



2015-2016 Student Mobility/Exchange Program Returning Undergraduate Student Report

Host University: RISD (Rhode Island School of Design)

Host Country: United States

Faculty/Department at Host Institution: Illustration

Semester: Spring

Date of Report: June 2, 2016

1. OVERALL EVALUATION

How would you rate your exchange experience overall?

Poor **Excellent**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please explain your rating.

Being able to study at RISD was a really wonderful experience. It was a good change of pace from OCAD, the faculty & students at my host school were extremely talented and inspiring, and Providence is a seemingly quiet but really very fascinating city. Proximity to the ocean (biking/ bussing distance – buses are free to students) was also lovely. I was sometimes lonely, but I think moving to any other city would feel the same.

Why did you choose this host institution? What key factors or issues influenced your decision?

I chose RISD because of its teachers & graduates. In particular I desperately wanted to take classes with Chris Buzelli and JooHee Yoon – and was extremely lucky to be able to do so! Class selection for exchange students happens right before the first week of class/ during the first week of class. Many classes will be full so for highly desired classes, email the instructor then go to the first class and cross your fingers that there will be unexpected spaces/ the people on the waiting list do not show up. Instructors are generally very open to students coming on the first day to try & get in, and you maybe get lucky and succeed! I wanted to do an exchange more for the learning experience as it directly relates to illustration rather than primarily to travel so happily my courses all worked out, but Providence can be a very interesting tourist destination as well (the ocean, as mentioned!). It was also appealing to my parents because it's pretty close to Toronto – a distance of about a day.

Please share a few of your most positive experiences and a few of the biggest challenges you faced.

Chris's Contemporary Class and JooHee's silkscreened posters class were very positive experiences. The material was eye opening, the instructors were both extremely passionate, and I had the chance to make some really interesting work, and take advantage of RISD's facilities (24 hour access!). Another really positive experience was getting to see all the senior shows since I was at RISD during spring semester. There was some amazing work being produced by graduating students – a particular highlight was the senior FAV (film/ animation/ video) show which was about 8 hours of work split into 2 nightly screenings. I also enjoyed taking out-of-major classes (wheel throwing was great; long studio hours but a good change of pace) where I got to meet students from other disciplines, and exploring the city which is very bike-able. In particular I'd highly encourage taking a bike trip down the East Bay bike path, the views are spectacular and it's a pretty long trail that goes all the way to Bristol. Newport is also nice when the weather's overcast (otherwise too crowded).

A challenge I hadn't anticipated was the peculiar loneliness of being in a city where you don't know anyone and things are similar yet also very strange (although to be fair I knew exactly one person, and evening knowing only her was very helpful). I made friends as the semester went along and ventured around the city, in which RISD truly is ensconced in its own College Hill bubble, but the sense of being alone can be pervasive, if not entirely unwelcome. Most of my illustration classmates were seniors & it was sometimes difficult to forge relationships with them. Outside of long class/ studio hours they were busy preparing for their futures, doing endless hours of homework, and had already established their habits and friends. This is not to say that people were unwelcoming or unfriendly, but getting close to others could be a challenge. It helps to work in studio (or in the ISB, Illustration Studies Building), and it was also really nice to keep in touch with friends in Toronto. I also got to know some of the other exchange students a bit better, though as a whole you and everyone are all very busy with schoolwork. Which can be another challenge – I took four studios and no liberals and the workload was slightly more than I was used to at OCAD, although manageable especially since I no longer had to commute every day. It can be difficult to make time outside school to do all the other things you might want to though, like travelling around the city & surrounding areas (RISD is close to Boston/ New York). It is worth it to explore though, if you have the means & time (make the time!).

2. PREPARATION

Please describe your preparation for the exchange, including banking, travel documents and student visa application. In retrospect, would you have done anything differently?

I was very privileged that my father had the means to handle my banking & set up US debit & credit cards for me through the bank where he is an employee. The bank he'd signed up for did not have a Providence branch however, so I used grocery stores ("cash back") in lieu of ATMs. RISD also unfortunately requires you to buy into their insurance plan regardless of your own insurance, so budget a few hundred dollars for this.

Travel documents included a series of health forms from RISD relating to general health & vaccination history/ TB history that I had some difficulty filling out since my doctor was a bit distracted and it took him a number of successive appointments to sort out what documentation I needed to bring. Since I immigrated to Canada as a child, my documentation

was also very spotty and certain forms were missing/ unclear/ had not been translated. I'd recommend getting started on these forms right away (as soon as you are accepted & RISD sends you the forms) if you are in a similar situation!

At the time of my exchange I did not need a visa application to study in the US as a Canadian citizen; RISD sent me the forms for the I-20 & I paid an online \$200 I-901 SEVIS fee. At the border you present the school forms & SEVIS receipt & they ask some questions, take your prints, and affix a slip of paper to your passport (F-1 student visa); the visa slip must be returned when you cross the border after finishing the term.

Are there any important items (e.g. art & design supplies, documents, specialty foods, health items) that a student should take to your host country?

If you are driving down I'd bring a scanner, depending on the work you make! The studios/buildings are open 24/7 but I think the doors are locked around 2 am, excepting residences. I also brought some specialty cooking ingredients along like rice flour but Providence has culturally-specific groceries if you're willing to bus. Boston is also an hour's train ride. The campus has an art store & an off-campus supply is about a thirty minute walk. There is also a second hand student art store.

3. ARRIVAL

Was anyone at the airport, train station, etc. to meet you? Did you experience any difficulties upon arrival?

My father very kindly drove me down to Providence from Toronto so this wasn't necessary. I was living in residence so it went smoothly, there is someone at the desk 24/7 to let students in.

When should students plan to arrive at the host university? When did you arrive? Would you have benefited from arriving earlier?

I arrived about a day or two ahead of classes, when you're first allowed to move into the dorms. If you are renting a place in East Providence, which is much cheaper & still relatively close by (probably all students lived within a half hour walking distance) you can try to arrive ahead & get some travel/ exploring in before inundated by school! Travelling alone is something the past four months have made me become fond of.

Was there an orientation session offered at your host university? If yes, did you attend and what did you learn?

Yes, there was a short morning session where I met other exchange students, about 15 of us over all. We heard from various campus offices, drank fancy bottled water, learned about resources, and watched a memorable sexual education video that compared sex with tea. There was also a short campus tour where I gleaned very little, it takes awhile of walking around on your own to familiarize yourself with College Hill! RISD (and Brown next door) are much larger than OCAD – they're like a miniature city unto their own.

Is there a coordinating office for international students, including exchange students, at your host university? Is there a staff person you would recommend students approach with their questions?

Yes, there was a woman named Caroline Schaefer who headed the RISD global office. I didn't see her much as things went smoothly but I'm sure she'd be able to offer help! There is also an international students office where Catherine Sacco might be able to help you.

4. ACCOMMODATION

Where did you live during your exchange? Were you happy with your accommodation?

I lived on campus at 15 West, where a majority of students from sophomores to seniors lived. There are also the Hill houses (slightly further from the illustration building, partway up the hill), and Charles Landing (much farther away from campus, have heard bad things about pipes bursting here, but I believe the rent is cheaper), and Colonial. 15 West is like an apartment complex, and the building conveniently also houses the RISD library, special collections, image collection, and a cafeteria where I did not eat very much (didn't sign up for a meal plan, so experimented with my dorm room's kitchen). 15 West was *very* nice and felt secure but it was extremely expensive. If you are looking for something more affordable I'd recommend looking for off-campus housing in the College Hill area of East Providence (*not* Providence), somewhere between the school and Wickenden street which is a walkable distance and contains some very nice (and also less nice) houses which are split into apartments.

Did you have any difficulties arranging accommodation yourself? Did the host institution assist you in finding accommodation?

I lived on campus; the host institution was very accommodating re roommate requests (I asked for someone compatibly quiet) and room choices (I wanted a single room in a suite if possible).

5. STUDIES AT HOST INSTITUTION

To better understand the similarities and differences between academic studies at OCAD U and at your host university, please comment on the following:

Level of academic difficulty and challenge: Similar – although the volume of work could be challenging, given 24 hour studio access it was manageable. The classes were also much more hands on although this may just be due to the nature of the courses I was taking.

Time spent in class (# of hours per week): [5 hours per class] x [4 classes] = 20 hours per week

Time spent working on projects outside of class (# of hours per week): I'm really bad at math, so please forgive me if I just say I spent about 10-20 hours per class per week, sometimes less, or more.

Studio-based work: all my classes were studio-based. I passed a lot of nights in the silkscreen/pottery studios in particular. The facilities were amazing in my mind – the silkscreen studio was dedicated *only to our class* – although other students commented on the lack of space. I find if

you go in the mornings/ work a few days ahead of the due date, there aren't any problems with this, so try to do that if you get a chance!

Written assignments: none, excepting one essay which I wrote while working in a studio, in between waiting for layers to dry.

Interaction between students and professors: I found all the instructors I had were very casual with students, so there are some good conversations. Chris is very insightful in critiques although I've heard he's more relaxed in Contemporary Illustration (where exploration is encouraged) versus Editorial (much more focused & exact). JooHee is a wonderful starting-off instructor for silkscreen, and became more critical as our skills increased and we moved from talking about technique to talking about execution/ idea/ etc. My wheel throwing instructor, a second year grad named Brendan Fuller was amazing, and went out of his way to help outside of class time, and to talk to everyone individually. Unfortunately he's headed off for Denmark. My advanced digital painting instructor (Gann) is someone I'd caution potential students about. His class can be unfocused, he tends to veer off topic on hour-long tangents, and the material is not as advanced as the student work. It's a good class to take as a filler period for experimentation in if you are personally motivated, and otherwise useful as breathing room from other classes. If you are looking for more actual instruction, I've heard Eric Telfort would be a preferable instructor to take for a digital painting class.

6. SERVICES

Were there any extracurricular activities/events scheduled for exchange/international students at your host university (cultural visits, trips, workshops, etc.)? Which ones would you recommend?

There were a few activities organized by the RISD global office on campus such as touring the RISD museum, going to the career centre, a session about grad school. I'd recommend doing these things on your own depending on your level of interest, although sessions can also be good places to get to catch up with fellow exchange students. The exchange students also independently of the host university had occasional dinners together which were a better place for socializing.

What were the library and computer facilities like?

The library is very architecturally interesting, although I did not make use of it beyond a photo shoot. I've heard it's nice for studying in! There is an interesting special collections/ image collections, & illustration has a great computer lab with tablets, Cintiques, large monitors, scanners. Depressingly, it is shut away in a basement & I tried to avoid it. You can also access the Brown library system (extensive, though confusing – their catalogue was in an awkward phase when I was there & shelving advice did not match the actual shelf locations), and the Athenaeum (an old fashioned holdover of lending libraries, available to RISD students; worth visiting as it's a lovely space if you like spaces with books, also good for potential studying)

7. COST OF LIVING

How did you prepare yourself financially for your exchange? Did you pay for the experience entirely out of your own savings? Did you receive student or bank loans? Did you apply for / receive any financial awards (scholarships or bursaries)? Did you have help from parents / family / friends?

I paid my tuition to OCAD from savings, & my parents very generously helped out with my living accommodations!

In general, was the cost of living in your host country higher, lower, or similar to that in Canada? Please explain.

Higher – the exchange rate was dismal when I left (Canadian dollar was about 63 cents American), residence was very expensive for my parents, compared to when I lived at home and commuted, and groceries/ buying other essentials also added up.

8. EXPENSES

Exchange rate with host country: Fluctuated – about 63 cents when I left. A bit better now.

Time spent in host country (month/year - month/year): about four months

Would you estimate that you spent more, less, or the same amount as an average, local student attending your host institution?

Possibly slightly less since I opted not to have a meal plan & mostly bought groceries instead of eating out. I also didn't need to buy too many materials. More than those who weren't living on residence however.

Please complete the following budget to give other students an idea of what they can expect to spend in the host country.

Basic Expenses in Canadian Dollars:

1. **Tuition and general fees (paid to OCAD U):** \$ 6 500 (Canadian)
2. **School supplies:** ~ \$ 100 US (mostly cost of paper for silkscreen class, plus extra clay for pottery)
3. **Rent or university residence:** \$1 306.25 /month = \$5 225.00 US
4. **Rent-related expenses:**
 - A) **Electricity/Water:** included in residence cost
 - B) **Telephone:** about \$35/month (my plan is with Wind so I paid my regular \$28/ month + additional 5 c/ text + 15c/ minute for US roaming)
 - C) **Cable:** none
 - D) **Other (specify)**
5. **Groceries or Meal Plan:** groceries were about \$25 US/ week so \$100 - \$125/ month

6. **Personal expenses (toiletries/cosmetics, etc.):** I brought a pack of toilet paper & shampoo with me, so I didn't spend anything in the US. Although I did buy a toilet brush, which was about \$5.
7. **Laundry:** To give you an idea, the washer/ dryer at 15 West are \$1.50 each.
8. **Transportation:** local RIPTA buses are free to students.
9. **Leisure (Sports, Entertainment, etc.):** I luckily had my bike with me so I was able to do a lot of free sightseeing. The gym at RISD is free and residences have TVs in common areas. The RISD museum is also free.
10. **Travel health insurance:** I can't remember the exact amount, about \$200 US
11. **Medical expenses in host country:** \$0
12. **Round trip plane ticket:** \$0 (my father drove me)
13. **Travel/trips during exchange:** 3 trips to Boston (\$63 + \$5 ticket to Isabella Stewart Gardner museum + ~ \$6 for the subway trip to a friend's home +\$20 for food); 2 trips to New York (about \$20 total for bus tickets to the city & back; about \$40/ night for hostels; about \$40 total for subway passes; about \$40 for museum tickets; about \$60 for food; plus lots of free attractions – the High Line; New York Public Library; Grand Central; Dead Horse Bay; Green-Wood Cemetery; walking around Park Slope to spy on houses; Central Park) - \$414 US
14. **Student visa:** \$ 200 US (SEVIS fee)
15. **Other expenses (please specify):** \$ 50 on extra clothing. I'd recommend Savers for cheap second hand clothing. Conveniently near a grocery (Super Stop & Shop) so you can do everything at once!

Estimated Total Expenses: \$13 343

9. ADAPTING TO YOUR HOST COUNTRY

Did you experience any "culture shock" during your exchange? How did you deal with it? Do you have any advice for students on how to adapt to life in your host country?

Be aware of traffic, since drivers can be aggressive & do not wait for pedestrians to finish crossing before making a turn. Drivers also may not stop at designated crossing areas so be careful not to assume traffic will wait for you to cross. & Providence is a strange city – there's a noticeable divide between the RISD/ Brown area and the other parts of the city, so to experience more of Providence it can be good to wander outside College Hill. Be judicious however, as it's a city even though it can feel strangely abandoned & sleepy. Also take advantage of RISD Rides services at night if you're travelling distances – while I was there

muggings, etc are sometimes known to happen to students when it's very late out & students were wandering around relatively alone.

Was there a lot of interaction between local students and exchange/international students? What is the best way to develop friendships with students from your host institution?

There is a lot of interaction during classes, but outside of class people can be really busy/ already have plans. I'd recommend doing homework in studio/ in the Illustration Studies Building – you can see people outside of class this way but everyone still gets work done. I started to take advantage of this a bit too late to get very close to people, but it really helps! Also your classmates will keep you from succumbing to the lure of sleep.

Did you have any unforeseen problems? Was there anything that you felt was strikingly different from what you expected? If so, is there a way that you could have prepared yourself?

Nothing comes to mind that I haven't already mentioned!

10. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

Good luck with your exchange! Don't be afraid to do things alone, explore as much as possible (Providence is more fascinating than it might appear at first), & if you're at RISD definitely put your best effort into coursework but don't let it eclipse other experiences! Oh & feel free to ask any further questions: wenting.draws@gmail.com.