



Reflection on my Kettering Experience

(Thomas M. Hoffmann Aug. 2019- Feb. 2020)

When I first came to Kettering at the end of the summer term, I often heard from other exchange students that Flint is not the best place for an exchange semester. They complained there was not much to do in Flint and that the Campus Village where all the exchange students stayed was always deserted. Reflecting on my stay in Flint at Kettering I could not disagree more.

Having a semester abroad during my bachelors' course was something I had already considered when I started my university studies. While in high school in Germany I already have had the opportunity of doing an exchange in which I had gone to Michigan for a high school year. This has been a great experience for me growing up, so when I learned that Reutlingen University has a partnership with Kettering University in Flint, Michigan, I knew that I could get a great chance to experience this adventure a second time. Even though I have visited my former host family multiple times ever since the time I was an exchange student, the so called "cultural shock" is something that can still happen. Having experienced the American lifestyle and of course the education system during the previous exchange made me familiar with some things, so this effect was not as strong, as it could have been for others who came to the US for the first time. For me it was my last semester of my bachelors' course when I came to Kettering to work on a research project and write my thesis. Considering this I started differently from most of the other exchange students who had to take classes and wanted the "exchange student experience". Reflecting on this, it turned out to be the crucial mindset which made this semester abroad a complete success for me. Since I did not have to take any classes I was not bound to a specific date when starting at Kettering. This allowed me to start at Kettering one month before the summer term ended and leave one month before the winter term ended. In this time, I had the chance to live in a shared apartment with three different sets of room mates. In contrast to this in Germany I was living in a small apartment by myself, so having room mates was already a big change for me. Stories about how it could go wrong and not work out having room mates had made me skeptical, but being at Kettering and being thrown into this situation was a change that I'm very thankful for and am very glad that it happened. We all got along very well and had a great time together.



Unfortunately, my room mates were all Germans, which made the exchange experience culturally wise a bit underwhelming, nevertheless I learned quite a lot from this. During a semester abroad there are always things that do not go as planned, there are always some issues, especially for people that stay in a foreign county and are in a similar situation. It does not matter how well you are prepared for the circumstances, but how you deal with them. The living in a shared apartment shows you how others cope with similar problems. The many times we cooked meals together in the evening to have some lunch for the next day or the exercise at the gym together after work are just some of the things to which a happily think back. Even though this is not an experience which is specific for a stay at Kettering, for me it was part for my very own Kettering experience.

The different mindset with which I had come to Kettering played an import role that made my experience a great success in my eyes. Most other exchange students come to Kettering to have the “exchange student experience”. They want to use their stay to see the country, go site seeing or are looking to have fun. They come with a “touristic” mindset to Kettering. For that, Flint is indeed not the ideal place. Even though there are several colleges located in Flint, Flint does not have the “student life” most exchange students might be looking for. Since I have already spend a while in the US and had the chance to travel the whole country while visiting my former host family over the years, I was more dedicated to doing my bachelors thesis than to go sightseeing and travel a lot. I wanted to fully concentrate on experiencing the research life and lab work while having the challenge of being in a foreign country and speaking and working in English. Therefore, I did not expect to travel a lot and live a touristic student life. For me, I wanted the work on my research at Kettering to be the “student experience”. Being dedicated to my thesis I still got to enjoy many activities and sights that have made my time at Kettering engaging and fun and made me fall in love with Flint. Kettering and Campus Village have a good location from where you can walk downtown into Flint. The downtown of Flint is not big, but it has a lot to offer if you keep an open mind and eye. There are many small businesses, restaurants and bars in Flint, of which many are new and contemporary. A brewery close by the campus had an open mic night once a week were people can come and give the audience a glance of their talents, which had become for me a tradition of coming to see the live music there and to meet new people, some of which I still stay in touch with. The music events at the Capitol theater were quite the experience that I would recommend to anyone, especially when you are staying during wintertime with all the festive concerts there. Campus village may be deserted, but it gives a lot of opportunity to organize something yourself, like a cookout with other apartments or a movie night in the community space. With these opportunities provided it was a great time and amazing student life going to work on the thesis every day, have activities after work and go into downtown on the weekends. During my stay I got to know many locals and made some good friends with whom I even got to travel a little bit in the area. This experience summed up was exactly what I was missing during my time in Reutlingen and a great way to finish my bachelor’s degree.



Living in a different country with a completely different culture is thrilling although sometimes difficult. But this is something one must understand when visiting other countries, that you do have to approach things with an open mindset and be open to other ways than you are used to from your home country. Knowing and keeping this in mind will make any exchange experience better. Handling situations or thinking about topics differently or just having different dishes always sparks a conversation and lets both the host culture as well as the guest culture reflect on themselves. One example that I came to understand is bread. In Germany bread is valued a lot. There are many bakeries, with many kinds of different bread. Throughout Germany eating slices of bread with different snacks of sausages or cheese is widely spread. Most of the Germans coming to America complain about the American bread. Remarks like “it’s too soft” are the main complaints. Getting to know the American “bread culture” then has showed me, that American bread is just used differently. While in Germany the bread is stiffer and keeps its shape, in America, the bread is used for sandwiches, where it serves as a soft shell to hold the content of the sandwich. Using a German bread for the same purpose would not work out, while the American bread is the best option for this and vice versa, the German bread has its purposes. This analogy, as trivial as it might sound, works for a lot of cultural differences which I encountered. Some things might seem like they are similar and then get judged on if it is better in the host culture or the guest culture, but upon learning how the other culture is using it can change your judgment of these things and enhance one’s understanding of how and why things can be different but still be of practical use.

Spending a semester at Kettering has had an impact on my life and will continue to have in the future. Not only did I make new good friends, but also gained more life experiences. Living in a shared apartment, cooking together with the flat mates and preparing a meal while listening to good music is not only a good memory, but also a habit I kept going back to Europe. Doing research, trying to solve puzzles in the lab and finding answers through experiments was a great alternative to the study live of the previous semesters at Reutlingen. Spending time at a University and doing research has affirmed my ambition to further follow the academic route. Although it was sometimes a challenge for me juggling the writing of the thesis from the scientific content side and having to express everything in



English, it was for me overall a thing that I did enjoy and want to do in the future. This is something that made me reconsider the career choices for the future and which profession I want to pursue in the field.