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How to choose a school?

This might be the most intuitive thought going through your mind while trying to choose your priorities for a study abroad semester. Well, if you don't have the time for some research, it might be a good practice to choose the most popular option.

However, if you do want to make a well-thought decision, you need to-

1. Decide about your criteria and prioritization of your criteria
2. Evaluate universities by your criteria
3. Prioritize the universities by your evaluation

Choosing your criteria

Let's break down the actual criteria that should lead you, the way I see it:

1. Social Environment
 - a. What type of people could you expect to meet and hang out with? (Age? Outgoing? Studies-oriented? Language barrier [not in US]?)
 - b. Urban school Vs. Campus-oriented school?
2. Academic Level
3. Traveling
 - a. Location
 - b. Transportation
4. Weather
5. Extracurricular Activities (Sports, Clubs etc.)
6. Cost of living

Evaluating by your criteria

After you gave a thought to your specific criteria, there are several resources to gather information from:

1. www.niche.com – Insane amount and resolution of information. Also, take a look at the "Reviews" section.
2. Talk to former study abroad Israeli students, super important to get the exchange student perspective.
3. Read these reports of course.
4. Forget about search phrases like "top business schools", "best universities in the US".

Should you choose UT Austin?

I can't compare my experience to any other university, but I'll say that this was one of the best experiences of my life.

What did I look for?

As I knew that most schools are great in academic terms, I mostly sought for a great social experience. As weather and location affect social, these were very important as well.

Texas? Austin? Green, friendly, young, active, parties, spacious, startup, these describes Austin for me.

Nature:

People told me I'd be surprised by how green Austin is, yet I didn't expect for that. Within the city you have some great parks and green peaceful neighborhoods, around it you can find *Barton springs* pool (Top left picture), the Colorado river, which creates a lot of amazing spots for hiking, SUP, tubing (Bottom left) or just swimming.

The nature just outside of Austin is also spectacular. For example, Hamilton pool preserve (Bottom left) just 44min away, close to an amazing state park.

The campus itself is also very green and beautiful. Sometimes I just preferred the 25 min walk through the campus nature rather than taking the bus. Whether you go through the campus vast main "speedway" avenue, or follow the stream the flows through the east side of campus, it feels great.

Biking through Austin is super convenient, biking lanes are great, and there are a lot of rental options (free simple bikes rental for students like תל-אופן, E-Scotters & E-Bikes rental), there's even a reoccurring used bikes auction event (It's fun even if you don't win).

Social:

It's not only my experience, people say that Austin is very friendly. I don't think I had several consecutive days that I didn't meet someone new. You'll meet a lot of interesting people from everywhere, whether it's on the bus, bar, campus or in a startup week, university fair, or some students organization event, there are endless options to meet new people in.

Particularly, McCombs business school offers a variety of student organizations – Wine club, beer club, sports club, traveling club, entrepreneurs club, tech club, there are around 30 of them, and each one offers it's own events.



Among some great events I recall are:

- ACL (One of the biggest music festivals in the US)
- Texas state fair (US & Texas stereotypes at their best, have you ever tasted deep fried butter?)
- Potluck dinners (everyone brings some local food of his own)
- **FOOTBALL** is BIG in UT, honestly I couldn't care less about the game itself, but everything around it is insane – "Tailgating" before the game (party of sort), crazy atmosphere in the game, and partying after the game
- Wine club events – It's just the opposite of what you imagine...
- Startup week & startup crawl – Tons of high-tech companies and startups opened their doors for everyone to come and learn, have some drinks, food. It ended with a big party, all for free.



There's always something happening, and you will always miss some event because you just can't be everywhere at one time.

Nightlife is also great in Austin, it's a student city and you feel it easily walking through 6th street or rainy street which are packed with bars, clubs and tons of people celebrating.

Except of Austin itself, of course there are limitless options of things you could plan and do with friends. I traveled with friends to Chicago, Las Vegas, San Antonio, New Orleans and Dallas.

Academics:

The academic experience is different then what we are used to in Israel, there's an emphasis on the studying experience, by involving various interesting activities inside and outside of class, and also involving various external lecturers from the industry.

I had a lesson in a museum, a surprise filmed interview by a news reporter in one lesson. The lecturers are great and put much effort in delivering the study curriculum in an interesting fashion.

The lecturer that I valued the most during the year, surprised us **during** the test and brought all the class pizzas (in addition, he invited everyone to his place to watch him perform with his band).

McCombs is situated high among the business schools in the US, with a good reason (not just the pizzas).

Living in Austin:

Austin is a student city, and you feel it in all central areas of it (you probably won't get far from central Austin).

Transportation - Everything is pretty close. There are various transportation options - Shared rides like Uber/Lyft, E-Scooters, bikes, E-Bikes, free buses for students, as mentioned the bike lanes are very convenient.

Prices – Housing prices are pretty high, in general Austin real-estate market is booming as demand grows higher every year, and the high-tech and startup scene keeps growing. Talk to me for more info regarding that matter. Besides housing, everything else is quite affordable and normal.

Safety – Austin is extremely safe, and although it's safe, the campus operates its own police.

Weather:

It depends on the season you intend to go on, but in general, Texas, including Austin, is relatively hot. If you intend to go on fall semester, you will experience very high temperatures for several weeks (Yet humidity is not as bad as in Tel-Aviv for example). As a person who suffers from the heat, I personally preferred that over a cold weather.

Traveling outside of Austin:

Texas is just in the middle between the east coast and west coast, at the south of the US.

Disadvantages –

- Most popular destinations requires a flight.

Advantages –

- Texas is in the middle, which means that the distance by flight to both sides is reasonable, in contrast to flying from one coast to the other.
- **The big advantage** – You will get to visit amazing destinations that on a typical US trip you wouldn't visit since they are remote from the coasts. New Orleans!, San Antonio, big bend national park (on the Mexican border), you could even visit destinations in Mexico and Cuba.
- Texas is a very proud state with it's own **distinct culture**, whether you'll visit the state fair, a football game, dance the Texas two-step dance, argue about Tex-Mex food, or just notice how big is **everything**, you'll get that distinct vibe you wouldn't get in many places in the US.



I got to travel a lot as I mentioned, and for me this is one of the greatest things about the exchange, just being able to group with several friends and go wherever you like.

Conclusion:

1. Choose wisely.
2. Choose. It's going to be one of the best things you ever did.
3. Choose UT Austin, McCombs!

Contact:

For any further information, feel free to contact me via email or mobile (ask Hila Rachmani).

Tomer Peled

