Exchange Student’s Guide
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Last Update 15/05/2011
You won’t be able to enter into Europe without the appropriate documents — mainly an electronic (also called biometric) passport valid past the time of the exchange, and a long-term visa. In addition to these essential documents, you’ll have to plan your exchange early on, in order to be able to complete the different forms and documents required by both your university in the US, and your host university in France. Avoid losing time at any cost!

**Chronology of the Required Steps towards your Exchange**

1. **Before anything, bear in mind that if you have any doubt concerning the way to obtain or use a specific document, you should always ask first either the Study Abroad office of your University, or the Service des Relations Internationales of the French university which is hosting you. You should never rely upon random information found on Internet forums or non-governmental websites and blogs. These sources are usually filled with erroneous or non-updated information that should not be trusted.**

2. The very first step towards setting up a student exchange should be to contact the director of the program, who’s usually a teacher working either in your department, or in the department of Modern Languages. Remember that he or she is the only person habilitated to give you the preliminary information concerning the exchange and to select the students he or she deems worthy of studying in France. You should keep in touch with your exchange program director at all times and inform him or her of the evolution of your status.

3. Once it has been confirmed that you’ve been enrolled in the program, you should start looking around for plane tickets. You should not consider buying one immediately—just try to scout the web and see the price range of roundtrips. In most cases, you’re allowed to enter the European territory maximum one week before the official beginning date of your semester abroad. At this point, you should start contacting the other students enrolled in the program and see if they were able to find interesting offers. Bear in mind that when you want to apply for a visa, you’re expected to bring your flight reservation and plane tickets the day of your appointment at the French Consulate. As a consequence, avoid at all cost last-minute flights.

4. The next step is to obtain a valid Biometric US Passport. The first form you have to obtain is the DS-11 (Application for a US Passport), which should be brought in person to a Passport Acceptance Facility (usually a Post Office close to your home.) You will be required to present a number of documents, including evidence of US citizenship, photocopy of your ID, and special passport pictures. For a complete list of the required document, and information about fees, please browse the website of the Bureau of Consular Affairs. Make sure your passport has blank pages to affix the visa.

5. You should then enroll at CampusFrance (http://www.usa.campusfrance.org), an organization affiliated to the French government responsible for the enrollment of exchange students coming to France. You will be asked to send more documents, including your acceptance letter (signed by the program director) and a $70 money order.

**Attestation d’Inscription**

The Attestation d’Inscription is a special certificate of enrollment issued by your French host university. It mentions your personal information and the semesters during which you are to follow classes in the school, and has to be stamped and signed by the Service des Relations Internationales (international student services). You’re required to bring an original copy of this document to your visa appointment. Be aware that this document is different from the US proof of enrollment.
Once you have received your registration confirmation from CampusFrance, it’s time to apply for a temporary long-term visa at the closest French Consulate. Each consular branch works differently, with its own opening hours and processing times, so you should not be afraid to call the Consulate or visit its website extensively. Apart from the regular documents (proof of US citizenship, ID, passport photos etc…), you will be asked to bring the following, more exotic items:

- Your CampusFrance confirmation of enrollment
- A proof of enrollment at a US college or university
- A certificate or letter of enrollment or pre-enrollment (Attestation d’Inscription) issued by your school in France
- A properly stamped envelope with your own address
- Your original plane tickets and flight reservation
- The OFII form (Demande d’Attestation OFII) filled out
- A notarized letter of financial guarantee from your parents or legal guardians or personal bank or university financial aid office stating that you will be provided a minimum of $600 a month for the duration of your studies and a copy of their most recent bank statements
- Proof of medical insurance (see the paragraph Social Security and Medical Insurance.)

This list is only given as an example of the documents which you may be asked to bring. Please always double-check with the Consulate to be sure about the official, mandatory list of documents necessary to candidate for a visa.

Often, an original and one or two copies are required of each document.

Your visa should be ready a couple of days after your appointment at the Consulate. If your flight is booked, you are now ready to leave! Enjoy your last week’s in the U.S., and double-check you have all the required documents—sometimes the director of the program organizes a final “orientation meeting” before your departure, try to not miss it.

Last precision for those who receive financial aid: you will keep receiving financial aid while in France… as long as you keep the Financial Aid Office informed of your change of status.

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### Social Security and Medical Insurance

You cannot leave the United-States without a decent medical coverage specially made for international trips. The first thing to do is to see what your university is offering—a special coverage, which can be purchased on a monthly or daily basis at a competitive price, is usually made for exchange students. You can also see if your, or your parents’ personal insurance company would accept to cover you during your stay in France. In such a case, please be sure that the policy you’re purchasing meets all the requirements listed by the French Consulate. Last but not least: don’t forget to ask for a letter to the insurance company, to be able to show a proof of insurance the day of your appointment.

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### Attestation OFII

The Attestation OFII is a new document required by the French immigration services. It has to be downloaded (just google “attestation OFII”) and works in a pretty unusual way. For the day of your visa appointment at the Consulate, you’ll have to fill out only the first part of the form (entitled rubriques à remplir lors de la demande de Visa). The consular agent will then process the document and give it or send it back to you.

Once in France, you’ll have to immediately send the document (with a delivery confirmation, in French accusé de réception) to the address corresponding to your department (county) of residency, the list being detailed on the last page of the OFII form. You will then be summoned to attend a mandatory medical check-up and will be delivered your titre de séjour, a document which is a proof of residence in France.
Foreign students can apply for student accommodation financial help at the CAF (Caisse d’Allocations Familiales – Family Allowances Fund). This help, called the ALE (Aide au Logement Étudiant), is specifically made for students to assist them in their housing costs, and is deposited each month directly in one’s bank account. The amount of money you may be entitled to receive is calculated using different parameters, including your financial situation, your parents’ financial situation, your age etc…. It is by no means guaranteed that you will obtain an ALE, but you should in any case attempt to apply.

The first step is to download and fill out the application form, available on the CAF website: http://www.caf.fr/pdfj/al8.pdf You should then take the application form to your residence secretary so that she can sign off on the paperwork. Once this first phase is complete, you will have to mail the CAF a file including the following documents:
- Your completed application
- Attestation de Résidence (Certificate of French Residence, delivered by your landlord)
- A copy of your passport
- A copy of your OFII (residence permit in different parts—see the paragraph Attestation OFII)
- One of your IBAN information sheets (can usually be found on the website of your bank)
- A copy of your birth certificate
- A written note, in French, stating that you don’t have a European Social Security card

Send the complete file to your local CAF—to find its address, enter your zip code on the map displayed on the website: http://www.caf.fr/wps/portal/votrecaf/jechercheunecaf

Please be aware that according to the answers given in the application form and your particular status, your application might be rejected. It is also quite possible that you will have to go to the local branch of the CAF to give them additional paperwork and to expedite the process.
Telephone, Internet & Communication

As an exchange student, you’re likely to use internet, phones, and postal services extensively. When it comes to services, choices will have to be made—let’s survey the available offer in France!

Internet Access

One of your first concerns upon your arrival will most certainly be to have the possibility to use a fast and reliable Internet access. Depending on your housing situation, you might have access to a complimentary Internet connection, included in your rent—this is the case for some student housing in France. If on the contrary you decide to live in a private apartment, try to think about asking your landlord if a phone line—required for any Internet access—is opened in the apartment. The main phone company in France is the formerly state-owned France Telecom. If you need any information or help to activate a phone line, they are usually the ones who should be contacted. In any case, you should bear in mind that it’s always better to ask questions before travelling to France. Asking your host university or landlord all your internet and phone related questions could avoid wasting some precious time once installed in your cozy apartment!

Cell Phones

Concerning cell phones, different approaches are possible. You can decide to see if your US-based phone company is offering reasonable rates for international calls—be sure to ask if the offer applies to France, and if your phone is going to be compatible with the French phone network. Consider if you intend to use the phone only in France/Europe or if you are going to use it to make frequent calls to the US. The other solution is to buy a cell phone once you have arrived. Even if the offer available is not as wide as what one can find in the US, you’ll still be faced with the traditional choice: forfait (plan) or téléphone prépayé (prepaid cell phone).

1) Suscribing to a plan. Plans can be a reasonable option; however, you should always be...
sure of the precise conditions of the offer: the most interesting ones usually require you to keep your phone for at least 12 or 24 months. On the other hand, smartphones and data plans (by the minute) tend to be cheaper in Europe! As for the internet providers, you will need a justificatif de domicile (proof of residence) to start a new contract.

2) Buying a prepaid cell phone. Even if prepaid options are not as cheap as they are in the U.S., they can still be interesting if you want a basic phone quickly and with no monthly payment. You should browse the different options carefully, as you will notice huge differences between the companies when it comes to the price per minute.

Whatever your choice, the good news is that in France, only the caller has to pay for the communication! That is the reason why the communication time offered by phone plans might appear small to you. It also means that even if your phone credit is depleted, your friends can still call you. Sometime, a friend of yours might tell you “je n’ai plus beaucoup de crédit, je te bipperai,” which means that because this person is almost out of credit, he or she will make your phone ring once or twice, to signify you that you should call him/her back!

Phoning to the United States

While in the past phoning to the United States was a genuine torture, being very complicated and costly, Internet had come to the rescue of the exchange student thanks to the VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol). Is it now possible to call for free any computer in the world, and for a tiny fee any phone. The most well-known and used software remains Skype, which is easy to use and offers good sound (and video, if you purchase a webcam) capabilities. Once the software is downloaded and installed, you just have to create an account and plug in your microphone and headphones. Any person in the world with a Skype account will be able to call you and to receive your calls.

To call a phone, you will have to add a few euros to your Skype account, then select the country you want to call, and dial the number. No need to worry about prefixes—the software automatically sets them according to the country you want to call. The current rate offered between phones in France and the US is around 2 cents per minute of communication. Skype also offers instant messaging capabilities, which works exactly like MSN Messenger or Yahoo Messenger.

For more information:

**Orange**
main French provider, also sells cell phones:
http://www.orange.fr

**Free**
other well-know provider:
http://www.free.fr

**SFR**
offers cell phones plans:
http://www.sfr.fr

**Skype**
VoIP communication:
http://www.skype.com
Transportation & Travels

You will quickly understand that transportation in Europe—especially in big metropolises like Paris—differs widely from what you’re used to in the United States. You will have to familiarize yourself with the public transportation system, whether it is to go to your classes, to go out, or to travel all over the country. Leave your car keys at home, welcome to France!

### Public Transportation

> Even if the development of the public transportation system differs widely from city to city, you should bear in mind that generally speaking, people tend to use them way more often than in the United States. Even if France is a small country compared to the US, you might be surprised to discover how easy and quick it is to cross Paris using the subway or to go from Lille to Marseilles by train. Transportation through buses, streetcars, subways, and bikes are well developed in most French cities, and it is much more convenient to travel long distances by train than by car. With the **TGV** (*Train à Grande Vitesse*, high speed train), speeding at nearly 200 mph, it is virtually possible to go anywhere in the country in a couple of hours. For this reason, plane trips should be reserved for trips outside of France, in all the different European countries. Let’s review the different opportunities offered to you, starting with the Parisian system of public transportation. In any case, you should always think about questions of transportation before arriving in France. Try to ask as many questions as possible to your exchange program advisor, who’s usually pretty well-informed about the city where you’re about to live!

### Moving around Paris

> Bad news: Paris is a huge city. Good news: public transportation is one of the city’s prides. The map of the transportation system might appear a bit overwhelming at first, with all its letters, figures, and colors. But with a few explanations and a little bit of practice, everything should become clearer.

This section will talk about the **métro** (subway) and **R.E.R.** (standing for regional express network). The buses are more complicated to use, so you should at first stick to the rail systems. You’ll be using it extensively, most likely on a daily basis.

- **The métro** lines are the ones located inside Paris itself. They stop at **arrêts de métro** (subway stops), symbolized on the map by small dots. The métro lines are numbered from 1 to 14.
- **The R.E.R.** lines are the ones which go outside Paris itself, to places like St-Cloud, St-Quentin en Yvelines, or Versailles. There are five different lines, named from A to F. One usually uses the R.E.R. for “long” travels, for example to cross the entire city, or go to the suburbs. For shorter distances, one will use the metro. However, in many cases, you will combine both modes of transportation to reach your destination.

> When taking the metro, you have to buy some **tickets de métro** (subway passes), which can be purchased in any subway station. You will see either a booth with a clerk ready to help you, or an automatic machine. Bear in mind that it’s more economical to buy books of 10 tickets, which are cheaper than buying single tickets. The price of a book of 10 tickets is currently 12 euros.

> One ticket entitles you to any number of subway transfers, meaning that as long as you don’t exit a station, you can go as far as you want on the whole subway network.
Using the metro is pretty easy: using the map, just see which line goes to the stop closest to your final destination—of course, you might need to transfer. Don’t forget to memorize the direction of the line, as you don’t want to end up at the totally opposite of your destination! The direction of a line is named after its end point, meaning that a line has always two directions.

Exemple: you’re currently at Strasbourg Saint-Denis and want to visit the Louvre Museum. You can either start by taking the mauve line 8, direction Balard, and then transfer at Opéra to the pink line 7, direction Villejuif-Louis Aragon, before exiting at Palais Royal Musée du Louvre station.

Or you can start taking the purple line 4, direction Porte d’Orléans, transfer at Châtelet to pink line 7, direction La Courneuve 8 Mai 1945, and exit at Palais Royal Musée du Louvre.

Let’s now say a word more specifically about the way the R.E.R. works, which is a little bit more complicated. The idea is that Paris is divided in different concentric parts, called zones. Zone 1 is Paris itself, zone 2 the very close suburbs, zone 3 a bit farther, up to zone 6. Each time you cross or enter into a zone, the price of the ticket gets higher. However, the R.E.R. can be taken with a basic metro tickets if you stay in zones 1 and/or 2. It means that if you want to take the R.E.R. to travel outside of zones 1 and 2, you will need to buy special R.E.R. tickets, which take into account the distance between your current station and your destination. As a precaution, you should always either ask an RATP agent what kind of ticket you will need, or buy a R.E.R. ticket at an automated machine. Doing so will allow you to not have to worry about the question of zones, because the machine will calculate the fee for you to pay. As a conclusion, try to bear in mind that in most cases, when riding the R.E.R., you cannot use standard métro tickets.
You have to know that most Parisians know the names of the different lines, stations, and transfer nodes by heart—and you will probably do too, after a semester in the city. However, during your first weeks in Paris, you should keep with you at all times a little plan of the transportation network. They can be purchased in any subway station or bureau de tabac for a couple of euros.

You should also try to familiarize yourself with the website of the RATP (http://www.ratp.fr). RATP (Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens) is the name of the organization which runs the public transportation services in Paris. Their website allows you to optimize your trips around the city, by entering your starting point and your destination on an interactive map. You will also find much interesting information about the history and development of the Parisian subway.

Let’s conclude with a word about the Vélib’ system. Vélib’ are public bicycles which can be rented for 30 minutes or more. They can be found in Vélib’ stations located throughout the city, and are a convenient and green way to visit the French capital. When you take a Vélib’, you can bring it back in any Vélib’ station of the city. Using them usually requires you to open a special account using a credit card, so you should inquire and ask questions at any subway station.

To conclude, Paris is a huge and wonderful city which gives you all the required tools to explore it, so try to go out as often as possible!
Moving around other French Cities

Detailing the way public transportation works in all the different French cities hosting a university of the IdA network would take way too long. As a consequence, we can only incite you to visit the website of both your host university and the city where you’re about to live, in order to obtain as much information as possible about the opportunities offered by the public transportation network. Sometimes, you will discover that the city has decided to privilege a bus system or a cable car system, or learn that they offer special prices depending on your age or status. More and more French cities are also developing their own public bicycle rental programs. In any case, try to ask your exchange program advisor as many questions as possible. Don’t leave the U.S. without knowing at least a bit of what you should expect once arrived in your French host city!

Travelling by Train

Taking the train is a fabulous way of discovering French cities. You can find train stations almost everywhere, and rates can be really interesting. The French train network is regulated by the SNCF (Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer, National Society of Rail), and has agencies which can be found both in and outside train stations. An interesting option for exchange students is the Carte 12/25, which allows people between the age of 12 and 25 to travel with a minimum of 25% off the basic train ticket, and sometimes even 50% off. The Carte 12/25 costs 49 euros for a year, and can be purchased in any train station or SNCF agency. Concerning tickets, they can be purchased either in stations and agencies, or online, from the SNCF website. When it comes to trips to the other side of the country, think about the TGV (Train à Grande Vitesse, High-Speed Train)! Many big cities can be reached from Paris in a breeze. For more information, you can visit http://www.sncf.fr

Taking the Plane

While taking the plane to travel in France is usually costly and less interesting than taking the train, it can be very inexpensive to fly around the European Union. During your semester or year abroad, you will probably want to visit a couple of European countries— they’re all so close to each others! However, a couple of low-cost European plane companies such as Ryanair and Easy Jet offer extremely cheap tickets; sometimes, you can find round-trip fares for Rome or Berlin for around 30 euros! For that reason, you should surf the web often looking for interesting deals and offers. Sometimes, these special deals are only available for a very short time, and sometimes you will be asked to book pretty far in advance.

Public transportation is huge in Europe, and you should use it extensively, for everything. When taking the train or flying, always remember that you should have with you your immigration document, including your U.S. Passport, Visa (Visa de Long Séjour Valant Titre de Séjour) and any other document relevant to your personal immigration status abroad. Good luck in your trips, and try to make the most of your semester(s) abroad!
Understanding the French System

Most of the universities in France are directly organized, monitored, and financed by the government itself. As a consequence, the following tips should apply wherever you happen to spend your semester or year abroad. The university year is composed of two semesters: S1 (roughly from September to December) and S2 (roughly from January to June). The figure representing the semester evolves according to the level of the student: the B.A. (la licence) being done in three years, for a total of six semesters, S1 and S2 correspond to the first year (or L1, for LicencePremière Année), S3 and S4 to the second year (or L2) and S5 and S6 for the third year (or L3). Don’t be puzzled too much by this avalanche of figures, and just be sure about when you’re supposed to arrive and when you’re supposed to leave! The director of your exchange program is always a good advisor when it comes to technical details.

Try to always be aware of the exact length of your stay, in order to be able to pick your classes without doing mistakes (for more information, see the paragraph Choosing classes).

In France, the whole higher education system revolves around the LMD system, meaning that your start with a Licence, in three years, and then go on with a Master, in two years, and can finish with a Doctorat, which takes a minimum of three years—there is no clear distinction made between undergraduate studies and graduate studies.

Grades (les notes) are on a scale from 0 (awful work) to 20 (perfect work), with sometimes decimals used. A grade of 10 is called la moyenne, meaning that in most cases a grade under 10 is considered bad, and a grade above 10 is considered good. Be aware that as everywhere, some teachers tend to grade in a harsher way than others, and in some classes, obtaining an 8 or a 9 is considered pretty decent. Concerning exams, it is unusual to have to take more than one or two for each class. In most cases, all exams take place at the end of the semester, and the grades obtained will be final. However, be aware that in case of really bad grades, universities offer what are called examens de rattrapage, which are an opportunity to re-take a specific test in an attempt to obtain a higher grade. Grades obtained will then be converted to the U.S. scale of letters by the director of the exchange and added to your university transcript. As every director and university uses different methods to convert grades from the French to the U.S. system, it would be useless to give you precise correspondences here.

Attendance to classes is mandatory, and teachers usually call the roll at the beginning of every TD (see below). If you can’t attend a specific class, you are expected to directly contact the teacher and explain the reasons of your absence. If you have trouble understanding or following a specific class, don’t wait for the day of the exam to worry about it! Immediately request an appointment with the teacher in question and try to see what could be done to improve the situation. CM (see below) can be a particularly painful experience for exchange students, as professors tend to speak pretty fast. If you experience difficulties, you should never hesitate before asking the person seated next to you for help: French students will usually have much pleasure helping a foreign student.
Cours Magistraux and Travaux Dirigés

Two main types of classes exist in France: CM (cours magistraux) and TD (travaux dirigés). CM means that a professor, usually very experienced and specialized in the subject, will sit in front of you and lecture. The audience is usually pretty large, ranging from fifty to more than three hundred students. You are supposed to take as many notes as possible, and later do research by yourself on the multiple references mentioned by the teacher. You are not expected to take part directly to a CM, but usually intermittent questions are welcomed.

Contrary to the CM, the TD’s audience is usually limited to a maximum of thirty students. The theme of the TD is usually directly linked to the CM, with the difference that the students are expected to talk and build the whole class along with the teacher. Be aware that CM and TD usually go together: for a single class, you’ll usually have to take both a CM and a TD. While the CM is the more theoretical part, the TD offers the opportunity to apply theory in a more practical way. In most cases, you’ll have one CM and one TD each week, for each class. For example, if you pick a class entitled “Histoire et Littérature Américaines,” you’ll have to attend both the CM (which could be a 1-hour-a-week, chronological history of American literature and culture) and the TD (which could be a 2-hour-a-week class in which you’re expected to read and prepare specific texts from a corpus of literary works, and then discuss your ideas and results during the class).

The relationship with professors is usually very different from what you would expect in the United States. In most cases, you are expected to be extremely polite with the professors, and familiar and rude language or attitudes are not accepted. Of course, each teacher has his or her own standards, and some tend to be more relaxed and easy-going than others—but when speaking in French, you should always say vous and never say tu to a professor. In a similar way, it is extremely unusual to see students calling their teachers by their first name: unless told to do otherwise, you should always address your teacher “Monsieur,” or “Madame.”

Last important thing: you should always attend orientation at the beginning of the semester. Orientation may be mandatory or voluntary, depending on the university, but is always very worthwhile for getting acclimated and for resolving details.

Choosing Classes

In most cases, you will be expected to choose and pick your classes before your departure. This is a very important phase, because as an exchange student, you are to attend classes in direct link with your major in the United States. Your semester or year abroad has to include classes relevant to the diploma you’re preparing in your American university. In order to avoid mistakes, you should always work with the director of the exchange program and an advisor in your major about how and when you’re expected to pick your classes. He or she will be able to tell you how many classes you have to take, and the types of classes you’re allowed to choose from. Sometimes the whole process can be done through the internet, and sometimes it is the director him or herself who has to communicate your choices to the university hosting you in France.