

Field Report

3 months stay at Georgia State University

Judith H. Parkinson

Department of Mathematics, University of Salzburg, Austria
Mathematics and Statistics Department, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA

General Impression

Visiting an American University proved to be an unique experience. It took a little bit to grasp what and how things are handled differently in the States. Americans are in general way friendlier and helpful than any other nation from which I have met. This is very helpful whenever you need help with anything. On contrast this first friendliness makes it difficult to tell whose characteristics are honest which can be rather frustrating if you're trying to get to know the person opposite to you.

Living costs proved to be more expensive than in Austria. Not only is rent higher, but groceries, especially healthy food, is significantly more expensive than back home.

Housing in the states for students is offered through the universities and also through private dorms. Getting into the dorms of the university can be problematic in the bigger cities as students who are not officially enrolled, i.e. pay tuition, usually get put at the end of the waiting list. Private dorms often only allow long term rent or come unfurnished, both of which is unsuitable for short term students. Airbnb offers a good alternative to the dorms even if that means being cut off from the other students.

Otherwise the USA offered plenty of opportunities for short trips such that one can see the cultural differences within the State.

Host Institution

Georgia State University was not too well prepared for my arrival. The first few days I had to first request my accesses before getting them in the second week.

They provided me with a good workplace including a computer and accessories. The Mathematics and Statistics Department is rather large. Once per week guests are invited from all over the USA to present their research such that one can gain a broad knowledge over the whole field. Additionally, guests of other departments at the GSU came to the department to get help with their research questions and to start co-operations which offers great opportunities. I received great help within the department.

Prior to my arrival I tried getting help from the housing department and the international students office, both of them refused help claiming I'm not an enrolled student and thus not their responsibility, which was quite disappointing.

The offered extra-curricular activities were plentiful and I enjoyed participating in some of them. The campus is spread out over the city and several shuttles run between the different sites. All administrative buildings are close to each other and, by chance, were close to the building in which my department was located.

Recommendations

There are two things in my eyes which I should have done beforehand to ensure a smoother process especially in the first few weeks.

Most students probably don't know their temporary supervisor before they actually fly over. That does not mean that one can't get to know him or her. I believe that one should take the time for a phone/skype/etc. call already before one applies. It helps to get to know your supervisor and get a better feeling of what expects you. Just because your supervisor at your home university thinks it's a good choice it not necessarily has to turn out that way. Your supervisor most likely never was supervised by the supervisor-candidate and thus might not be able to assess the proficiency of him or her. Especially if you don't have the feeling that a corporation will work there then is still enough time to consider maybe a different supervisor. Research usually progresses faster if one feels comfortable with the people he or she feels comfortable with.

The second thing that helps with organizing the first few days is to ensure that your temporary supervisor gets involved with the on-site preparations like ensuring you find something to live, setting up your work space, making sure that everyone who needs to be informed about your visit is informed. It takes a lot of uncertainty out and makes sure you look more relaxed towards your travel and you can start working on your research straight from day one.