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My Experience Studying at HAW Hamburg, Spring 2009

There are two areas I think about when it comes to my study experience in Hamburg: the things I learned inside of the classroom and the things I learned outside of the classroom. In all, I learned much more than I have during any other semester.

When I first walked into class at HAW I was quite nervous. For one, I had never taken an engineering course outside of Virginia Tech, so I didn't know what to expect. Secondly, I had never taken a course in German. Coming into the situation, I knew that it would be a challenge, and I decided that I would simply do my best.

I was no stranger to the German language. In first grade my parents enrolled me in a program where I took math and science courses in German. I wasn't a very good student back then, and I didn't care very much for school; however, just being in that environment helped lay the foundations for my learning the German language. When I finished the program in sixth grade, I wasn't necessarily an expert at the language, or at grammar to be certain, but I knew a fair amount of vocabulary, along with the standard words (ich, du, er, sie, es, etc.). From seventh grade through twelfth, and in my first year at Virginia Tech, I took the standard German courses that were offered. By the time I got to Hamburg, I was not fluent by any means, but I had learned a lot of German. I had not, however, spoken my German to native speakers or listened to German people speaking to each other. This, coupled with my unfamiliarity with the German school system, led to my hesitation about taking classes in Hamburg.

My reservation was compounded somewhat when I got to Germany and learned that a couple of the classes I had wanted to take were not offered in the spring semester. And even more so when I learned that I was one of the only exchange students taking courses in German (engineering was one of the only fields in which courses were not offered in English, and only two other exchange students were taking engineering courses). These concerns were mostly resolved though in a discussion with the course coordinator, during which I chose some suitable

replacement courses. This discussion also helped me to feel more relaxed about the situation as a whole.

Another resource that helped to assuage some of my anxiety was my assigned buddy, Henning. I began to really appreciate Henning on the first day that I arrived in Hamburg. Before I flew in, I gave Henning the time that I was supposed to arrive in Hamburg, and he was scheduled to meet me there at that time. The problem arose when my first flight was late coming into London and I missed my second flight by five minutes. When I was told that I wouldn't be able to catch the next flight for another four hours, I figured there would be no way that Henning would wait around that long for me. I had thoughts of walking through Hamburg alone with all my bags looking for a place to spend the night. When I finally did arrive, I was delightfully surprised to find my buddy Henning waiting there for me as soon as I walked through the gate. From there, Henning did his best to help me get everything I needed, including checking me into my residence, getting me a bank account, signing me up for my health insurance, and registering me with the city of Hamburg. He even did the things that were not necessarily asked of a buddy, such as inviting me over to his residence on my first night (even after he had to wait for me for four extra hours at the airport), introducing me to other people, showing me some of the interesting places in the city, and simply discussing the ins and outs of German culture with me. Henning, in my opinion, is the best buddy ever. He went to all of the buddy events that I went to, and he continued to hang out with me throughout the entire semester. He turned out to be one of the best friends that I made in Germany, and we also shared many of the same friends. He truly took an interest in me and my problems, and we in fact shared most of the same interests.

My first day of class turned out to be very similar to what class at Virginia Tech was like. I walked into a room full of students, I chose a place and sat down, and after a few minutes the instructor walked in, introduced himself, and began the lesson. Aside from being in a different language, the structure of the class was about what I was used to. In all truth though, the language did make a large difference. When I took German courses at home, the teachers knew that we were not native German speakers, and they spoke to us accordingly. This was not the case here at HAW Hamburg. I was a little shocked at first, but when I really concentrated, I found that I could understand about sixty percent of what was said by the instructor. This may seem like a small amount, but with the way the courses were run and organized I found it to be an acceptable

number. In each of my classes the professor would write notes on the board while speaking about the subject matter. I would copy all of the notes regardless of whether I understood them or not. I would also listen to the teacher and try to decipher as much as possible from what he was saying. When I got home (to the student accommodations where I lived) I would translate all of the notes that I did not understand (using dict.leo.org, a very useful website). I got this system down within my first few weeks of taking classes, and it worked pretty well.

Another useful resource in the classroom was the aid I received from my fellow classmates. One of the first things I learned in class was that I shouldn't be afraid to reach out. Nearly everyone I asked was very helpful and willing to answer my questions. A few of my classmates even made a point to sit next to me. We would work together, share solutions to problems, and speak in both English and German (mostly German for my sake). I actually made a couple of good friends in class, and we would later do things together outside of class.

As it turned out, my most helpful friend for everything in the classroom was, in fact, my buddy Henning. He was in my major (mechanical engineering) so he was familiar with the way things worked inside of the department, and he was a few years ahead of me, so he helped recommend some of the classes that I ended up taking. He also answered a few of the questions I had with regards to homework problems as well as general administration issues. All in all, Henning turned out to be my greatest resource as well as a great friend.

I did learn a fair amount in school, but more than anything else in Hamburg, I learned the most about culture; both German culture and the culture of the many other people I met. One of the main reasons I love Hamburg is because of the diversity of the city. In my time in Germany I had the opportunity to visit Berlin, Munich, and Frankfurt, and Hamburg seemed to have the most to offer as far as diversity and a mix of culture. I had many enlightening conversations on the train and on the street with folks from around the globe. I learned about life in Ghana, the way things work in Turkey, and how life is in other parts of Germany. I probably spoke more German on the train and on the street than anywhere else.

I made many international friends as well. Henning was my closest German friend. We had many discussions about the differences between our two countries. We weren't afraid to poke a little fun at each other either. Just from being in the country, I quickly learned many of the main

differences. The most apparent differences are with alcohol. Not only are you allowed to drink before you're twenty one, but you're also allowed to have alcohol in public. It felt very strange the first time I took a beer onto the train. Another apparent difference is that waiters and bartenders do not expect to be tipped. This makes things a lot simpler, and it saves the customer a little bit of a hassle. Some of the most noticeable differences are in fast food restaurants. Condiments, such as ketchup and mayonnaise, must be paid for separately, and the customer does not throw away their own trash. Then, of course, you have the differences with automobiles. In the United States you have a lot of trucks and other large vehicles on the street. During the whole five months I was in Germany, I saw one truck. Also, in the United States Mercedes are considered luxury vehicles, and they are more expensive than most other cars people buy. In Germany almost every single police car and taxi is a Mercedes. The one thing I was not expecting though is that almost ninety percent of the cars on the street are hatchbacks. I'm not sure why this is, but, according to Henning, it's because Germans are practical people. These are some of the most apparent differences, and there are tons of small things that really separate the culture and feel of the two countries.

One of the benefits of the exchange program was the opportunity to meet people from other countries who also came to study in Germany. I was very fortunate to make friends from places such as Spain, Sweden, France, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, Turkey, Switzerland, Russia, and Sudan. Before I met all of my friends from the exchange program though, I had the pleasure of taking courses at the Cologne Language Center. I actually arrived in Hamburg two weeks before classes started, and it was recommended that I use that time to refine my German skills, so I decided to take this course. It certainly was a great refresher on the German language, and I needed it, seeing as how I hadn't taken a German course since my first year in college (I am now in my fourth year), but it was also my first chance to meet other people from the international community. It was good to meet other people who were also trying to learn the German language, and it was good to speak with them in German. We spoke German all the time, even when class wasn't in session. Most of the other international people I met preferred to speak in English, which I certainly didn't mind, but I jumped on the opportunity to practice my German. What also made the folks in my class interesting is that, unlike my friends from class and from the exchange program, most of them were not students. Some of them were younger than me, just out of high school trying to learn a new language so that they could get a higher

education in a different country. Some of them were older, married, and trying to better their German so that they could improve their chances in the workforce. It was quite the experience meeting and sharing with all these folks, coming from uniquely different places in their lives.



It wasn't until we had our first buddy-program event, the trip to the Miniature Wunderland in Hamburg that I realized how many students there really were in our program. I took the opportunities offered by the buddy-program to try and make as many friends as possible. Some of my best friends from the program were from Spain. Upon meeting them I was immediately taken in by their energy and willingness to befriend. They were always going somewhere or seeing something, and they would often invite me along. They were also quite good at cooking, and they liked to share their cooking with others. I soon developed a taste for the Spanish omelet, and I learned to like cooked mushrooms.

Most of the meals I had prepared for me, however, were by my wonderful Swedish friends. Some of the nicest and most hospitable people I've met, they would invite me over all the time for a meal or just to enjoy each other's company. They had the good habit of organizing and inviting people over for various social events. One was a cocktail party thrown on behalf of the Swedish National holiday where we all dressed up and ate caviar. Another party was thrown

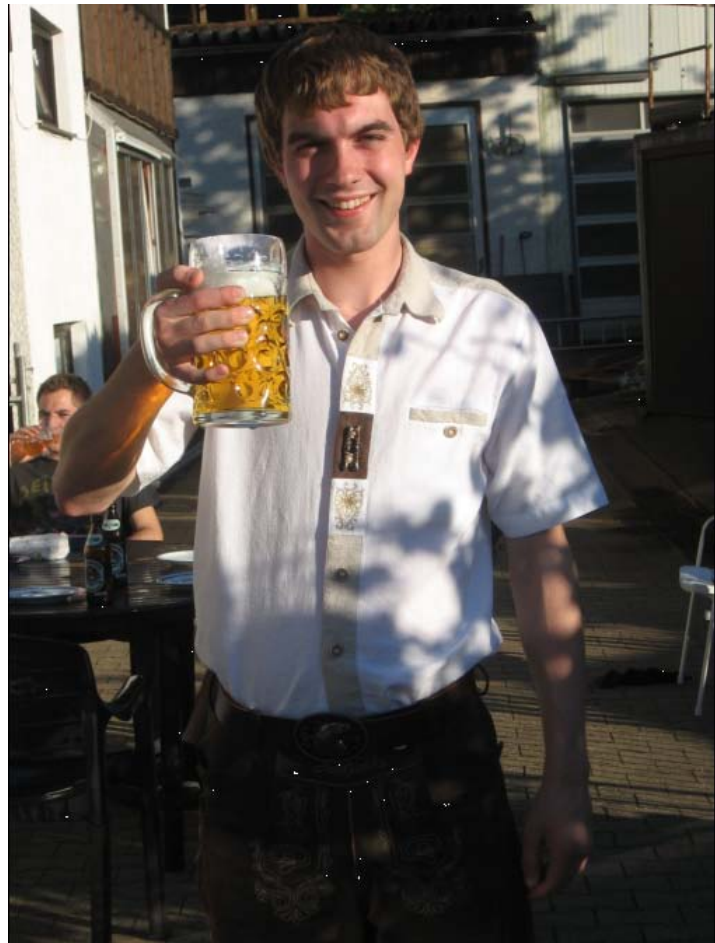
on behalf of the Swedish midsummer, the biggest holiday in the country. They prepared for the entire first half of the semester so that we could experience firsthand the magnitude of this holiday. They had us over on a Saturday for the entire day. They prepared a meal and snacks for almost twenty people, they prepared personalized messages for each of us, and they had us playing games for the entire day. I won't soon forget about Swedish midsummer.

I also made great friends through the buddy program from Turkey, France, Finland, Poland, Brazil, the Netherlands and numerous other places. I learned about places like Istanbul, Paris, Turkey, and Halo. I learned that Döner may or may not be a popular food in Turkey. I learned that the best wine in the world comes from France. I learned that Finland is the best at Ice Hockey (or possibly even Sweden). I ate many things including some French stuff that looked like dog food, some meat made of horse, caviar, herring, and plenty of other things I don't generally eat at home. I learned plenty about the beaches in Brazil, the differences between the Portuguese and Spanish languages, the weather in Scandinavia, and the solar patterns in Sweden. I also learned plenty about electronic music and the many popular former and modern bands out of Sweden (Abba, Mando Diao, etc.). I even went to see a current Swedish band, from the same city as my friend Emma, who came to play in Hamburg. I learned, by consensus from many reliable sources, that people from Scandinavia and the Netherlands speak very good English, because American television programs in their countries are given subtitles rather than being dubbed. I learned very quickly as well that people from northern Europe consider it very rude to be late to appointments. All in all, I learned a great deal from my new friends in the buddy program.

The buddy program was also instrumental in helping me learn about the city of Hamburg. One of the first events was a walking trip through the section of Hamburg along the Elbe river called Blankenese, an area full of old and expensive mansions. It was quite the experience for someone such as myself who had never encountered German architecture. I later returned to Blankenese for the German midsummer when there were massive bonfires and crowds along the beachside, a great time all around. One of the next events was the trip to the Rathaus, or town hall of Hamburg. I was amazed by the amount of fancy art and architecture in this place; every room was extremely ornate, and it looked like it was out of a movie. According to Henning, It was the typical kind of thing you see in Europe, but to me, it was quite amazing.

My favorite buddy-program event was a trip to Berlin, my first time being outside of Hamburg since I had first arrived in the country. It was the first of a number of trips I took, all of which really added to my experience of being in Europe. It was a great trip for getting to know people from the buddy program. We all traveled together on a bus, and we stayed together in a hostel. It was a two-day trip, and I spent the first day with some friends walking around the city and then going to the Jewish museum, a memorial to the Jewish people persecuted during the Second World War. On the second day I went with the entire group on a tour of the city. We saw many things that, before, I had only read about in history class. We saw the remnants of the Berlin wall, Checkpoint Charlie, the Brandenburger Tor, Alexander Platz, the Reichstag, and many other landmarks that were older than anything I had ever seen in my own country (although according to the tour guide almost all the major buildings in the city had been destroyed during World War Two). Berlin was, no doubt, the most historical city I've ever been to.

Not long after the Berlin trip, my friends Elena and Marta invited my friend Dave and myself on another weekend trip to Frankfurt. The highlight of this trip was that we got to rent a car and drive on the autobahn. Many Americans share the fantasy of wanting to drive on the autobahn, and it was every bit as cool as I thought it would be. We rented a BMW (a German car of course) with a nice engine, and we made sure to test it out on our way to Frankfurt. My only complaint about the autobahn was that, with everyone going so fast, I was slightly nervous whenever I was driving. Otherwise, it was a great drive and a great trip. Frankfurt didn't have quite as much to see as Berlin, but it was one of the most beautiful cities I have ever seen.



A few months into my stay in Hamburg, my buddy Henning approached me with the idea of going to visit his friend Michael in Deggendorf, a town just outside of Munich, on a weekend when we had a school holiday. I thought it was a great idea, because I really wanted to experience Bavarian culture while I was in Germany. We left Hamburg in Henning's Mercedes (Henning used to work for the company, so he got a good deal on the car), and we arrived in Deggendorf about eight hours later. Since I had arrived to Germany I had only been in large cities (Hamburg and Berlin), so it was a really nice change of pace to go to a small town. I had also had many ideas about Bavaria before I arrived (Don't worry, I did not believe that everyone wears leather pants and plays the accordion), so I was eager to experience the culture in Deggendorf. The first thing I realized was that I could understand nearly none of what the locals said there. I asked Henning about it, and he said not to worry, because he understood little more than I could. I did, however, learn some Bavarian greetings and phrases with the help of some of Michael's roommates. One of the roommates also made me very happy by allowing me to wear his leather pants (Bavarian people don't wear leather pants every day, but most of them do own a pair). While in Deggendorf I also got to enjoy a German-style barbeque, see most of the town, and go to a Biergarten, or beer garden. I was told that, when in Bavaria, I had to make sure to get to a beer garden, and it didn't disappoint. There is something very therapeutic about sitting under the sun with some good friends and sipping some quality beer. On the final day of our trip we took the train one hour to visit Munich. While in Munich, I realized that whenever I think of something typically German, I think of something you would find in Bavaria. The houses all have that German-looking architecture, and the old buildings and churches have that old gothic look to them. Really, Munich just seemed to be an older city than the other German cities I had visited. One of the highlights of the trip was our visit to the Hofbräuhaus. It was a large, dark beer hall with many long tables full of Germans and, more especially, tourists (I saw more Americans here than anywhere else during my stay in Germany). Everyone was sipping beer from large liter glasses while listening to Bavarian folk music being played by the leather pants-clad band at the end of the hall. The other highlights of our trip included seeing the BMW headquarters, a new building shaped like an automobile engine cylinder, and the Munich Olympic facilities. Despite being over thirty years old, the facilities were in great shape, and they were rather interesting to see.

Munich was a very old city, but on my last trip I saw some very old things. When we found out that the Champions League Soccer Finals were going to be in Rome, some of my friends and I decided that it would be a great time to visit the city, so we booked tickets with Ryan air (the cheapest way to travel) and flew down for the weekend of the match. Our first experience in Rome was trying to find the hostel that we had booked, which proved to be quite a challenge. There were no directions given for the hostel, only an address, and when we finally did find where it was supposed to be, there was no sign for the hostel. After a few hours of deliberation, we realized that the desk for the hostel was at the top of a building near the given address. When we made it to the desk, the attendant took us back down to the street, down a few blocks, into another unmarked door, up some flights of stairs, into another unmarked door, and, finally, into our room. The room was not nice by any means, but it was worth the dirt-cheap price that we had paid for it. We didn't mind though, because we spent very little time in the room. Our first stop was the Vatican. The lines were massive to enter, but we found a good deal with a knowledgeable tour guide who already had tickets, so we were able to save a few hours by skipping the lines. We did pay a little extra for that tour, but it was well worth it. The Vatican was amazing, with the Sistine Chapel, all of the famous works by Raphael and Michelangelo, the hordes of statues and paintings from ancient Greece and Rome, and especially St. Peter's Basilica. Just to tour the Vatican took almost an entire day. And it didn't stop there. The next day we saw the ancient coliseum, the old Roman ruins, and the soccer stadium right before the big game. There was no way we were getting into the stadium (the cheapest tickets were one thousand Euros), but just being there was enough. There is a reason that alcohol sales were banned in the city during the day of the game. The crowds were huge, loud, and rowdy. We met plenty of people and joined the festivities. It was an amazing trip finished off with some fun.



When I returned to Hamburg from this last trip, I returned to a place where I felt secure. Hamburg had begun to feel like home to me. The streets, the train, the trees, and the smell had all become familiar to me. I even miss it a little as I

write about it. When I think back on my experience studying in Hamburg, I think of a great many things: my friends, learning German, deciphering and learning Engineering, the Hamburg harbor, and the even the U-bahn that I rode every day. After all of that I am certain of one thing: it was the greatest semester I have ever experienced.