

George Mason University (GMU)

Mirnesa Ibišević

During the fall semester, I studied abroad at George Mason University. This university is located in Fairfax, Virginia in the United States of America.

Preparation

Once you get selected by Erasmus University, you will need to apply to George Mason by sending several documents to the university, including a financial statement, university transcript and some application forms. Make sure to start with this as soon as possible, as it can be a very time-consuming process to collect all the necessary documents. You will also need to prove your English proficiency by taking either the TOEFL or IELTS test. The university does not make any exceptions, so make sure to take the test as soon as possible, as the application deadline follows shortly after ESE sends out the acceptance emails.

It will take some time for George Mason to process your application. You will probably receive your acceptance letter at the beginning of May. From now on, you can start applying for your visa and book your flight. The university will provide you with the necessary steps and documents in order to apply for your visa. You will also need to schedule an appointment at the American Consulate in Amsterdam, but this will all become clear to you once you start the application.

Furthermore, you will need to arrange housing in advance. I would strongly recommend living on campus during your exchange semester. The university will inform you about where to find the online housing application. After you have applied, you will be given a specific time slot in which you can pick a room in your preferred building. If you end up choosing a dorm without a kitchen, you are also obliged to include a meal plan. During the semester I lived in a double room in Northern Neck. The suite had a large living room, kitchen and two bathrooms, which we shared with six girls. Overall, I was really satisfied with the building and all the facilities that came with it, so you will definitely not regret getting a room there.

Arrival

My flight landed at Washington Dulles International Airport on Sunday. From there, I took a SuperShuttle to Fairfax for \$28. The SuperShuttle is a shared van which you can book beforehand online. It is cheaper than the taxi and more convenient than public transportation. Because housing check-in was available from Monday, I had to book one night at a hotel in Fairfax. The next day I checked in at the residential desk on campus (open 24 hours), which will give you the key to your room. You can use this first day to buy all the necessary items for your room, such as blankets, pillows, plates, etc.

The rest of the week is filled with introduction days, mandatory check-ins, and lots of activities organized for new students. I would recommend attending as many of those activities as possible, as it is a great way of meeting other (international) students.

Courses

The level of the courses and the teaching methods of the lecturers are different than at our university. Classes consist of about 30 students and participation usually determines a big part of your grade, although attendance is not mandatory. All courses have at least one midterm. Also, the final exam usually accounts for only a small percentage of your total grade. Overall, the courses are substantially easier than at our university.

Erasmus requires you to take 24 ECTS during your exchange, which is equal to 12 credits at George Mason. I took four different courses, each worth three credits.

Introduction to Firm Valuation (FNAN341) – 6 ECTS

This course examines techniques for analyzing, understanding, and applying financial information in decision situations. Topics include financial statement analysis, development of financial models, and financial planning and forecasting. Some basic knowledge of accounting and Excel is also needed. In my opinion, this was probably the most interesting course as it offered a lot of variety. Also, the professor was really good, so I would definitely recommend taking a course from Shelly Canterbury. The course itself was not very difficult; as long as you participate and pay attention during the lectures you should be fine. The two midterms accounted for 10% and 20%. The final exam was worth 35% of your final grade. You also had several assignments: finishing the workbook (10%), Bloomberg projects (5%) and one final case at the end of the semester (10%). Finally, participation was worth 10%. Although this may seem like a lot of work, the workload is really not that high as most of the homework is being done in class.

Introduction to Mathematical Economics (ECON340) – 6 ECTS

This course is a mathematical treatment of the theory of firm and household behavior. It basically covers the same material that has been discussed in Microeconomics, using some basic mathematical concepts, such as matrices, integration and differentiation. From all the courses that I took, I considered this one the easiest. The lectures were similar to our exercise lectures in which the professor just gave you lots of examples to work with.

Applied Regression Analysis (STAT456) – 6 ECTS

This course introduces statistical modeling with a focus on regression. Some topics that are included are: correlation, simple and multiple regression models, model fitting and matrix forms for multiple regressions. You also needed a computer statistical package to do some homework assignments. The homework accounted for 10% of your grade, the two computer assignments and the two midterms were each 15%, leaving only 30% for the final exam. Overall, I really enjoyed this course as it was not too hard, but the course material was still interesting.

Economic Development of Latin America (ECON361) – 6 ECTS

This course discusses the economic development, institutions and problems of Latin America. There were two midterms that each accounted for 20% of your grade, just like the final exam. The questions of the exams were given to you a week in advance to prepare. The professor expected you to write an entire essay (two pages long at least) answering these questions, so you had to learn a lot of facts by heart. Participation was also 20% of your grade, which you should not worry about as long as you show up to class regularly. At the end of the semester, you had to hand in a final paper with a

minimum of 2000 words. This also accounted for 20% of your grade. In my opinion, this course had nothings to do with economics, and the teaching methods were of very low quality.

Finances

The following table gives an overview of my estimated expenses during my exchange semester.

What?	Costs	Remarks
Flight	€ 1,237	Amsterdam – Washington D.C. New York - Amsterdam
Rent	€ 4,100	Double room in an apartment
Administrative fee	€ 450	
Visa	€ 304	Including SEVIS fee
TOEFL	€ 218	
Insurance	€ 1,052	Mandatory
Food	€ 1,285	
Going out	€ 80	Including clubs, cinema, etc.
Public transportation	€ 460	Including UBER
Study supplies	€ 288	Mostly rented. Sold back one book
Traveling	€ 600	
Other	€ 200	Including mobile phone costs
	€ 10,274	

Daily life

You will never get yourself bored at George Mason. The university has a lot of different clubs that organize various events throughout the semester (with lots of free food and free t-shirts). For example, I went to a basketball game at the EagleBank Arena, which was really fun as the level of the matches is surprisingly high.

The campus also has three big sports buildings, where you can do any kind of sports, free of charge to all students. The Aquatic Center has a large swimming pool and offers different types of gym classes. If you're into sports, I would definitely recommend joining a sports club. During the semester, I joined the salsa and tennis club. These clubs also organize other events outside the regular practices, so it is a great way of meeting other people.

As with most American cities, you can hardly reach any places by bike in Fairfax. Fortunately, there are free Mason Shuttles and CUE buses that can take you to Walmart, the metro and the mall (Fair

Lakes Center or Fair Oaks Mall). Also, if you happen to make friends with any Americans, they will be more than happy to drive you anywhere you need to be.

As the courses did not require a lot of effort, I had a lot of free time. On the weekends, we would usually visit Washington D.C., which is slightly less than an hour away from campus (you will have to take the bus and metro). We also went to an NBA game, watching the Washington Wizards play. This was truly a great experience and the tickets were not expensive at all. Furthermore, I managed to visit Philadelphia, Boston and New York. We also went hiking in the Great Falls, which is only half an hour away from campus.

In general, American people are very friendly, welcoming and they are always willing to help you with anything you need. One of my roommates invited me over for Thanksgiving dinner with her family, which was an amazing and real American experience. Also, if you happen to meet anyone from a fraternity, you will get invited to their parties which usually take place on the weekend.

All in all, I would definitely recommend going to George Mason for your exchange semester, as you will get the opportunity to experience real American college life and meet lots of new friends.