



Cornell University

Ithaca, NY

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Fall Exchange 2015

CALS International Student Exchange Program



Table of Contents

Part I.....	1-3
Monthly Activity Log	1-3
Part II	4-8
General Exchange Information	4-8
Part III	9
Checklist.....	9
Part IV	10
Best Practices of Host University.....	10

Cornell University

Part I – Monthly Activity Log

August 2015

Class officially starts on August 25th but as exchange students we were asked to attend mandatory orientation that started on August 19th instead. The orientation events were very useful and I would highly recommend you to attend as many events as possible. I remember during the first event we were taken around the campus and Ithaca. At the dinner, they even arranged a casual dinner for all of us new exchange students to get together and meet for the very first time. Since class was starting within a week of our arrival, we were also arranged to meet with our major specific advisors to discuss about our class-related issues. The first week of arrival was definitely one of the busiest weeks of exchange – there were so many orientation events scheduled. While we were free to schedule which events to attend based on our own interests, there was a couple that was mandatory either because they were exchange/transfer specific ones.



Homecoming Fireworks

September 2015

There are several events and dates you would have to look out for and definitely would not want to miss including: ClubFest, Career Fair, Homecoming Weekend and Add/Drop Deadlines (this varies according to your school, so ask around just to make sure). ClubFest is where registered societies recruit new members and it was amazing! Societies in Cornell are very different in nature from Hong Kong. There are some societies that are very selective; when I joined Global China Connections (GCC), I was asked to submit a resume and go through three rounds of interviews before I was officially admitted. But I would strongly recommend you to join one of these selective societies because this is where I met my ‘family’ in Cornell who helped me settle down and build my network quickly. Homecoming Weekend is also one of those ‘welcome back’ events that include several performances (make sure you go see the fireworks!) and inauguration speeches. This year was special as Cornell welcomed their 13th President, Elizabeth Garrett. Amidst all of these

recreational events, do not forget to check out the career fair where you would have the opportunity to meet recruiters from top-notch firms.

Oh yes – before you go to Cornell there would already be send-off events prearranged by the Cornell Hong Kong Student Association (HKSA). Make sure you check them out on Facebook and ClubFest!



Cornell HKSA Fall Semester 2015

October 2015

Here's to the first break! Honestly speaking I was so relieved because I was overwhelmed by everything that has been going on over my first two months of exchange. The pace in Cornell is very quick and there's always something going on because it's very community-based (Ithaca itself is very small and isolated – in fact the students makeup half of the town's population). Since I wanted a very relaxed trip, I decided to spend my fall break in New York City (a must go for those who have never been), which was 4.5 bus hours away despite being already one of the closest cities to Ithaca. Fortunately there were a lot of bus options available with in-campus pickup and drop-off – Cornell itself also offers their own bus service known as Campus-to-Campus (C2C) with free Wi-Fi, but I decided to opt for another bus service known as Shortline (runs past midnight) for pricing reasons. I was relatively skeptical to try it out first after the bad reviews posted online, but it was nothing like described. In fact, when I came back late at night the driver offered to drop off the students right at the dorm since it was so cold. Speaking which – the temperate fluctuates a lot in Ithaca so be prepared – by October it started to get pretty cold already.

November 2015

November was the most stressful month throughout my exchange. I found that the general practice with Cornell courses is to have 2 prelim exams rather than 1 midterm exam. By now I had prelim exams, final exams and presentations to give so it was tiring. Students here are very hardworking and high achieving so while I was only an exchange student, I also ended up giving my very best too. Honestly, I was surprised by the level of details the students paid attention to – for one of my presentations, my team even tried to coordinate all our outfits together and the quality of paper in which we printed our reports in. I was glad that the November ended with another break – Thanksgiving! You would find that almost all students will go back home and for me, I stayed in Ithaca and spent thanksgiving with my friends. It was my first ‘All-American’ thanksgiving dinner and all I can say is be prepared for some very good turkey! There is also a traditional thanksgiving feast offered by the International Students and Scholars Office, and based on the reviews from the other exchange students – the food was amazing too.

December 2015

I got lucky that by now I was finished with the majority of my exams, in fact I only had two more exams. I finished abnormally early – the exam period was between 9-17th and I was already done by the 10th. However I ended up staying in Ithaca till the 20th because I wanted to meet with many of my friends first (it was very sad because as we realized, this farewell may be the last time we will ever see each other). I also ended up falling in love with Ithaca and I have to say Ithaca is one of the most gorgeous places I ever visited. I guess the only thing that made leaving better for me was the fact that I eventually had the chance to go back to my ‘once-home’ Canada and reunite with my brother who I have not seen in forever (my brother goes to the University of Toronto).

Till next time, Cornell! Thanks for the most amazing semester I had so far!



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Part II – General Exchange Information

Visa Procedures

You will be provided an 'I-20' or 'certificate of eligibility' to apply for a 'F-1' visa stamp from the US Consulate. Please keep this very safe – I would say this is one of the most important documents you would need throughout the exchange. I received mine very early on before going exchange (if I did not remember wrong, it should be mailed directly to your house at around May for fall exchange). As a Canadian, I did not have to apply for a visa because I was granted a stay in the US for up to 6 months at the time of entry. But this meant that I had pay SEVIS online myself first and bring the receipt documents.

To make things a bit clearer, here's what I brought to the customs:

- Proof of identify and citizenship (a Canadian passport)
- Original I-20 Certificate
- SEVIS Receipt

*Sometimes when you would find that the immigration websites also require a proof that you have the funds to pay for the school you plan to attend. Cornell has this part covered because they attach this alongside with the I-20 since our tuition fees are waived. But you do have to be prepared in providing financial documents (meaning you need a bank to issue a formal document, certifying you have a certain balance in your account – I had to pay to get mine) to fill in the Declaration of Finances form.

Orientation Activities

There is mandatory orientation designed exclusively for exchange students (for fall exchange – I was expected to arrive by August 19 when classes began on August 25). I personally found the orientations very useful because they help you settle down fast – teaching you how to get around the town, campus and register for classes.

*You can also request for an exchange buddy to assist you with your transition to Cornell but remember to email your exchange advisor well in advance.

Accommodations

I was told that on-campus housing was not offered for visiting exchange students but after talking to other exchange students when I arrived I realized that for anyone who applied basically got an offer (I wish I knew because looking for off-campus housing was very

difficult since sublets often run for 1 year rather than 1 semester). I do know there are several platforms to look for off-campus housing – Facebook, Yorango or Craigslist, but you have to start looking fast! Most students already start looking a semester early. I faced difficulty for mine so I reached out to my advisor who coincidentally was able to offer me housing since some students dropped their offer in the last minute.

*I would strongly advise you to live at Collegetown or around there (to my knowledge Dryden, Seneca, and Quarry streets are quite close) if you are considering off-campus housing. It's extremely convenient and saves you the pain of commuting everywhere.

Course Registration

Course registration differs according to your major and its school requirement. I was placed in Applied Economics and Management under the College School of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS), which did not have any particular requirements except – I was free to take any courses from other schools too. The best thing about the courses in Cornell is that they are very similar to the ones in HKUST; the majority of the courses are 3-4 credits and they even have exactly same course registration system (my student center). In order to maintain your visa status, you must take 12 credits per semester and the maximum credit load is 18 credits. The advisors usually recommend registering for approximately 14 credits but there is an add-drop period for you to try out different courses – the drop deadlines goes as far as October!

*Since we are only allowed to register for courses after degree-seeking Cornell students, you would find that most of the courses you had in mind are closed and already full by the time of enrolment. I was very worried but later realized that when I was arrived to Cornell in person and talked to my professors about my situation, most of them were able to manually add me in.

Teaching & Assessment Methods

After taking several courses in Cornell, I realized that the teaching pace there is very fast and with higher-level electives, basic knowledge is expected (they will not spend time going through introductory knowledge – I found this part relatively difficult because the course materials covered in the introductory classes at Cornell differed a lot from HKUST's). They also stress a lot on class interaction, so professors do expect you to contribute to class discussions and often weight approximately 10% on your participation (I would strongly suggest this too because you get a lot more out of the classes).

*Always reach out to your professors if you are in doubt, I faced a lot difficult deciding on which finance courses to take and my professors recommended me to take Investments that turned out to be my favorite course! In addition, there are different terms used in Cornell,

the biggest difference is that they refer prelim as midterms. Be prepared – most courses ask for 2 prelims exams.

Sports & Recreation Facilities

There's a lot of sports and recreation facilities available in Cornell, some you won't even have access to normally in Hong Kong so try to make the best out of it. A great way to try out these facilities as well as to make new friends is to take a PE course. Course include hiking, canoeing, kayaking, climbing, skiing, snowshoeing, caving, teambuilding, wilderness first aid and at times they may even open Fall/Spring break trips depending on the semester.

*If you are interested in PE courses, make sure you keep track of the add-drop deadlines because they are slightly different from the regular academic courses. Certain PE courses also require a course fee.

Cost/Expenses

Unfortunately the living expenses are quite high in Cornell, especially because its located in such an isolated place so there isn't much alternative too. As a part of processing your I-20, you would get an idea of how much to spend because you are expected to show your financial status but here's a rough estimation given by my exchange advisor in US dollars:

- US Visa Stamp – SEVIS Registration Fees - \$200
- Mandatory Student Activity Fee - \$118
- Off-campus Housing – approx. \$500-1,000/month
- Food – approx. \$200-400/month
- Books – approx. \$435 per semester (*Books are ridiculously expensive in the US. I found that a textbook usually cost around \$200/course – fortunately you could always save by borrowing from libraries/bookstore or reselling back to the bookstore after you used them)
- Health Insurance - \$1000/semester (*This cannot be waived)
- Local Transportation in Ithaca – Free (*But this only comes with your student ID, so collect it early and don't lose it!)

*The above costs are only the BASIC costs. You would definitely spend more especially if you are looking to travel around the US while you are there. You would also be billed for all the university-related expenses online through Cornell's Office of Bursar (bursar's just another word for finance) – it was confusing at first but once you receive your first bill through email, you will understand how the system works.

Social Clubs & Networking Opportunities

When you arrive to Cornell, you would find that there's plenty of networking opportunities available. The first one comes alongside with the mandatory orientation because you can

meet the other exchange students (they also help you meet the students who are placed in the same major as you because you will end up seeing them a lot!). As I mentioned before, you could then find the other social clubs through ClubFest when they do member recruitment, so make sure you mark down that important date and go!

Health & Safety

There is very strict health requirements prior attending Cornell. You would be expected to go through a specific health check-up; the university sets the requirements forward and you have to get a health practitioner to follow through and send the formal document (*I found the doctors in HKUST Clinic to carry this out but a fee of HKD\$200 was expected for the formal documents).

Generally because Ithaca is home to such a friendly and small community; you would find yourself very safe all the time. Cornell also has their own police patrolling the university at all times who sends weekly updates on the safety tips and contacts you can reach out to when you feel unsafe.

Food

Ithaca is very small in comparison to Hong Kong so there are relatively limited food options available. I usually find myself eating in-campus; they have several cafeterias and if you are keen in cooking your own food, you could always access the supermarket called Wegmans (they have literally everything), Wal-Mart's or even Target.

Transportation

Local transportation is free provided you have your student ID (*remember to collect it as it saves you a lot of money!). I found the cheapest way to travel around the US from Ithaca is by taking the buses – I rode the shortline a lot (*a round trip back and forth from New York City is around USD\$90), but there's a lot of options available for you to compare prices with. Of course, you could also rent a car (*carpooling is quite popular) if you have a license to drive with.

Climate

The weather in Ithaca fluctuates a lot; not just within the day but also between days, so the best advice I could give is to bring many layers. From what I heard from other students, the fall semester I went was unusually warm because they said that the fall semester before I came, it snowed so heavily that it piled up their hips. The first month I arrived, it was practically as hot as the Hong Kong's summers but by mid-September it started to get noticeably colder (*started wearing a jacket) and remained at around single digit for October, November and December. (*it snowed for a day in October and didn't snow

anymore until December).

*Overall, it's difficult to forecast how the climate's going to be... Oh and it rains A LOT in Cornell, so bring an umbrella!

Communication

Prior in going to Cornell, the primary method of communication is through email and make sure you do check this regularly because there's going to be a lot of information sent to you! Since there is quite a lot of paperwork to sort out before going, make sure to check your mailbox too! (*Important documents such as your I-20 will be mailed to you). In addition, they have a platform set up for students to ask questions as "Chatter" and eventually a Facebook group page for exchange students exclusively.

*Your NetID (i.e. username) is key for communication so that people can identify who you are.

Cautionary Measures

I personally felt overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork I had to sort out – so please carefully read through all the information sent to your email and mail. I didn't know that I was expected to fill in an online application in order to formally become their exchange students and that process took a long time because there were several requirements to fulfill including the following:

- Declaration of Finances Form (2R)
- 2 Letters of References
- Personal Statement
- Recent Transcripts
- Official score of recognized tests such as TOEFL or IELTS; you may also be subjected to a phone interview (I was waived but I wasn't sure for what reason. I'm assuming that it was either because I have done GCSE First English, IB English or my Canadian nationality.
- Copy of Passport

Cornell University

Part III – Checklist

	Athletic Sneakers
	Flip-flops
	Winter Boots
	Formal Outfit (including a suit, this would be very useful for presentations and career fairs)
	Everyday Outfits (including summer and winter appropriate ones, but you may want bring more winter clothes – it gets cold fast!)
	Gloves
	Scarf
	Hat
	Winter Coat
	Jacket (a light one and one for colder)
	Toiletries
	Bedsheets
	Blankets
	Camera
	Cellphone (I used AT&T for my SIM card – offers a great monthly plan)
	Laptop (you can actually borrow a laptop up to 2 weeks in Cornell)
	Chargers (remember to bring the adapters for each charger)
	USB Cables
	Medical Supplies
	Umbrella
	***Photocopies of passports and student visas (a very useful tip I received, just in case you lose it, at least you have a copy)

Overall, I wouldn't be too worried if you have forgotten to bring anything because usually you can buy whatever you forgot in Wal-Mart or Target.

Cornell University

Part IV – Best Practices of Host University

There's always something happening in Cornell because there's so much to offer, so try to make the most out of everything there while you are there. In fact I was so preoccupied in Cornell that I did not do much travelling because I didn't want to miss out on anything happening on-campus. I fell in love with Cornell's Career Services immediately – there's recruitment events nearly every week, Career fair offered right in the beginning of the semester and advisors that are there to help you with resume critique. You would also have access to a lot of resources even after you are gone since the NetID given to you follows you even after you leave and the friendships you build that will last for a lifetime.



Proud to be part of... Global China Connections (GCC) Cornell Chapter Fall 2015

So while there is a lot to prepare for, there is also a lot to look forward to. Good luck and be prepared for the most amazing time of your life - I miss it already!