

## International/Exchange Student Orientation Guide

As a further admissions test, we would like you to answer the following Trivia Questions:

1) How many people live in State College?

- a) 80.000    b) 200.000    c) 500.000    d) 94.000

2) How many people fit into Beaver Stadium?

- a) 60.000    b) 132.000    c) 37.000    d) 106.000

3) How much money was raised at the 2019 THON?

- a) 3.55 Million    b) 1.7 Million    c) 44 Million    d) 10.6 Million

*Herzlichen Glückwunsch! Did you answer all questions correctly? Then you are almost ready to start the semester! Here are some other relevant pieces of information that more specifically apply to international as well as exchange students.*

### **Before arrival**

**First salary:** Be warned that you will very likely not get a salary at the end of August because of the administrative things going on. Most likely, your first salary will be paid by the end of September, so make sure to have some savings for the first months here!

Tip: Get a credit card in your home country so that you don't have to immediately rely on your first pay check here or try to save up some money prior to moving to the States (pro tip: do both!).

**Proof of vaccination:** In order to be eligible for the Penn State Health Insurance, you need to provide proof that you have all the required vaccinations. You should have received a document which outlines which vaccinations are necessary (and which ones are recommended). Make sure to check your immunization card against the required vaccinations and to consult with a doctor in order to refresh any expired vaccinations before coming to Penn State. You can also bring your immunization card with you.

**How to get to State College:** Unfortunately, State College is kind of remote from any larger cities such as Pittsburgh (2 ½ hours), Philadelphia (3 hours), D.C. (3 ½ hours), Baltimore (3 hours), and New York City (4 hours). However, these are the cities with the closest international airports. State College also has an airport, but only for domestic flights from and to a very restricted number of cities. To get from any of the international airports to State College, you can check out Megabus and Greyhound Bus.

Megabus:                    <https://us.megabus.com/>

Greyhound Bus:         <https://www.greyhound.com/north>

**iStart:** Before and upon arrival in the States, you will have to register and upload multiple files to iStart, the PSU international student portal

(<https://istart.gp.psu.edu/istart/controllers/start/start.cfm>). These include:

- Your signed I-20 or DS-2019, your passport, and a visa photograph
- Complete Government Regulations Training
- Update your contact information
- Update personal information
- Your most recent I-94

### **After arrival**

**Orientation:** You will participate in three orientation events, international orientation (mandatory; sometime early August), the general grad student orientation (one week before classes start), and the departmental orientation (a couple of days before classes start). The international orientation and general grad student orientation cover important topics such as health insurance, campus policies, etc. The departmental orientation is designed to give helpful tips on how to stay on top of the work load, give you an idea of which textbooks we're using for teaching, how to set up your class on CANVAS (the portal we use for teaching), and of course meet and get to know other fellow grad students.

**International organizations:** i.e. "Bridges International", "RUF" - basically every organization will be introduced during the international orientation days. Even though, you might not feel like joining them forever, it is a great opportunity in the beginning to not be alone and to have something to do, meeting some people who are in the same situation (just arrived in State College or even the US) and it keeps you busy the first days. Moreover, they have many events with free food, hiking, and getting to know State College a bit. Even later in the semester they offer cheap trips, as well as organized "coming together" events.

**Setting up a bank account:** During the international orientation, you will get the opportunity to open a bank account which comes with a debit card (typically at the PNC bank). This is very convenient, because the orientation guides will help you to fill out the paperwork and to set it up will go quickly. After that it only takes a couple of days until you will be able to pick up your debit card at the PNC bank downtown in College Avenue. They usually have the offer that you, whenever you open an account with them, and you use your card 10 times within the first month, you will get \$200 as a welcome present. This is really worth it, since it's literally free money.

Of course, you can set up a bank account with any bank you like, but PNC has multiple branch locations on and off campus and is widespread across Pennsylvania. Getting an American bank account and debit card is definitely recommended, as it will make it easier for you to receive your paychecks and to make payments for rent, online orders, etc. without having to pay additional fees for using your out-of-country card.

If you want to transfer money to Germany, we can recommend a website called *TransferWise*. Talk to Maike or Valerie for details!

**SIM-Card and phone plans:** You will most likely need to get an American SIM-card for the duration of your stay to avoid any international fees. SIM-Cards and phone contracts in the US can be quite expensive. A couple phone plans that are worth checking out are:

T-Mobile

→ monthly option for \$45 includes 4GB of highspeed data, unlimited text and talk, and reasonable service throughout the US. For an additional \$15, you get data and talk for Canada and Mexico as well.

→ also offers a family plan (4 lines for \$30).

AT&T

→ cheapest plan is \$35 with AutoPay set-up including 1GB of data, unlimited text and talk, and a very good service throughout the US. For \$45 per month, your plan includes service in Canada and Mexico as well.

TING

→ cheapest provider around, with monthly fares as cheap as \$9. This includes limited data, but no text or calls. You pay extra per text or minute of calling (ingoing and outgoing). Be aware that service outside of Pennsylvania is often pretty bad!

Cricket

→ worth it to think about a plan with some other people, since it is always cheaper to get a family plan (but you do not have to be family for that)

Other providers:

Verizon

MintMobile

**Getting a Social Security Number (SSN):** To get your social security number, you need to fill out the Social Security eForm on iStart. You may collect the DISSA letter after 2 business days at the DISSA Reception Desk outside 408 Boucke Building (8am-5pm, Monday through Friday). You must have your photo ID to pick up the document. After you pick up your DISSA letter, you must go to the Social Security Administrative office (e.g. 901 University Dr Suite 2, State College, PA 16801). As soon as you receive your Social Security Card, you must update your I-9 in Equifax.

**WorkLion/Workday:** Laura Shaffer is responsible for guiding you through the registration process. Again, you will need information provided on your passport, I-20 or DS-2019, SSN, PSU ID, etc. It's important to complete this quickly to receive your first salary as soon as possible.

**Tax treaty:** If I understood it correctly, the tax treaty between the US and different countries exempt a person from paying taxes in the US. However, it is usually limited to a certain time period (4 years for Germany). -> for international students, who are going to be here for 5 years

anyways, it is advisable to not participate in the tax treaty but to pay taxes in the US. This means that you will have to file taxes every year (April 15 is when taxes have to be filed). For exchange students who are here for only 1 year, it can be advisable to accept the tax treaty.

Address:

Payroll Office - 101 James M. Elliott Building 120 South Burrowes Street State College, PA 16801-3857
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**Legal status:** Your legal status here in the US is that of a nonresident alien. This is important to know and indicate for example when you complete your work documents, file taxes etc.

**Health insurance:** see general orientation guide entry (page 9).

**IDs:** State College is very strict in terms of IDs. If you want to enter a bar or buy alcohol, you will need to have your passport ready as they don't accept your national ID. If you don't want to carry around your passport with you at all times, you can apply for a US ID at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV, or Department of Transportation DOT). Similarly, if you want to buy a car to get around more easily, you will need a US issued ID as they don't accept any form of foreign ID for buying a car. International driver's licenses are only valid for a year, so you will also need to consider getting a Pennsylvania driver's license. If you have a German driver's license, you can simply exchange it for a Pennsylvania one and won't have to take a driver's exam. If your license is not German, you will have to check in at the DMV to see if such a treaty also exists for your country.

DMV/DOT Address: 812 W College Ave, Bellefonte, PA 16823  
Phone: (800) 932-4600  
Website: <https://www.dmv.pa.gov/Pages/default.aspx>

**DISSA and its processes (travel signature, etc.):** DISSA is the Directorate of International Student & Scholar Advising (you will most likely already be familiar with it as a lot of the communication before arrival will be through their office).

If you want to travel abroad, you will need to get a travel signature from DISSA. THIS IS CRUCIAL: If you don't have a travel signature, you can't re-enter the US. To get a travel signature, you have to apply for the signature on iStart (see section on iStart). You will get notified on when you can bring in your I-20 or DS-2019 and when you can pick up the signed form. The travel signature is valid for one year only, which means you will need to get a new signature every year.

Address: 410 Boucke Building, University Park, PA 16802  
Website: <https://global.psu.edu/article/contact-dissa>

**Water (get a filter so you don't die/dye):** Even though water quality in the US is generally good, tap water often contains disinfectants like chlorite, bromate, or haloacetic acids, which can contribute to a slightly "off" taste. You will therefore want to get a water filter such as a Britta filter, and you can get these from pretty much any larger store such as Walmart or Target (we do not recommend ZeroWater filters!). Similarly, if you have sensitive hair, you may want to get hair products like shampoos and conditioners that provide your hair with enough nutrients.

**Restaurants:** While this may be different in many other countries, in the US, it is customary to tip between 15 and 20 % for food and drinks. Wages for waiters and waitresses are very low here and so they rely on tips to actually make a living. It is very rude to not tip at all or to tip considerably below 15 %.

**Driving and participating in traffic:** The most important thing is: DO NOT TRUST CARS TO STOP FOR YOU!! Although the law clearly states that drivers have to yield to pedestrians and cyclists when turning or at a crosswalk, many drivers WILL NOT! Make sure that drivers see you and actually slow down. There are many young people in fast cars on State College's roads, who don't always know what they are doing. Please be very careful and wait until it is safe to cross. For your reference, here is the PennDOT regulation:

Drivers must yield to pedestrians when they are: a) crossing at any intersection without a traffic light (with or without a crosswalk); b) crossing the roadway in marked crosswalks, whether or not at an intersection; c) walking on a sidewalk crossing a driveway or alley; and d) when the driver is turning a corner and pedestrians are crossing with the light.

Although the traffic laws largely overlap with those in Europe, there are some things to keep in mind. Importantly, traffic laws may vary depending on the state you are in. Make sure to look up traffic regulations if you travel to another state by car. In Pennsylvania, you may turn right on a red light unless otherwise indicated:

When there is a steady red light, you must stop before crossing the marked stop line or crosswalk. You may turn right while the light is red, unless a NO TURN ON RED sign is posted at the intersection. You must first stop, check for and yield to pedestrians and other traffic.

4-way stops are another big difference, since they do not work like the German *rechts-vor-links* rule:

A FOUR-WAY STOP sign means there are four stop signs at this intersection. Traffic from all four directions must stop. The first vehicle to reach the intersection should move forward first. If two vehicles reach the intersection at the same time, the driver on the left yields to the driver on the right. If facing one another both can proceed with caution, watching for possible turns.

For further reference, we advise that you familiarize yourself with the Pennsylvania Driver's Manual, which is available as a PDF under:

Website:

<https://www.dot.state.pa.us/public/dvspubsforms/bdl/bdl%20manuals/manuals/pa%20drivers%20manual%20by%20chapter/english/pub%2095.pdf>

Again, please be careful and do not trust State College drivers!

*If you have questions at any point, please do not hesitate to ask your fellow grad students! We have all been in the same situations as you and can help you with navigating your new environment.*