



TWO GERMAN GIRLS

Claudia and Wiebke, Exchange Students,
Provide Their Impressions of
Oakland University

1. How did you come to OU? Since summer 2000, Oakland University and the University of Oldenburg in Germany have had an exchange program between the two universities.

2. Do you pay tuition, and do Oakland Students pay tuition in Germany?

German students do not pay tuition at Oakland University but OU students pay Oakland tuition and can enrol in three or four courses each semester that are specifically designated in the catalogue and on Banner as overseas courses. On both campuses, the overseas courses will transfer into the student's academic major or but it is essential that students discuss their overseas course work with their professors in their major or minor and who will evaluate their course work upon the student's return to their home campuses. OU students, who are not part of a formal exchange between the universities, can apply for admission to a German university and get free tuition if they are accepted. Students pay activity fees and room and board at the site of their partner universities.

3. What is the name of your home university and where is it? What kind of town is it in?

Our University is called "Carl von Ossietzky Universität" and it is located in Oldenburg. Oldenburg is a town with about 155,000 citizens in the very north of Germany, about 45

minutes away from the Northern Sea. Its weather is nearly the same as here in Rochester, except that it is not getting that cold in the winter.

Oldenburg is a manageable and green city with woods and roomy parks around. The gardens of the many one and two family houses provide for a lot of nature. Oldenburg's townscape is frequented by the students from the college and the Universität of Oldenburg: cosy pubs, cheap restaurants, and, of course, the bicycle as the transport number 1 belong to the life in the city.

Also culturally Oldenburg has many things to offer: a theater, a lot of museums, the Weser-Ems-Halle, where many concerts and fairs take place, and many other events thru the whole year, like a vine market, Easter market, or the city fest, where the party lasts the whole night and the people drink (alcohol!!!) and dance on the streets. And every summer the "cultural summer" transforms the city to an open-air theater.

4. Germans are famous for making good beer. What is the age limit for drinking beer in Germany?

In Germany you have to be 16 years to drink beer and to go in a club until midnight. If you wanna be out in a club after midnight you have to be over 18 and in some clubs they collect you ID if you are under 18 and call out your name if you have not left before midnight. But if you are over 18 the clubs are open for you until 5 or 6 am. This is that we first learn to control our drinking before we get our drivers license (in Germany we get our license with 18) and we think this is the better way around.

Beer is very famous in Germany and near Oldenburg there are three of Germany's biggest beer producers (Becks, Haake Beck, and Jever). In the South of Germany people prefer drinking wheat beer (German: Hefeweizen), especially at the popular "Oktoberfest", the biggest party in Munich. Actually, we both do not really like beer, which is not very common for Germans. ☺

5. Does Oakland require more or less term papers and other writing tasks than Oldenburg? Describe the differences you found.

At our university we do not have to write more papers, but we have to write more pages about our topic and our papers are more specific. The main difference between papers in Germany and OU is that at OU our longest paper was 14 pages double-space, which means 7 pages in Germany. This is nothing compared to our papers in Germany where we actually have to write about 15–20 pages single spaced on one topic.

6. What do Europeans like you hope to gain from a semester at OU? Did you get what you came for?

The main thing we came for to OU was to improve our English skills. Despite improving our English we were interested in the American way of life, university life and what are the differences compared to Germany. We think we really got what we wanted. By studying for our classes, talking and going out with Americans we really improved our English and as a sideline we got to know the American way of life.

We also used this semester as a last chance to go abroad before we will start to work next year. So if we apply for our jobs next year this will be an additional bonus for our revenue. In Germany it is very important to speak at least one other language and to have cultural experiences, either from working or studying in a foreign country.

7. Where are the parties better, at OU or in Oldenburg?

Oakland is a non-alcoholic campus, so as a consequence all on-campus activities, like the Fall Ball, are parties without alcohol and also under control. If students are not allowed to drink—as an effect—they react crazy when they have the opportunity to: They dance on tables and get totally wasted. These are most of the experiences we made on parties on campus.

Club life in America is similar to Party life in Germany—

especially, if the clubs are only for students over 21. People are more relaxed: They sit, talk and dance. A big difference to parties in Germany is that our clubs are open until 6 am in the morning and even our University parties last at least until 4 or 5 am. In Oldenburg we have a lot of small student clubs in the city center. All of them have separate parts, where you can sit, relax, and have something to eat. This is a difference to big American clubs, where you can only dance and drink.

8. Some have complained that campus life at OU is boring. How would you describe it?

In Germany we do not really have a “campus life”. Our dorms are all over the city, so if we want to meet each other, we go into the city and meet or party there. Most of the students live in a so-called “WG” (short form for: “Wohngemeinschaft”), which are small apartments for three or four students.

We really think campus life at Oakland University is great! We cannot really compare living on campus at OU to other American Universities, but for us, living on campus is the best opportunity to meet people and to get involved into student life. We like the short ways to our classes and even if most of OU’s students are commuters, we got to know a lot of other students in the dorms or apartments and made many friendships there. We are a little community and especially for us exchange-students it is the best chance to settle in Oakland University.

9. If you would change one thing about Oakland or your experience here, what would it be?

If we could change one thing about our experience here then we would stay a whole year instead of just one semester. Now when we have to leave we just got to know some people from our classes nearer and we are sad that we cannot spend some more time with them. Despite that we did not really have the time to travel around, we could not even make it to the Ni-

agara Falls. If we could stay longer we would travel thru the country to see some more parts of America.

10. Did you meet other foreign students? Many American students?

In 2001, two years ago, Wiebke was an exchange student at Oakland University for one semester, too. In that year I lived in the dorm West Vandenberg, 7th floor. A lot of other exchange students lived on that floor—students from Malta, Japan, China—but also at least twenty other American students. We had a lot of cultural “come togethers”, for example eating Sushi on the floor or going home to some of the American’s homes for dinner.

This year we live together in our apartment with my friend Kristyn who was my roommate two years ago, in 2001. She picked us up from the airport and helped us a lot during the semester. We also met some Norwegian exchange students who have the same classes and are living in the same apartment building. In addition, that we met a lot of other students in the German and International Club: These clubs are great opportunities to get to know students from all over the world.

Most of the students we meet in our classes are Americans; a lot of them are interested in different cultures and want to know something about the German way of life. Some of them work in the German companies in the Detroit area and know a lot about Europe. But sometimes we also get weird questions from “college students”!!!, for example: Is Austria a part of Germany? Or if we have cars in Germany. And so on.

11. Do you have a car? And do foreign students have cars?

We both do NOT have a car—unbelievable in America, isn’t it? In the beginning we were thinking about buying one, but because we are only staying at Oakland for four months, we decided not to buy one. We never had any problems with that fact. We made a lot of friends on campus, in our classes, and we have a wonderful (American) roommate who are all

offering us, driving us around and taking us wherever we need to go.

But we know a lot of other exchange students who bought cars. Most of them are staying for two semesters and so they can travel around during Winter or Spring break.

In Oldenburg it is not very common for students to have a car. We have a very good transportation system and especially in our town every student has a bike, with which you can reach every part of the town.

12. Did you get a chance to see and hear the Detroit cultural attractions?

No, not at all!!

The only thing we were able to manage was the “Oktoberfest-Boatride” on the River Detroit with the German Club, which was really fun, because we got to see how Americans think about Germany. Most of them think, Germany is like Bavaria, but this is only a small part of Germany and not everyone in Germany is wearing a “dirndle” or “leather trousers”, eating “Bratwurst” or “Sauerkraut” and listening to “Volksmusik” (like it seems in Frankenmuth: We were totally shocked!!!). Actually, we are just normal people.

We also went to a basketball game of the Pistons, but we could barely see, because we sat in the very last row. In Germany basketball is not as famous as it is here and there are not that many people at the games, therefore we expected a really frisky atmosphere, but actually this was not the case, maybe because it was only pre-season.

If we had more time we would have liked to see some more cultural attractions in Detroit.

13. Did you travel far out the Detroit area?

Yes, we definitely travelled far out the Detroit area. Actually, we are just coming back from our trip to Duluth, Minnesota where we visited Wiebke’s American friend Kelly who I met when she was an exchange student in Oldenburg for one semester last year. We celebrated Thanksgiving with her family

and we really had a wonderful time together (and ate way too much ☺). As we did not get a cheap flight ticket to Minneapolis, we drove to her house—through Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin—a very long way on which we saw a lot of countryside . . . but it was FUN!

The weekend before Thanksgiving we visited Chicago—a great city to go Christmas Shopping (which is definitely better in the US than in Germany). We stayed in a hotel in the city and saw a lot of the tourist attractions—like the Sears Tower and the Water Tower.

We both visited the States before and saw cities like New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and Boston. So this time we really wanted not to travel around like a “German Tourist”—this time we wanted to be part of the American way of life.

14. As you know, OU has recently built new living facilities for students and we know that the two of you lived in one of them. A candid opportunity, now, what did you think of them?

In 2001, Wiebke lived in the dorms on OU campus. I shared one room with another student and a bathroom with 4 other girls. That had a lot of advantages in the beginning, because I got to know a lot of other students really fast. But after a while, I really wanted to be on my own for some hour. I also would have liked to eat my own food, prepare my own dinner and so on. I was also was not really used to stay in a room with another person, because this is not really common in Germany!

When I heard that OU built new buildings, I asked my counsellor Dr. Mabee if we could live in one of the new apartments: They are really perfect! We have our own room, a big living room, and two bathrooms. We also have a kitchen with everything in it: Microwave, Dish Washer and so on: More luxury than we ever had in one of our apartments in Germany. We can invite people to dinner or to study, and we have our own space for ourselves. We also had a lot of good parties in our apartment—there is enough space for 50 people!

15. Tell us more about the exchange program that brought you to Oakland:

The program was launched by Barbara Mabee, Professor of German and Chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Oakland University. Professor Mabee grew up near Oldenburg in northern Germany (town is called Westerstede and Wiebke comes from that town too!) and came to this country as an exchange student herself in the 1960s. She had the idea for the exchange program when she was on her sabbatical and doing research at the University of Oldenburg. She contacted the German department, the exchange program co-ordinator, Bob McLaughlin, and the then Vice-President of the University of Oldenburg, Ina Grieb. Professor Mabee found that there was a definite interest in an exchange with Oakland University, largely because of the site of the university, close to the headquarters of many major German automobile companies and a multitude of German-American companies. Vice President Ina Grieb came to Oakland University in 1999 to formalize the exchange, meet the President of OU and to get a feel for the campus and the industries surrounding OU. She also gave a lecture at OU. Professor Mabee hand-carried the final exchange agreement in her luggage for a final signing in the summer of 1999 as she went on a research visit to Germany. Two exchange co-ordinators from the University of Oldenburg have since visited the OU Campus and Professor Mabee frequently spends time in Oldenburg and meets the OU exchange students whenever she is in Germany. Having been an exchange student herself, she strongly believes that studying abroad offers a unique opportunity for personal growth in an unfamiliar setting and for understanding the strengths and shortcomings of one's own culture in the context of a global world.

The Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg is one of the youngest universities in Germany. Founded in 1973, it grew out the city's 200-year-old teacher training college. Today, the University includes Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Education, Economics, Languages, Business Studies,

Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Computer Science departments. Since 1973, enrolment has increased from 2,500 to more than 13,000. The University has established formal academic links with more than 30 universities in the USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Bulgaria, Russia and Tunisia. These partnerships include staff and student exchange programs as well as research projects. Since summer 2000, almost every semester students of the two universities have studied at the partner university. Some students go for one semester and some stay for two semesters. The exchange program is not limited to foreign language majors but designed for students from any academic unit as long as the OU student has had two years of German instruction. For the most part OU students enrol in German courses at the University of Oldenburg since the university has several different levels of courses in German Language and Culture for foreign students. However, each semester OU students can also sign up for courses (lecture courses or seminars) with regular German students in any field as long as OU students have made arrangements with an instructor from OU beforehand that the courses will transfer into a student's major or minor. The purpose of the program is to provide students with the opportunity to immerse themselves in another culture and language and to gain global perspectives in their chosen field of study.

Oldenburg students come usually in August and stay for the OU fall semester or if they stay for both semesters, they return in April or May. German students have also looked into internships because their student visas also allow them to do an internship in a field closely related to their academic studies for the same number of months that they have been formally enrolled in courses at OU. Students from OU either leave in early April to enrol in Oldenburg's summer semester that ends in mid July or they leave in early September to enrol in their winter semester that goes until mid February. If they go for the entire year, they leave in September and come back in July. Students make all overseas travel arrangements on

their own. So far, no faculty has been involved in the exchange program with the University of Oldenburg.

16. Last Question: When are you two coming back?

When we will leave Michigan in the end of December, we will have to finish our studying in summer 2004. We really want to work and get some experiences in our fields of study—Wiebke in Marketing and Claudia in Human Resources. Wiebke is thinking about coming back for an internship in one of the German companies around the Detroit area.

Anyhow, we both would like to come back some time to visit our friends, professors, and of course Oakland University.