra credit by attending various talks, seminars or movie screenings. Generally these are very interesting, and something you would enjoy attending anyway if you have any interest in world or national politics, cultural sessions, or professional views on the state of world industries. Your professors will let you know in which sessions you can get bonus marks for attending. They even hold cooking classes, motivation sessions, indoor kayaking lessons etc.

The timetables for class is standardised across the whole university, which means most people have classes at similar times. Class on Mon, Wed and Fri are always the same, as are Tue and Thur. The times you have class also determines what time you have end of year exams. This is handy for arranging travel.

Transport

As I mentioned before, there is an extensive bus service throughout the campus. These come every five minutes, clockwise and anti-clockwise around campus. They are timetabled to come more frequently at times just before classes start, and just after classes finish so there isn't much excuse to be late for class. The buses can be very crowded during inclement weather though.

The buses also have thorough routes throughout Macomb if you wish to visit any of the large outlet stores, or go to the bank, post office etc. There is also a late-night service which can return you safely back to campus. All the bus routes are completely free which is very convenient. It is also possible to walk from campus to the square (where the banks, bars, post office is located) in around 20 minutes. A taxi company has recently re-opened, though we have never had the need to use one.

Chicago is about three and a half hours on the Amtrak train, which leaves Chicago and Macomb twice each day respectively. To drive, can take well over four hours depending on traffic. The train is reasonably cheap (\$16 one way) if you book it in advance and if you have an STA student card. But you can get in trouble booking within a week of departure (up to \$50 one way).

Expenses

Always be aware of the dollar exchange rate because this will ultimately determine how much money you are able to spend. I found that there were many costs that I had not anticipated, so it is important to leave room in your budget for unexpected costs. The university has a monthly billing system, so your first month will be the biggest (around \$4000) for accommodation, dining plan and other various costs. You can elect to pay in one instalment, or pay a fraction each month. I would recommend paying it all in one go, as depending on how the Australian dollar fares, this can make a huge impact on your savings so it's best to get it all out the way and not be stressing if the dollar drops more than 30 cents (as it did for us). Be aware that most universities (it seems) don't accept Visa credit cards for payment, only MasterCard or Amex, so if you don't have one of those you should probably get one, it is easy to get one from most Australian banks. Your other option is to transfer money to a US bank

account and then write a cheque, but find out how to do that before you go, and what the associated costs will be.

Having a MasterCard debit card linked to your home savings account is very useful, as is having a credit card as a back-up option if you have a shortage of cash for some reason. Before leaving, it is wise to register your cards with your bank by letting them know your overseas itinerary. Otherwise they may shut off your access if the purchases seem irregular (as they will be if you are on the other side of the world).

I opened a bank account in the US, but I don't really use it all that much and tend to withdraw bulks of cash as I need it from my Australian account despite the small costs. It is easy to open though, and I would still probably recommend getting one as there have been times when it has proven useful. Each week there isn't the need to spend too much money, I'd say around \$40 US each week has been my average but often that includes spending money on things down the track such as travel bookings, or other incidentals. It also depends on whether you opt to take weekend vacations or other trips. You could easily spend less than this. Wal-Mart is probably the best option for buying most of things you'll need while semester is on; they literally sell just about everything.

Holiday Travel

As important as the university factor is, I believe that travelling will make a crucial impact on the success of your experience. Seeing new places can be very exciting and rewarding and I can't stress enough how much of a motivating factor travel can be, both before you leave, and while you're slogging away with work in the middle of winter. Try and have flights arranged before you leave, but be versatile to changing your exact plans, because you never know what other opportunities may arise. I chose to travel before and after the university term.

Close to WIU, Chicago is definitely worth a visit. It is a large, organised and progressive city with fascinating architecture, friendly people and a sense of community despite its size. There is the chance to see one of the many sporting teams in the city, as well as some good art galleries, jazz clubs, shops and pizza restaurants. From Illinois, most places are pretty accessible given its central location.

New York is a must. Despite how much they think you've seen of it, it is sure to astound. There is so much to do here and you could easily spend a week without ever feeling like you've seen everything, although you're sure to be worn out by then. Even though cities like Chicago and NY are a lot more expensive than in university towns, don't miss out on an experience because things are pricey. Who knows when you'll ever make it back to these places, so seize the day while you can.

Your major breaks in the year (for fall term anyway) will be before class starts in August, for one week at Thanksgiving in November, and when term ends in late December. Consider round-the-world flights if you afford them. I would have paid around \$2200 for a Sydney to Chicago direct flight. Instead my flights went Sydney, Auckland, New York, Chicago, London, Bangkok, for \$3000. You can really make a trip of it, especially if you can hook up with someone else for parts of it. On the flipside, don't be afraid to travel alone, you are guaranteed to meet people in the same situation who can become good friends. Although after a while, there is nothing better than seeing a familiar face.

Social Activities

The university is constantly promoting various hall, clubs fraternity and sorority activities. Many of these are offered as alternatives to partying on weekends, or as midweek activities. There are often new movies being shown at the uni cinema, promotions at the bowling alley, guest speakers on behalf of clubs and community service activities.

The international community is very well organised and efficient so there are always things on for international students. This could include going on a field trip to a local site or mall, adopting a local family with whom who do an activity every couple of weeks, or American football explanation sessions. A lot of these can be enjoyable if you have the time and inclination.

Sports (known as intramurals) are taken much more seriously than dorm sports at CSU. They involve proper rules, official team registration and fines for teams who don't field enough players. But they can be great fun if you can make a team in one of the many sports offered, and a good source of regular exercise. The university also has a state of the art recreation centre with a large, fully equipped weights room, lots of treadmills, cross trainers etc, a heated indoor swimming pool, squash courts, indoor running track and basketball courts. It's free as well.

Cultural Information

You have to face the fact that Americans are different from Australians. These differences are deeper than simply accents and geography. You will soon realise that most have no idea about our country and will be fascinated about it. The US is still a very conservative country in many ways and it may take a while to adjust to some of the rules and expectations that stand in society.

It is unavoidable to constantly compare your new home with your old one, particularly when you're with another Aussie. I don't think there's anything wrong with that as long as you're not constantly complaining about your new environment. Most Americans will want to know a bit about where you're from anyway (especially if you ever see kangaroos, their reaction never fails to astonish me).

Get you Aussie slang ready anyway; you'll have many opportunities to use it!

Weather

Macomb winter takes cold to a whole new level compared to Bathurst. They frequently receive strong biting winds from the Great Lakes and Canada, heavy snow fall, and temperatures that can drop to minus 20 degrees. Fortunately the worst of it seems to occur in Jan and Feb. Still it's a 'chilling' experience and you will need to prepare by bringing or buying appropriate clothing.

I brought quite a few hoodies and woollen jumpers, plus one jacket. By layering extensively and combined with a beanie and scarf, you should be fine. But if need be, they sell really warm clothes for fairly cheap at Wal-Mart. These types of clothes can take up a lot of room in your suitcase, so buying them here is not too bad an option.

In the months leading up to November, it has been very pleasant for most of the time. The temperatures have hovered between 15 and 30 so it's easy to dress appropriately. It has rained a lot, so a rain-jacket is essential. Temperatures in the residence halls can be very bizarre at times, e.g. cold air when it's freezing outside and vice versa. In fact it's hard to find a comfortable medium so a range of different clothes is a good idea.

What to bring from home

Bring whatever clothes you would normally wear, don't bring too many so that your bag is extremely heavy, but you will get quickly sick of whatever you do bring, so choose wisely. There are not many opportunities once you're in Macomb to update the wardrobe, fashionably anyway. Toiletries can be expensive purchases upon arrival (though they are mostly cheaper than at home) but are also heavy to bring so consider that too when packing.

A digital camera is a must, and so too is a laptop if you have one. It's probably handy to have some kind of backpack or shoulder strap bag as well, but like most things you can buy that upon arrival if need be. Also make sure you have power adaptors.

What not to bring

I brought a suit jacket and ties, but have found them pretty useless. They take up room, and there haven't been the occasions to really use them. Although a couple of dress shirts for guys will come in handy at some point.

Don't bring very heavy shoes, unless you choose to wear them every time you get on a flight. My mobile phone became useless, despite having international roaming. In Macomb, only CDMA service is available to you will be forced to buy a 90's style brick to use for your time here and then just recharge it with credit every now and then. In fact, I bought the phone and never topped it up because it was so cumbersome, and I didn't use it too much seeing as I had Facebook, Skype and a room phone. If you are at a university with regular mobile service, I would bring your phone from home and

simply have it enabled or unlocked before you leave. It is difficult to find a good prepaid phone and you won't be able to buy a contract.

Don't buy an international license if you are planning to drive. They are simply a representation of your Australian license, and seeing as ours are in English there is absolutely no point. It is a waste of money! You are allowed to drive as long as you are legally allowed in the country.
What you may need to buy

Textbooks can be an expensive surprise when you arrive. I would highly recommend buying them on the internet (eBay is great) and you will save hundreds of dollars. Often buying the 4th edition instead of the 5th edition will reap great savings and little or no actual difference in content, but just check with your professor first. All of mine were fine with it.

WU offers a micro-fridge package (around \$150 for microwave, fridge/freezer) that will be available in your room when you arrive. I took this option, but in hindsight may have opted against it and bought a fridge at Wal-Mart instead (for about \$50). There is always the option of selling it at the end of the year as well.

Relationships

The more you become involved with other people on campus, the better your relationships will ultimately become. This is the best way to avoid becoming homesick. The cure for it will never be feeling sorry for yourself, you just have to get out there and do it.

Having a regular chat with your family is essential and a good way to communicate to them how your experience is going. Don't forget that they'll probably be missing you as well (hopefully) so don't just abandon them as soon as you get on the plane. I didn't use Skype to call, but know others who did and it was very convenient. All you need is a microphone head-set and a webcam if you want to do free video calls. These things can be bought when you arrive.

Americans are naturally intrigued by Australians, yet this does not mean they will all be confident enough to socially interact with you. You are sure to miss your friends at home and it's important to stay in contact with them, but saying that, it's important to meet new people as soon as you can. I found that the people I met in the first week were the ones that became my good friends by year end. Don't feel like you should avoid other international students, simply because you want to go to America to meet Americans. My closest friends were European students, so don't restrict yourself. And remember to have fun, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.