

See original version in German: <https://projekt.bht-berlin.de/elba/testimonials-from-bht>

Dear readers,

My name is Christopher Ruhnau, and I had the great opportunity to receive a scholarship to study abroad in the USA from September 19, 2023, to March 17, 2024. As an electrical engineering student at Berliner Hochschule für Technik (BHT), the ELBA-program (Experiential Learning Berlin America) gave me the opportunity to expand my academic knowledge, gain new cultural perspectives, and improve my language skills.

The decision to apply for this scholarship did not come overnight. Inspired by conversations with professors, fellow students, and supervisors, I decided that a semester abroad would be a valuable addition to my academic and personal development. What particularly appealed to me was the opportunity to study at an internationally renowned college while experiencing American culture firsthand.

In this report, I would like to share my experiences with you—from the application and preparation process to daily life and studying at The College of New Jersey, to the countless learning experiences and personal development I have undergone. My goal is to provide valuable insights and tips to future scholarship recipients and to express my gratitude to the ELBA-program for this incredible opportunity. At the same time, I would like to say a word of thanks to my employer, Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe, without their encouragement and support I would not have been able to participate in this scholarship program.

I invite you to join me on my journey through the East Coast of the United States. It has been a time of growth, challenge, and many moments that have had a lasting impact on my view of the world and my role in it.

The college is a public university known for its strong emphasis on academic excellence and a close-knit campus community. It is located in Ewing, New Jersey, near Trenton, the state capital.

The college was originally founded in 1855 as New State Normal School and has undergone several name changes over the years before receiving its current name in 1996.

Application process for the ELBA-program

My first contact with the ELBA-program came about by chance. At an information event at Berliner Hochschule für Technik, which provided an overview of international exchange programs, I learned about the opportunity to conduct research or gain practical experience in the USA. The ELBA program particularly caught my attention because it seemed to be directly related to my interests and my field of study.

After the event, I decided to find out more about the program requirements and spoke to my professor about it. The criteria for applying included:

- A letter of recommendation from a professor confirming both academic aptitude and personal skills.
- Proof of language proficiency that meets the requirements for a DAAD scholarship abroad.
- Openness to new academic and cultural experiences in another country, summarized in a letter of motivation.

With this information, I prepared my application documents. I wrote my letter of motivation with the intention of clearly stating my motivation and reasons for applying to the ELBA program. I

also included the required letter of recommendation from a professor who was able to attest to my skills and qualities.

A few weeks after submitting my application, I received an email informing me that I had been included in the selection process for the ELBA program. Suddenly, the scholarship began to take shape.

The selection process lasted several weeks and consisted of several phases:

- An initial meeting to introduce yourself and get to know each other.
- An interview in English with the coordinators of the ELBA program to delve deeper into the details of the program.
- A final meeting with a professor or lecturer from TCNJ, provided a suitable match has been found, to explore the possibilities for collaboration.

When I was informed during the final phase that there was indeed a professor interested in collaborating with me, I realized that the scholarship would soon become a reality and that I was on the verge of numerous new and exciting experiences.

Preparing for my stay abroad

Preparing for my stay abroad as part of the ELBA program required careful planning and organization, especially with regard to visa matters.

Visa matters:

The first step in the preparation phase was to apply for a J-1 visa, which is required for participants in exchange programs in the USA. I found detailed information and guidelines on the official website of the US Consulate and from the coordinators at Berliner Hochschule für Technik and The College of New Jersey. The application process proved to be quite time-consuming, not least because of the extensive documentation required. In addition to the completed application form, I had to submit my passport, a recent photo, the letter of invitation from the College of New Jersey, and proof of funding for my scholarship. After some time and patience, I was relieved when I was finally granted the J-1 visa.

Accommodation:

Fortunately, the college provided accommodation free of charge. I was assigned a place in a house very close to the campus. The house, which I would share with five other people, was only a 10-minute walk from the campus.

Budget: Another aspect of my preparations concerned my budget. The free accommodation provided by the college allowed me to manage my scholarship money efficiently. This meant I could concentrate fully on my studies and the new experiences associated with them without having to worry too much about financial matters.

Personal preparation:

In addition to the administrative and logistical preparations, I placed great importance on my personal preparation. To prepare myself for the different seasons—fall, winter, and spring—in the US, I packed appropriate clothing so that I would be ready for any weather conditions. It was also important to me to carefully organize my documents. I took all the necessary papers with me and made additional copies to be on the safe side in case of loss. A mandatory part of the preparation was taking out private health insurance for abroad. After thorough research and

comparing different offers, I decided on insurance from the Würzburger Insurance Group. This decision gave me an additional feeling of security, as I knew that I would be well cared for in case of health problems.

Emotional preparation:

The day of departure was an emotional moment for both me and my partner, who will be holding down the fort at home from now on. My anticipation for the adventure ahead was mixed with the realization that I would not have an important person in my life by my side for some time. We viewed this period of separation as a new experience and challenge for our relationship, one that we would have to overcome together.

A central element of my experience abroad was the scholarship itself, which was specifically designed for a six-month stay. It aimed to offer scholarship holders not only the opportunity to gain practical experience and study, but also to conduct research. In my case, I decided to do a combination of both, which allowed me to work on my bachelor's thesis on "Controlling the NAO robot using digital audio signal processing."

The NAO robot offers a versatile development platform for designing your own applications with its built-in sensors and actuators. With the help of AI, it is also possible to assign specific tasks to the robot, such as distinguishing between different sounds.

The robotics lab provided me with all the resources and equipment I needed to work on my thesis. If anything was missing, it was ordered immediately. This allowed me to make the most of the time I had available.

Life in the host country

The time I spent in the USA enriched me enormously, not only academically but also personally. At first, I felt a little overwhelmed by the new environment, but this initial feeling of being overwhelmed quickly gave way to a deep fascination. I met many new people and gained insights into college culture, which was very different from what I knew in Germany. College life was characterized by a variety of clubs and sports activities, including baseball, soccer, swimming, hockey, and football.

Even everyday errands, such as shopping, became an adventure, as stores and supermarkets in the US are much larger than in Germany. I also had to get used to the comparatively high food prices, but this soon ceased to be a problem thanks to price comparisons and taking advantage of discount promotions. In addition, the college cafeterias offered the opportunity to enjoy inexpensive meals. In addition to my studies, there were numerous opportunities for leisure activities organized by student associations. Highlights included trips to New York (especially Chinatown), Philadelphia, and other places of interest.

Life at college

My first day at college was accompanied by a warm welcome. After receiving my campus card, my host professor, Dr. Kim, gave me a tour of the campus. I was impressed by its size and relatively quiet atmosphere. I was particularly taken with the Campus Town area, which offered a wide range of leisure activities, from gyms and hair salons to several restaurants.

The highlight, however, was the visit to the robotics lab, where I was to complete both my practical phase and my bachelor's thesis on "Controlling the NAO robot using digital audio signal processing." The lab was modernly equipped and housed numerous robots, which were distributed throughout the lab in various states.

My work environment included my own workstation with a large whiteboard, my own PC, and a NAO robot that I was allowed to use for my research. I quickly familiarized myself with the conditions, which helped me find my bachelor's thesis topic and work on it successfully. Over the months, I advanced my research in the lab and was able to successfully complete my bachelor's thesis.

Personal development

My stay abroad at The College of New Jersey as part of the ELBA program was not only academically enriching, but also a time of intense personal development. Professionally, working in the robotics lab offered me a unique opportunity to delve deeply into the topics of neural networks and machine learning. The practical application of this knowledge in the development and control of the NAO robot was a challenge that took my technical skills and problem-solving abilities to a new level.

Personally, living in a culture that was previously unknown to me was an opportunity to push beyond my own boundaries. Living outside my comfort zone forced me to deal with new situations and challenges, which led to growth in my adaptability and independence. Interacting with people from different cultures and the need to find my way in a foreign education system promoted my communication skills and intercultural understanding.

This combination of academic immersion and personal development had a lasting impact on my time abroad. The experiences I gained during my stay not only broadened my academic horizons, but also shaped my personality. I returned with a greater sense of independence, increased adaptability, and a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity.

Conclusion

In summary, my time at TCNJ as part of the ELBA program was an incredibly enriching experience that went far beyond the academic setting. The opportunity to study at a renowned US college while immersing myself in American culture provided me with a unique opportunity for personal and professional development.

The challenges I encountered and the people I met broadened my perspective on the world and made me a more open-minded and adaptable person. This scholarship was not only a step in my academic career, but also a life-changing experience that heightened my curiosity and thirst for knowledge.

I am deeply grateful for the support I received from all sides and hope that my experiences will inspire others to take the leap into the unknown and explore the countless opportunities that a scholarship abroad offers.

Translated with deepL 😊