

Report CalPoly exchange

Fall Quarter 2021

Hello fellow Americanophile! I went to CalPoly as a Master Student of Gebäudetechnik in my third semester. My quarter at CalPoly (they operate in quarters, not semesters) was from September 20th to December 12th, and my total stay in the US lasted from August 25th to January 7th. For me, the main reason for going to California was my desire to go abroad one last time before entering the full-time working world, and I have had fantastic experiences on previous exchanges so far. I initially planned to go to Australia, but exchange opportunities were scarce there and CalPoly seemed a good alternative. Now I can full-heartedly say, CalPoly turned out to be one of the best adventures of my life.

1. Before

The application was rather straight forward, yet time consuming. After gathering information about the different possibilities for my degree, I attended some online seminars by the HM and finalised my decision where to go. One written application incl. interview later, I was in! The most tedious process was setting up my CalPoly online account and the Visa process. CalPoly is very proactive in helping international students sort out their paperwork, but you can expect a lot of emailing back and forth, and even calling abroad. The Visa battle is also fought mainly online, here I advise to get started as early as possible. When in doubt, ask the other exchange students (HM usually offers to set up a WhatsApp group so students can exchange information). Snatching an appointment at the embassy was the hardest part of my entire application process because there were almost no appointments due to the ongoing pandemic. Nevertheless, there is plenty of help available and everyone ended up receiving their Visa in time.

The J1 student Visa for the US allows you to travel freely in the entire country, you can also leave and re-enter after doing some paperwork. Working is not allowed unless you do even more paperwork and find a job at CalPoly. Very interesting is the so-called 'grace period' which allows you to stay 30 days prior and after your quarter(s) with the purpose of sorting out your affairs, and it also creates an excellent opportunity to travel.

When it comes to finances, I received a partial scholarship by PROMOS (875€) and paid the rest from personal savings. My advice: Save up lots! California is very expensive with the current strength of the dollar (almost 1:1 in 2021) and with the US's rather unbridled capitalistic structures not much is subsidised for students, and you will have to pay for many things that you would expect to be free. You can work on campus to support your financial situation also; I will talk about this later.

It is worthwhile looking into getting a good insurance. CalPoly insures every incoming international student, but the coverage is rather thin, and I recommend getting a personal German insurance also, especially if you plan to travel or do sports.

Flying to the US is easy; there are regular flights to San Francisco or LA, both are about a four-hour drive away from San Luis Obispo (SLO). I flew with KLM to SF and had a short stop in Amsterdam.

2. Start

I arrived in SF 3 weeks before the quarter started and used my time to first explore SF by myself and then travel the state with a close Californian friend. If you travel solo, I recommend sightseeing in

the big cities as it's fairly easy to get around without a car. To get to SLO, there is a train from San Diego, LA and SF as far as I know, and Greyhound buses (the American FlixBus), too. If you live on campus you must schedule your arrival online anyway, otherwise I would recommend arriving at least 2 days prior to the start of classes.

Before arrival on campus, I suggest buying a prepaid SIM card for your phone. There are lots of providers, AT&T offers the best coverage, Telekom is cheaper. All bigger towns have stores where you can very easily buy a SIM card.

CalPoly offers a rich orientation package, starting with mandatory online seminars and then a voluntary WOW-week (week of welcome) which is mainly aimed at freshers (Ersties), but even as a postgrad student I did enjoy WOW, got to know the campus & SLO and made first friends that way.

Now let's talk classes. You pick your courses online before the start of the quarter, here it is important to find courses that a) get approved and recognised by the HM Prüfungskommission so you can make them count towards your degree, b) are actually taught in your quarter and c) do not interfere with each other on your schedule. This can be tricky, but the international centre is again very helpful here. I picked courses to cover the two classes I had left at HM and pushed my thesis to the next semester. The course load in my experience is not hard but time consuming. It is much more equally distributed over the 10 weeks of the quarter and finals week is much less stressful as in Munich.

Another important decision is where to live. There are two options. If you want to save time, pick CalPoly campus housing. Flats are sufficiently equipped and close to the classrooms but also very expensive (we are talking 1.500\$ per month). You live in flats of around 4 people (you have your own room) and CalPoly will match you with people of your gender and age, not your nationality though. If you want to save money, find private accommodation in SLO. Best way to find a place is Facebook groups (warning: it is extremely hard to find a good place though, many places ask for financial guarantors that have to be US nationals. The housing situation in SLO is bad. Start your search as early as possible!) I chose campus housing and was lucky enough to live with 3 fantastic girls, my age and transfer students who were new at CalPoly. We became very close friends. Living on campus also means there is always someone to talk to if you have a problem (so-called RAs, your residential advisors), but you are also under more surveillance than in a private accommodation.

3. During

I already knew public transport is bad in the US but I only realised what this means when I moved there. Yes, it is bad, even in SLO. There are only a few bus routes in town and buses are either very busy or very infrequent. CalPoly is built at the side of town into the hills, so the campus is also rather hilly. Biking is fine if you have at least 5 gears and enjoy cycling uphill. Don't buy a car unless you plan to stay for the entire year; parking on campus needs to be booked in advance for the entire year and is costly too. I found that the best way to get around is making friends with Americans who own cars (pretty much everybody who is not a fresher). If you live on campus you can walk to all your classes.

Groceries are also quite the adventure to buy, because the big supermarkets are not located close to campus. I always went shopping with my flatmates in their cars. There might be a bus, I honestly don't know. But I can definitely recommend shopping at Trader Joe's, there the food has an adequate quality and is still affordable. The average food quality is unfortunately not as good as in Germany, and prices are also higher. For emergency groceries there is a store on campus, but with

restricted selection and extortionate prices. There are also several food places on Campus (incl. Starbucks and Subway), but they are also rather expensive and not of the best quality.

Working on campus is allowed and possible. Apply early (before going abroad) via their website Handshake and maybe try to find a job that pays at least minimum wage (~\$14 per hour). Work and holiday times are extremely flexible which is convenient, so don't worry about not having any time left for activities. I worked for sports concessions and food trucks between 10 and 20 hours per week. The job was relaxed, and I got to see some great sports games and theatre shows in the Performing Arts Centre for free.

If you are planning to work, you will also need a bank account. For that, you should go with Bank of America as they have ATMs on campus. If work is not an option for you, do not bother getting a local bank account. Just have a Visa or Mastercard that does not charge fees when paying abroad.

And now, one of the most important topics: Free time. Make sure to join at least one club or university organisation to find local friends and explore a new hobby or have buddies to do one you know. There is a fair at the start of the quarter where all clubs advertise their activities. Whatever you are interested in, you will find a club for it. There is archery, horseback riding, surfing, drama, a-cappella (Pitch Perfect but in real life), American football, debating, big band, cheerleading, axe throwing etc. etc. the list goes on forever. The American college movies are not lying here.

I joined the infamous Ski club and the hiking club, and signed up for a wood working class at the Arts & Crafts Centre. All were great choices, and only the wood working was a binding sign up. I had a lot of fun going skiing and partying with Ski club (we went to Colorado in December), explored a few of the numerous hiking trails around SLO and built my own skateboard deck.

In general I hung out with my flatmates, neighbours, and friends from orientation mostly. We organised a trip to Joshua Tree national park for a weekend, which was a personal highlight of my exchange.

Travelling around California and beyond is a truly wonderful experience, exchange students should try to visit the different national parks in particular! It is also easy to connect to the other exchange students from Munich and other universities as the campus often offers activities especially for internationals. Just make sure you do not only stick to other Germans as you will end up talking a lot of German again and have a less authentic 'American experience', but this is obviously up to the individual.

The final 30 days after exam week are perfect for doing extensive travelling.

4. After

Looking back, my exchange quarter at CalPoly was the best choice I could have possibly made. American culture might seem very 'familiar' to Europe on first sight, but there are countless things I learnt and became more aware of by living in California. I now understand a lot more about the country, its rich nature, tricky politics and just how people think. As us Europeans have a very detailed image about the US in our heads, it is great to explore what is actually true about those stereotypes and what is either just wrong or never mentioned. My flatmates and I had countless hilarious conversations about quirky American or German / European things.

Studying the American side of my major has not only taught me new technical knowledge but also inversely things about the US itself and how different local conditions affect engineering practice. It gave me a new perspective which will certainly be advantageous in my future career. On top of this I was able to make valuable connections to professors and even potential employers. Professor – student – relationships are much friendlier and more personal in the US, so it is easier to establish

professional contacts. Furthermore, CalPoly is a very prestigious university in the US (pretty much one level below the Ivy league) and American people will be impressed if you tell them you studied there. If you think about working abroad someday, an exchange to CalPoly can be your steppingstone into the American or even international working world.

My final, personal tip is to not overload your schedule and leave time for extracurricular activities and travelling. As I said before, the courses are not too difficult but time consuming. Save up enough money before your trip. Try to make as many local friends as possible, because you will not be able to visit other exchange students in the US when everyone has left. Build your international network. And go explore! CalPoly has a million opportunities and it will never be boring!