

Portland State University

Wintersemester 2018/2019 and Summersemester 2019

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When the planning for the year abroad approached, I did not have a clear vision in mind on where to go. Yet, especially talking to my teachers, students who have already been abroad, as well as reading the testimonials directed me to the Portland State University in Oregon. Until then, I had no association with Oregon or Portland at all. After some research however, I thought that a good university with many classes in the field of environmental sciences, a progressive and sustainable city close to the pacific and the mountains sounded suitable for me. It seemed like the perfect blend of academic opportunities in a dynamic environment where I could also follow my interest in outdoor sports.

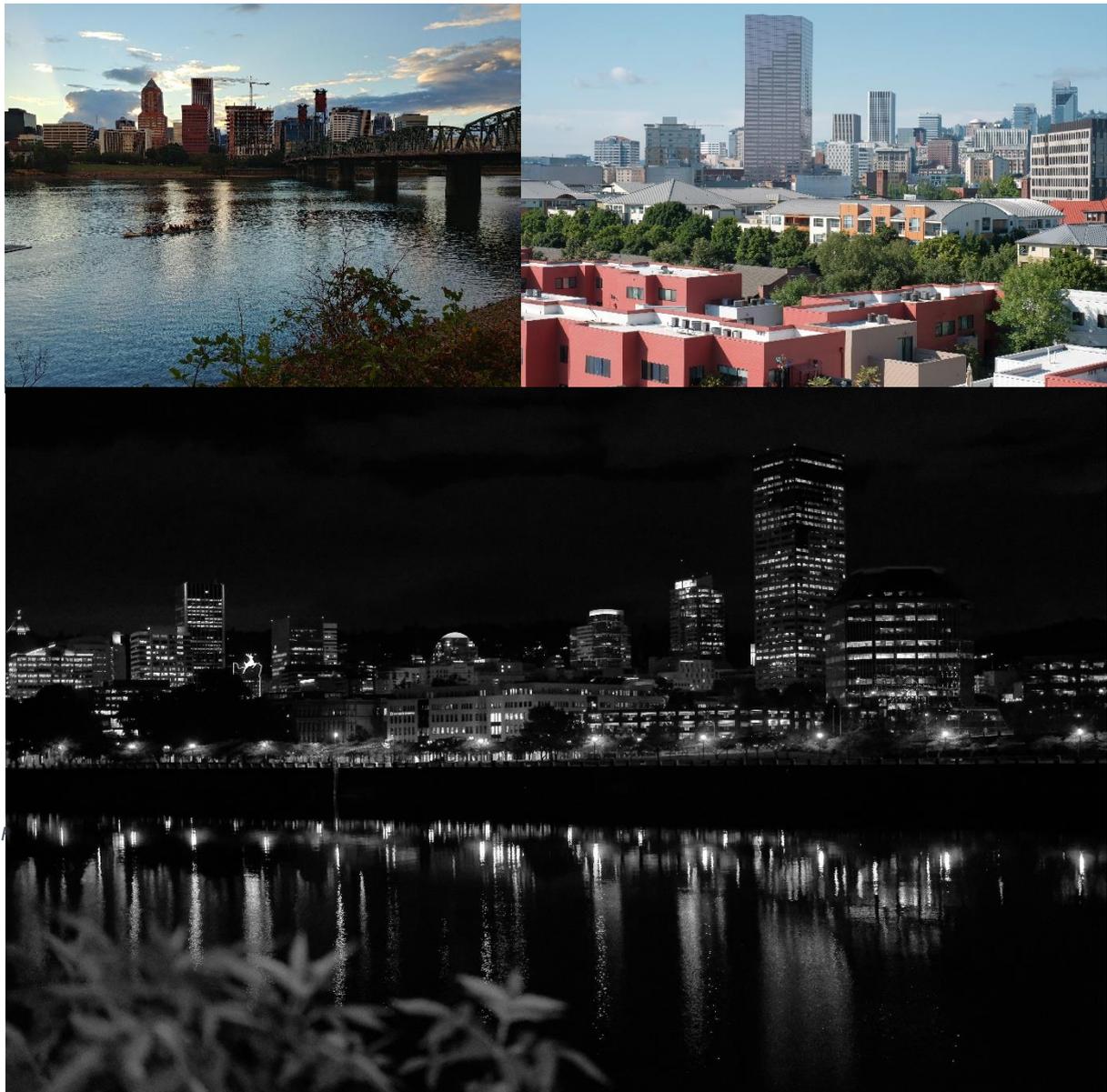


Figure 1: Portland's skyline



Figure 2: Sunsets at the Pacific, just 2 hours from Portland.

Writing applications was initially challenging. Nevertheless, it was a great opportunity to distil down personal goals and to research all existing possibilities. From scholarship application to the ones for the international office and then the host university itself, it was a long process, but the staff members on all sides were always helpful and supportive. The final letter of acceptance came then in June and I applied for my Visa. After an appointment in Munich, everything was settled in this regard too. Prior to leaving I also issued another Credit Card from the DKB, which turned out to be handy, as well as a health insurance from Hanse Merkur, with which I could waive the one offered at Portland State University. Over a friend of a friend I could also find a room in advance. Depending on the experience one seeks, students coming to Portland can decide between university dorms, or rooms in shared flats or houses. The latter are mostly accessible over Facebook groups or Craigslist. However, it can be very competitive, and prices are also beyond the ones in Freiburg. I was nevertheless happy with my living situation with a family, who rented some rooms out to students. I departed with Iceland Air from Frankfurt. Since I had some time in the summer before the term started in Portland, I stopped in Iceland for a few days, as well as on the east coast in Philadelphia and New York (there are also fantastic direct flights to Portland and even more often to Seattle from Frankfurt). Eventually, I got to Portland a week before the orientation day, which was perfect to settle in. That gave me the time to organise a phone plan (MintMobile), buy a bike, get to know the city and thereby get accustomed to my new home. Being used to European city design, it was initially not very intuitive to move around in Portland. Although the city is known to be a ‘green’ and ‘bike friendly city’, this must be understood in comparison to American standards and I was initially disappointed by the fact that cars still rule the city. After getting to know the city better, it was still perfectly accessible by bike. Maps indicating the bike and walking routes were useful in this regard, which can be found at most bike shops. Communicating in English was mostly straight forward, although it took a while until I picked up some common phrases. Although people warned me, I realised soon that not only housing is more expensive, but also food. By the end of my time in Portland, I avoided the big supermarkets and can recommend to future outgoings the farmer markets, trader joes and the PSU food pantry.



Figure 3: The Columbia river Gorge, Mt. Hood or Crater Lake are inviting for weekend trips.

Naively, I did not expect too many cultural differences, since I had already American friends in Freiburg and the American way of living seems well known through its entertainment industry. Nevertheless, the subtle differences can be felt strongly. Politics is certainly a hot topic. Yet, in Portland most people show their opposition to the current administration. It must however be noted that Portland constitutes a colourful, progressive and socially liberal island within the more homogenous and conservative state of Oregon. I could also observe how the history of the relation between the settlers and the native Americans is still digested.

My studies at PSU started with an orientation day, on which all important offices and staff members for international students were introduced. The atmosphere was very inviting, and the practical information was helpful. Especially the office of international affairs was also always supportive throughout the year. Signing up for classes worked over the platform banweb. Especially the schedule planner tool was helpful. In my first two terms I signed up for three classes, in my last one, I chose to do four. It worked well, and I therefore can apply

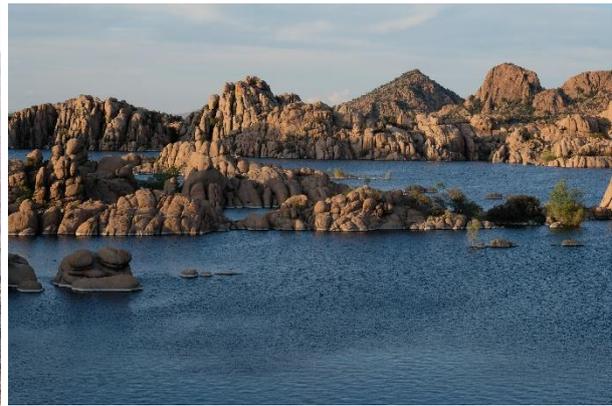


Figure 4: Traveling in Arizona, visiting the Grand Canyon and Sedona.

for as many credits as I would have done in Freiburg for a year. The class format was generally were similar to what I was used to in the LAS program. They were also characterised by small class sizes, close contact to professors and many readings and assignments throughout the term. The range of classes is however much broader. Especially classes which were already held for a couple of times, and therefore got improved over time, proved to be very sophisticated. In the first term I signed up for *Environmental Politics*, *Environmental Literacy* and *Globalization*. These helped me to strengthen my knowledge about the environmental movement and the political debates around climate change. Additionally, I could gain more knowledge about the economic globalisation, beginning with the colonial period up to current political debates. For my second term I chose to take the classes *Documentary Film Production*, *Food, Justice, and Social Movements* and *Indigenous and Systems Perspectives on Sustainability*. All classes were very enriching. I would like to pursuit further my interest in documentary film making as a way to communicate knowledge. The graduate seminar on food deeply inspired me to steer into the field of agricultural change. The Systems Science class provided additionally an intriguing viewpoint which remains an effective framework for most things. Arising from my increased interest in the mechanisms of economic globalisation, I wanted to develop a better understanding of the economic system. Therefore, I took in my last term the classes *History of Economic Thought* and *Marxist Political Economy*. Besides those two, I signed up for *Ecopsychology* and *Media and International Relations*. Through this mix I could get a wider grasp on the current climate debate. Overall, 400 level courses or graduate classes proved to be more enriching. The level of interaction among students was depending on the class. Initially, I was disappointed to see that in some classes there is almost no dynamic exchange among students. The opposite, however, could also be observed in later classes.



Figure 5: Climbing at Smith Rock State Park with the PSU Outdoor Program.

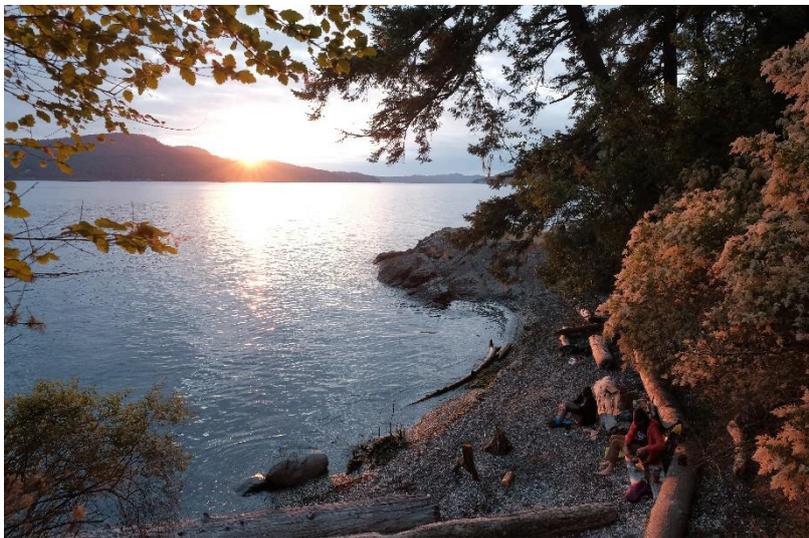


Figure 6: Bike touring across the San Juan Islands.

I also want to note that Portland State University offers many resources besides the classes that one takes. I would encourage future outgoings to take advantage of the many opportunities at PSU right from the start. Since it might feel overwhelming in the beginning that there are so many possibilities, I want to mention the writing centre, the PSU food pantry, the Students Sustainability Centre, the Outdoor Program and the Recreational Centre. Above these, there are all kinds of student run committees, ranging from a cycle group, over magazines to several culturally or politically oriented ones. Engaging in one of them, enables one to connect more to the campus community

and it is much easier to develop closer personal relationships in such settings. I volunteered with the Student Sustainability Centre for one term, which was a great experience. As it is also hard to get out of town without a car, I participated in the trips offered by the Outdoor Program. Those were always very well organised, and great to connect to other peers and explore Oregon.

Overall, I can conclude that this exchange year was incredibly enriching on all levels. I could develop a clearer picture for where my greatest interests lie, understand (one of) the most influential countries, get stimulated in political questions, meet and learn from people who are different from me, become more confident with my English skills, and explore the beautiful pacific northwest.

