1. **Obtaining a visa/residence permit:** In Germany, residence permits (*Aufenthaltstitel*) are obtained after arrival, but it’s best to familiarize yourself with the process before departure from the US because it can get a little confusing. The residence permit is a long term process and not something that you will have to worry about immediately after arrival, but registering with your local *Bezirksamt* is something you have to take care of right away:

Within your first **ten days** in Berlin: **BEZIRKSAMT REGISTRATION**
- Search “Anmeldung bei der Meldbehörde Allgemeine Hinweise Berlin” online
  - Click on the first link (it should be a PDF file)
- Print and fill-out the form as best you can (they will help you at the office if you have blank spaces)
- Bring the form, your passport, and your patience to your local *Bezirksamt* (based on what neighborhood you live in – mine, for example, was at Rathaus Steglitz because I lived in Steglitz)
  - Check the opening hours before you go as they can sometimes be irregular
  - You will likely have to wait in a line to get a number, and after that it might be a few hours before your number is called so bring a book/music for the wait!

Within **three months** of your arrival: **RESIDENCE PERMIT**
- This one is a bit more complicated, and you have two choices for how to go about completing it. You can take matters into your own hands and go to the *Auslandsbehörde* of the *Landesamt für Bürger und Ordnungsangelegenheiten* yourself with all of the necessary documents, but you may have to wait all day and pay fees. Your other option is to let the helpful people at the *Akademisches Auslandsamt* take care of it for you, which is what I did. The upside: no fees, but the downside: you have to give up your passport for a few weeks. In theory I think this is the better option, but I actually had a traumatic experience with this whole process (if you’re interested in the story, read about it here: [http://puschingberlin.tumblr.com/post/14560741111/yesterday-proved-to-be-both-a-wonderful-and](http://puschingberlin.tumblr.com/post/14560741111/yesterday-proved-to-be-both-a-wonderful-and))
- Regardless of which option you choose, you’ll need to compile all of the things on this list:
  - The visa application form (look for the *Aufenthaltstitel-Erteilung* form at [http://www.berlin.de/laboformulare/formularserver.php](http://www.berlin.de/laboformulare/formularserver.php))
  - Signed and stamped *Anmeldung Formular* from the *Bezirksamt*
- **Passport**
- **Proof of health insurance** (In your case the CISI health insurance printout from the UMN and the health insurance exemption form that the Akademisches Auslandsamt will tell you how to obtain upon your first visit)
- **Proof of financial support** (your letter from the FU detailing your stipend)
- **Proof of registration at the university** (you will get a stack of blue papers after matriculating at the FU, among which is your Semester Ticket for the public transportation and therefore something you will always carry with you – so just make sure you bring it along.)
- **Two biometric passport photos** (I actually only needed one…I used a photobooth at an S-Bahn station and it was quick and easy)

2. **Materials:** During the summer before your year abroad, the FU will send you some important forms and information in the mail, so make sure that the address you give the Learning Abroad Center is a permanent one. One of the first tasks to complete is setting up an account with Distributed Campus, an online portal that is filled with helpful information about everything from registration to housing to events going on in Berlin. It’s a really nice resource and I suggest getting in the habit of checking it every few weeks for updates. You will receive information about Distributed Campus in the mail from the FU, along with a letter of admission and information about student housing and orientation. It is very important that you take the time to read and understand all of these materials AND take them with you to Berlin.

3. **Arrival:** There is no airport pick-up provided as this is a relatively independent program, but with Berlin’s vast network of public transportation getting around is easy. It would be smart to map out your route from the airport on www.bvg.de before leaving the U.S., because navigating the buses and trains can be challenging at first. You’ll have to buy a single AB transit ticket for 2.30 Euros for this first trip because you won’t have your Semester Ticket for public transportation from the FU yet. There are machines at every S- and U-Bahn station, and you can buy bus tickets as you board the bus. Before leaving the U.S. I highly recommend changing some money into Euros so that you have one less thing to worry about when you first arrive – it was great to be able to buy food at the airport, groceries, etc. during my first few days with this money.

4. **Health issues:** I did not have any health issues while abroad (and I hope that you don’t either!), but if I did I am confident that the German medical system would have been more than adequate at helping me get better. For most of your minor health concerns, the many local pharmacies (*Apotheke*) will be more than
sufficient – the pharmacists are very knowledgeable and will help you find what you need.

**Important:** The CISI health insurance you will receive as part of the Scholarship Exchange Program is all you will need while abroad. You do not have to buy additional German health insurance, but you *do* need a health insurance exemption form. The tricky part is that this exemption form is filled out by an employee who is trying to sell you German health insurance. The company’s name is AOK, and there is an office located in the main building of the FU (*Silberlaube*). The salesperson might be a little pushy in telling you that what you have isn’t good enough, but if you show them the CISI insurance card and kindly insist that all you want is the exemption form, he/she will eventually give in. If you have questions about the process once you’re abroad, the people at the *Akademisches Auslandsamt* will be your best resource.

5. **Money Matters:** Shortly after arriving in Berlin, I opened a bank account with “Berliner Sparkasse” and my stipend was deposited there each month. I highly recommend opening up a German bank account instead of constantly being charged fees to get money out of your American bank account. I really enjoyed “Berliner Sparkasse” – the representative who helped me set up my account was helpful and patient, and I received a debit card (*Kontocard*) in the mail within a few weeks. I’ve also heard good things about “Deutsche Bank”, and because both of these banks have ATMs all around the city, they are both great options.

I brought about 350 Euros with me upon arriving in Berlin, and it was very nice to be able to buy some essential items and not have to worry about finding a low-fee ATM or a money exchange counter. Make sure you inform your American bank that you will be going abroad for so long, as they might place a block on your cards if you don’t.

You will not find checks in Germany. Instead, most payments (namely rent) are done by bank transfers. You receive the bank information of who you need to pay and transfer the money from your account using a simple form (that looks sort of like a check). I was fortunate enough to never have to deal with bank transfers because I sublet my apartment and paid in cash each month, but it doesn’t seem to be too difficult to adjust to.
6. Average Monthly Budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Amount (in Euro)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rent</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>I sublet a very nice one-bedroom apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilities</td>
<td>Included in rent</td>
<td>From what I could gather, utilities are usually fairly inexpensive if they’re not included in the rent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>This is obviously dependent on the person, but it’s fairly easy to maintain a low food budget in Berlin. Foods like fruits, veggies, and fresh bread are often much more affordable in Berlin than in the States, and the Mensa (cafeteria) at the FU is cheap, hot, and at times very convenient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transportation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Your “Semester Ticket” will cover all public transportation (valid Oct. 1st), but I recommend also buying a cheap bike for a onetime cost of about 50 Euro!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entertainment</td>
<td>50-75</td>
<td>Highly subjective – Berlin is a cheap city, but if you go out to eat or to bars/clubs quite frequently, the cost will naturally be higher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>books (per term)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Because I took two English Lit classes at the FU, I had to buy hard-copies of novels, but most classes will make all of the material available online, leaving it up to you to print it. Sometimes a course will require you to purchase a Reader from a local print shop with all of the course material, but the price is (thankfully) much lower than the cost of textbooks at the UMN.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>photocopiers/school supplies (per term)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>~400 Euro/month</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. University/Campus: It won’t take long for you to realize that the FU and the UMN campuses are pretty different. There aren’t rows of huge, stoic buildings like the Mall area of the U, and the buildings are spread out amongst residential houses and apartments (for example, the Akademisches Auslandsamt – the Office for International Students – is located in a converted house). You will likely have the majority of your classes in the large main building on campus, called the Silberlaube. In this building you will also find a large computer lab, cafeteria (Mensa), a few libraries, and the offices of many different subjects (including the foreign language office). The Akademisches Auslandsamt (Address: Brümmerstr. 52) is the first place on campus that you’ll need to visit, but beware of the limited office hours! On most days they are only open for three or four hours.
I can fully recommend finding a Tandem language partner soon after your arrival in Berlin. It’s a great way to practice your German skills with someone who also wants to better their English skills, and you’ll likely make a great friend in the process. You can fill out a form online and the Sprachenzentrum will pair you up with someone who seems compatible in interests and skill level. Here’s the link to the form: [http://www.sprachenzentrum.fu-berlin.de/slz/tandem/fragebogen/index.html](http://www.sprachenzentrum.fu-berlin.de/slz/tandem/fragebogen/index.html)

I can also fully recommend taking sport classes through the Hochschulsport program. It is a fantastic way to make German friends who obviously have at least one shared interest with you – I met one of my closest friends in my swing dance class during winter semester. You do need to pay extra for these courses, but the prices are all very reasonable in my opinion. I recommend going to the office to register instead of trying to do it online (the website is pretty glitchy), and be aware that the fun courses fill up quickly! Here’s the link to the main website: [https://www.hs-sport.fu-berlin.de/](https://www.hs-sport.fu-berlin.de/)

8. **University Calendar:** You will probably want to arrive in Berlin before October 1st in order to attend the orientation days and prepare for the start of the winter semester’s lecture period (Vorlesungszeit) on October 15th – there are quite a few tasks to complete and it’s best to give yourself a few weeks. There is a two week break for Christmas and a two month break in between the winter and summer semesters. You may have to write some long final papers (Hausarbeit) or study for final exams during this chunk of time, but you’ll likely have time to do quite a bit of traveling! Winter semester runs mid-October to mid-February, and summer semester begins mid-April and goes until mid-July. I stayed in Berlin until the start of August and I recommend you also give yourself some time to travel, say your goodbyes, and wrap up your schoolwork before flying back to the States.

9. **Academic Issues:** As UMN students, we are used to carefully selecting our classes for the next semester and registering for them as soon as our time slot opens, but this is certainly not the case at the FU. You will choose most of your classes during the orientation days the week before classes start. The credits are called “ETCS” and 10 ECTS are worth 5 U.S. credits. You have to register for at least 13 U.S. credits, or 26 ECTS per semester.

As an international student, you have the chance to take “Erasmus” courses with other international students. These courses deal with many aspects of German history and culture. You will receive a booklet which describes these courses during orientation, and I definitely recommend taking at least one Erasmus course each semester. For your other courses, you will have to try to use the FU’s online
registration system, “Campus Management”. It is unbelievably confusing and glitchy, so don’t think twice about asking for help at the Akademisches Auslandsamt if you can’t figure it out on your own. Often times a professor won’t even make you register with Campus Management – just tell them you’re an international student and you’re often good to go. At the end of each semester you will receive your grades for each course in the form of a Schein – a small certificate that has the course info, your grade, and an official university stamp and signature on it. Bring this home with you, along with all of the important course assignments and materials, because you will need them in order to petition for transfer credit upon your return to Minneapolis. Keep in touch with your UMN advisors throughout your time abroad so that you know you’re staying on track with your studies.

The course list for the whole university can be found online at: www.fu-berlin.de/vv and generally speaking, all courses are open to direct-exchange students.

This was my course load:

Winter Semester:
- Kulturelle Orientierung in Berlin (Erasmus course)
  - 10 ECTS
- Berlin in der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur (Erasmus course)
  - 5 ECTS
- German language course – level B1.2
  - 6 ECTS
- The African-American Novel at the Mid-Century (English Lit course)
  - 5 ECTS
- Sport course: Swing Dance

Summer Semester:
- Rückblick auf die DDR im Film (Erasmus course)
  - 10 ECTS
- German language course – level B2.1
  - 6 ECTS
- Deutsch als Zweitsprache (Education Sciences course)
  - Audit (I took it just for the experience, not for credit)
- American Detective Fiction (English Lit course)
  - 5 ECTS
• Sport courses: Jazz-Modern Dance and Outdoor Rock-climbing

One last side-note about classes at the FU that I wish someone had told me: if a class is scheduled from 10am to noon, that class will actually start 15 minutes later and end 15 minutes earlier than the scheduled time (so from 10:15am to 11:45am). During the first week I was constantly 15-20 minutes early for class and puzzled by why they always ended early 😊

10. Language Courses: There is an intensive language pre-session offered at the FU, but I did not participate. The fee is 500 Euro for a month-long course in September. More information can be found here: [http://www.sprachenzentrum.fu-berlin.de/sprachangebot/deutsch/vorkurs_deutsch](http://www.sprachenzentrum.fu-berlin.de/sprachangebot/deutsch/vorkurs_deutsch)

I really enjoyed the language courses I took at the FU – the classes are relatively small and I made many international friends while bettering my grammar and speaking skills significantly. The courses focus on a specific theme, which keeps things interesting, and my instructors were fantastic. In order to take any language courses at the FU, you have to take a placement test during the orientation days – this won’t be a hard task since you’re sort of herded like cattle from one task to the next during orientation ;)

11. Volunteer/Internships: I had wanted to find an internship in a local German classroom during my summer semester, but it proved to be more difficult than I anticipated (I found out that it was only possible during the semester break). If you are interested in volunteering or finding an internship, I recommend contacting the _Akademisches Auslandsamt_ for further information.

12. Housing: You will have two main options in terms of housing: university housing or independent housing. I opted for independent housing and sublet a very nice one-bedroom apartment from a former German Scholarship Exchange Program student (who studies in Trier and didn’t want to give up his Berlin apartment), and it was a really great decision. The apartment was fully furnished and I paid my rent each month in cash. I lived in Steglitz and was only a short bike-ride away from the university and a short train-ride away from the center of the city. I was very lucky to stumble upon this living situation, however – I have heard that finding a place to live in Berlin can be a bit of a challenge. If you do choose this option, I suggest searching for a place in a WG (an apartment shared with multiple people, each with their own bedroom but with a shared kitchen/bathroom) on this website: [www.wg-gesucht.de](http://www.wg-gesucht.de). The housemates will want to meet you, and they usually get so many requests that they can be picky about
who they want to live with (hence, the challenge). Another challenge is the fact that you may end up with a completely unfurnished room and have to buy quite a lot right when you arrive. If you choose to find a place independently, I suggest checking into a hostel or arranging to stay with a friend for the first few days so that you have time to find a permanent place. Your other option is to choose the university housing and live in a pre-arranged WG in the “Studentendorf Schlachtensee”. You will likely share an apartment with about 6 people and pay about 250 Euros a month. The upside is that you will avoid the grueling process of searching for an apartment independently and that you will be fairly close to the FU campus. The downside is that you will be very far away from the livelier parts of Berlin and you will be living among other international students instead of with Germans. You will receive information about the university housing in the mail during the summer. You will likely pay your rent with the bank transfers I mentioned earlier.

13. Eating & Entertainment: I almost always cooked for myself in my apartment. Groceries were very affordable and I enjoyed experimenting with different recipes during my downtime 😊. When I was on the FU campus all day I would eat at the cafeteria (Mensa), which I found to be tastier and cheaper than the UMN cafeterias. I also definitely recommend taking advantage of Berlin’s multiculturalism by visiting some of the many culturally diverse restaurants throughout Berlin. I was obsessed with an Indian restaurant called “Nirwana” that was just a few blocks away from my apartment, and I also tried Egyptian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Turkish, and Italian restaurants that were all fantastic.

Berlin has an exciting and ever-changing nightlife, especially in the more “hip” neighborhoods like Kreuzberg and Prenzlauer Berg. I had a blast checking out the crazy techno scene and walked out of the clubs to find that the sun was shining on multiple occasions. I also enjoyed dancing salsa nearly every weekend with a friend I met in my swing dance class (See!? You really need to try the sport courses!). There really is something for everyone in Berlin, and I suggest that you live it up while you’re here!

14. Transportation: You will see that you have many great options for getting around Berlin, which is really wonderful. As a student at the FU, you will have a “Semester Ticket” for all public transportation in the city - that means the U-Bahn, S-Bahn, Strassenbahn, busses, and the Regionalbahn (within the city limits). There’s really no need to ever pay for a taxi because the trains run all night on the weekends – it’s really a huge benefit to have this transportation pass! The website is www.bvg.de and they have a great trip-planner that I used all of the time. In
addition to public transportation, I was lucky enough to inherit a bike from a former Scholarship Exchange Program student and I used it nearly every day in the fall, spring, and summer. Berlin is remarkably flat and bike-friendly, so I highly recommend buying a used bike for under 50 Euros at a street market like Flohmarkt am Mauerpark. It’s definitely worth the expense, even if it’s only used once for a nice, long bike-ride through Grünwald or near Schlachtensee.

15. Communication: Communicating with friends and family back home is easier than ever nowadays, and the modes of connection are seemingly endless. For video-calling I used Skype, and I was actually happy when my parents set up Facebook accounts because it was another way for me to stay connected with them. I also recommend taking advantage of Google Voice – you just need a gmail account to set it up and you can send text messages to US phones for free! It really comes in handy from time to time. Here’s the link: http://www.google.com/googlevoice/about.html

I also recommend setting up the UMN Virtual Private Network (VPN). When you are connected to it you can use websites like Hulu and Pandora (which are normally unavailable in Germany) because your computer thinks you’re in Minneapolis! Here’s the link: http://www.oit.umn.edu/vpn/

In terms of local communication, I suggest buying a cheap pay-as-you-go cell phone once you’re here. Mine was 15 Euros and I think I used about 60 Euros worth of minutes in the whole ten months. You can find huge bins of them at Media Markt, but make sure you bring your Anmeldung certificate with you because you sometimes need to prove that you have a permanent address. I used the company “O2” and was totally satisfied with it.

16. Background information on country/city: In my opinion, Berlin is a city that is easy to fall in love with and hard to leave. Its multiculturalism and its complex history make it a city unique in Germany and in the world as a whole. You will meet many different kinds of people here, try all sorts of food, and learn so much.

In terms of weather, you can expect it to be similar to Minneapolis but with a temperature range of about 15 degrees less – winters aren’t so bitter-cold and summer temperatures hover around 75 degrees. You will definitely still want a winter coat and gloves, though! Don’t be disheartened by the constant overcast in the wintertime, because spring and summer are well worth the wait! The city really comes alive when the flowers start to bloom 😊
17. **Safety:** I never felt that my safety was threatened in Berlin. Compared to Paris or Rome, Berlin is (in my opinion) a much safer city. You won’t really have to worry about pickpockets either, but you should obviously still keep track of your valuables while in public spaces. In general, the safety precautions you take in Minneapolis will be adequate for Berlin as well.

18. **Packing:** I packed about two weeks worth of everyday clothes, one formal outfit, and enough toiletries to last me a few weeks (it was nice to continue using some familiar products from home while I adjusted to my new life). I highly recommend trying very hard not to over-pack. I promise you, it is not worth the headache to bring two checked bags over here. You will definitely buy at least a few items when you’re here and if you already have two suitcases filled with stuff from home, it will be an even bigger hassle to figure out a way to bring it all back with you. A few items not to forget: your passport, outlet adapter(s), and chargers (for your MP3 player, laptop, etc). I did not ship anything home because it is pretty expensive and for me it wasn’t necessary. If I have one broad-range tip for packing for such a long term trip like this, it is simply “don’t over think it”. Almost anything you forget to bring can be replaced, and the more you think about packing, the more crap you are likely to throw into that suitcase as you think of a hypothetical situation in which it might be useful. Resist!!

19. **Resources:** As I mentioned already, the Distributed Campus website is a great resource for international students in Berlin, and you will likely find answers to all of your questions there. The *Akademisches Auslandsamt* is another great resource, but their limited hours make them a bit less accessible. Not to toot my own horn, but this final report will also be very useful, especially during your first few weeks, so I recommend printing out a copy or saving it on your computer. Sarah Tschida from the Learning Abroad Center is also a great resource – if you have questions pre-departure, she’d be happy to help you out!

I know this all seems a bit overwhelming – ten pages of advice and things to remember – but I can tell you from my own experience that things always have a way of working themselves out. Your first few weeks will be chaotic as you mumble sentences of broken German to impatient government employees and try to make sense of the public transit map, but it will soon fall into a nice rhythm once your classes begin.

20. **Overall Assessment:** This experience in Berlin significantly enriched my life both academically and personally, and I feel unbelievably fortunate to have had the opportunity to participate in this program. My German language skills
skyrocketed, I picked up an awesome “berlinische” accent, I travelled all around Europe, and I made friends that I can’t wait to visit in the future. I feel all the more confident in my career choice as a German teacher, and I hope to take advantage of another long-term stay in Germany very soon! Studying abroad really changes a person for the better, and I wish the best for you in your own adventures in the incredible city of Berlin! Viel Spaß!