

A (Free) Alternative to Studying Abroad:

The Voluntary Social Year in Germany

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## Abstract

Many American college students cannot afford to study abroad at a time of their life when an immersion experience in a foreign country would benefit them the most. This article discusses the opportunity to live and volunteer in Germany or Austria on a modest, but adequate monthly stipend through the *Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr* or Voluntary Social Year. A parallel program called *Ökologisches Freiwilliges Jahr*, concentrates on ecological volunteering. Volunteers can choose from a wide range of possible activities, expanding their international and professional expertise. In addition, these programs represent alternative paths to academic education, offering volunteers 25 weekend seminars per year designed to enrich them intellectually and socially. Because Germany is experiencing a shortage of volunteers, foreign volunteers are very welcome there. On average, 97,000 young men have spent their time annually in the German military during the last decade of the compulsory draft (2001-2011) with a year of civil service. By 2015, however, fewer than 39,000 volunteers worked in civil service, leaving approximately 58,000 of previously staffed volunteer spots vacant each year. This article outlines how a college graduate may obtain a volunteer position in Germany.

### A (Free) Alternative to Studying Abroad: The Voluntary Social Year in Germany

Many American college students cannot afford to study abroad due to financial or time constraints. Yet they are at an age when an immersion experience in a foreign country would benefit them the most: they are flexible and resilient enough to undertake a life-changing adventure; if they have hardly traveled before, this challenge will expand their social and intellectual horizons; their résumé most likely could use the highly desirable boost afforded by an extended international experience prior to entering the job market; and they are not moored yet in mortgages, careers, and/or committed relationships. After graduation, some graduates solve this dilemma of being caught between a lack of money or time during their college years and the desire to see the world by joining the [Peace Corps](#), [Rotaract](#), [Lions Clubs International](#), [United Nations Volunteers](#), or [Kiwanis International](#). Others pay a fee to organizations that connect them to vetted volunteer projects across the globe. This article discusses another option: the opportunity to live and volunteer in Germany or Austria on a modest, but adequate monthly stipend through the *Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr* (FSJ) or Voluntary Social Year.

#### **Background of the *Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr***

The FSJ was conceived of in 1954 as a time for diaconical service by the two main churches in Germany (i.e., the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches). Based on its popularity, the voluntary year of service became a governmentally-funded program in 1964. The funding, which is equivalent to the subsidies paid for tuition-free vocational training or university studies in Germany, recognizes the FSJ as an alternative path to education. As such, volunteers are obligated to participate in 25 educational days per year that usually are organized as five-day seminars. These weeks count toward the twelve months of service and all expenses are fully covered. Most of the German federal states or *Bundesländer* have designated meeting facilities

that resemble youth hostels. They may be situated in forests, castles, or fin-de-siècle mansions, on mountains or farms, by lakes or the ocean, and in towns (Figure 1).



*Seminarzentrum Gut Siggen, Schleswig-Holstein*



*Sport- und Tagungszentrum Hachen, Hesse*



*Bildungsstätte Burg Bodenstein, Thuringia*



*Jugendbildungsstätte Bad Hindeland, Bavaria*

*Figure 1. Sample locations of meeting facilities for the required education days.*

The seminars are designed to enrich the volunteers intellectually and socially. They establish contact between all the volunteers in a region for mutual support and companionship. Their academic topics vary, but may include courses in psychology, pedagogy, or political science. Further schooling focuses on psychological health and social justice, such as conflict resolution, gender studies, anthroposophy (i.e., therapeutic education to maximize mental well-being), peace

studies, and yoga. To obtain an impression of the variety of activities and lessons offered in a week-long seminar, visit the [website of EOS](#) (based in the state of Baden-Württemberg).

### **Program Description of the FSJ**

The term “year” is essentially a misnomer, since the FSJ can last from 6 to 18 months, depending on the needs of the institution requesting a volunteer. The program is decentralized, meaning that each of the 16 federal states in Germany handles it differently. Most states, such as Baden-Württemberg, have established central websites that attempt to list available slots that are often organized by region, type of work, or specific criteria (e.g., a driver’s license is required, etc.). Many young Germans rely on the ubiquitous means of public transportation to get around and don’t obtain the expensive driver’s license, so this is important information to know prior to applying.

Any federally certified charitable, social, or public organization can request volunteers and obtain federal funds to pay them without going through a state-sponsored channel. Accordingly, the range of possible activities is enormous. Volunteers can choose from human rights agencies, schools, daycare programs, neighborhood groups, agricultural co-ops, refugee groups, sports clubs, museums, parks, animal rescue centers, community gardens, theaters, operas, churches, hospitals, nursing homes, cemeteries, libraries, youth programs, archaeological excavations, historic preservation sites, and city, state and federal governments. In keeping with Germany’s remarkable focus on environmental protection and alternative energy, a parallel program, called *Ökologisches Freiwilliges Jahr*, concentrates only on ecological volunteering.

Volunteers are compensated for their work. Currently, the maximum monthly allowance is 381 EUR (\$425) plus additional funding for room and board if these are not available within the organization’s buildings. In addition, all volunteers are fully insured (i.e., health, dental,

accident, unemployment, long-term care, and old age) and receive 20-26 days of paid vacation time and 12 days of paid holidays. They also are provided work clothes and monthly local transportation passes. The workload is 35 hours per week.

The FSJ is open to anyone aged 18-27, with older volunteers entering the *Bundesfreiwilligendienst* (BFD; Federal Volunteer Service) instead. Like the FSJ, this program is intended to promote social solidarity through personal involvement; unlike the FSJ, it accommodates both employed and non-working (e.g., unemployed or retired) individuals by offering part- and full-time shifts. Their benefits are similar to those received via the FSJ.

### **The Application Process and Preparing for the FSJ**

Foreign volunteers are very welcome in Germany to participate in the FSJ program. But what must a recent graduate do to find a volunteer slot abroad? Below are the listed requirements:

1. Learn to speak German. Although most Germans speak English, some German-speaking skills are highly recommended. There are numerous websites that teach beginning German. The federal language institute offers online courses and even some free resources. Many libraries own copies of the Rosetta Stone learning program. Self-motivated learners can study grammar online (e.g., DuoLingo, Parleremo, and Babbel) and then connect for speaking practice sessions with like-minded individuals on language-exchange websites (e.g., italki, LingoZone, or busuu).
2. Compose a German-style *Lebenslauf* which resembles an American resume with some important alterations. German *Lebensläufe* do not state honors, hobbies or

- objectives and always sport the applicant's passport-style photo on the upper left corner. Examples and templates can be found here: <https://lebenslauf.com/>
3. Find several appealing volunteer positions by searching for FSJ and identifying the federal state in which you wish to work.
  4. Send out emails with your *Lebenslauf* attached, introducing yourself and stating your German language skills. Be honest about them; you don't want to arrive to find that you cannot do the job.
  5. Once an institution accepts you, obtain a passport and the International Driving Permit (available at an AAA office). Many U.S. states have a reciprocity agreement, allowing you to drive with your American license (check here whether your state participates: <https://www.german-way.com/for-expats/living-in-germany/german-drivers-license-reciprocity/>), but the IDP is useful if you get stopped and your police officer is unclear about the rules.
  6. Open a checking account with a bank that doesn't charge fees for international ATM withdrawals (e.g., Bank of America is linked with Deutsche Bank and waives all fees). This way you can withdraw cash at a Deutsche Bank ATM in the Cirrus network as soon as you arrive. The surcharges you save will pay for your first meal there!
  7. Apply for a credit card that doesn't charge a currency exchange surcharge for international purchases (e.g., VISA card from Capital One).
  8. Join the expat community InterNations at <https://www.internations.org/> for support and practical advice. Also, read the tips provided here: <https://www.german-way.com/>

9. Gather your medical records, especially a list of your vaccinations. You will undergo a medical examination at your place of assignment.
10. In case your family and friends are not so tech-savvy, set them up with a Skype account or practice Facetiming with them. Be sure that your plan allows international roaming. If not or if it's too expensive, German cell phone plans are cheap and you can use your laptop for Skyping.
11. If your organization cannot provide you with housing, you can search for rentals here: <http://www.wg-gesucht.de/>. Your German host will also be able to help you, especially if your volunteer location is in a small town.

### **Suggestions for Getting Acclimated Once Arriving in Germany**

What happens after you arrive? American citizens can enter Germany and stay as tourists for three months without a visa. You will probably land in Frankfurt and from there, travel to your assignment. There are two travel options: train or bus. Both are clean, efficient, and fast, but the bus will be much cheaper. Check with <https://www.flixbus.com/> and <https://www.bahn.com/en/view/index.shtml> for prices. If you buy a train ticket, remember to purchase a seat reservation, too.

Once you have moved into your residence, you will need to visit some city offices. Your employer will provide you with a work contract and proof of health insurance, which you must bring to the *Ausländeramt* (or *Ausländerbehörde*) to obtain an *Aufenthaltstitel* (time-limited residence permit). After that, you will show your passport, *Aufenthaltstitel*, and lease at the *Einwohnermeldeamt*, which may also be called *Bürgeramt* or *Bürgerbüro*. There you will fill out a *Meldeschein* (registration certificate). Some people find the bureaucracy in Germany burdensome, but these registrations make sure that all people receive the social services they are



entitled to and that no one is homeless or uninsured. These precautions also lower the crime rate in comparison to the United States. In 2013, for example, there were 682 murders in Germany and 15,696 in the US (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013), which represents rates of 0.85 and 4.88/100,000 inhabitants respectively.

Because bills and salaries in Germany are paid via bank transfers, you will need a bank account. The following website contains some useful information: <http://www.movingto-berlin.com/german-bank-account/>). While still in the US, open an account at the first bank mentioned: Deutsche Kreditbank.

Germany is a social democracy with an enviable quality of life. Most people live comfortably, not ostentatiously and there is very little poverty. So, you will not see a large disparity between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. At first, many people will appear distant and even uninterested in you because they are ensconced in private lives. Most Germans stay right where they were raised. You should actively seek contacts and the more conversant you are in political and social matters, the more interesting your acquaintance will be. The fact alone that you are a *FSJler* will provide you with credibility and prestige in a society where intellectual proficiency trumps material possessions. To get the most learning out of this once-in-a-lifetime experience, you will need to stretch your mind while there, embracing the uncomfortable feelings of culture shock and accepting that realities are culturally constructed: what you accepted as “normal” in your home nation may be unusual or even unknown somewhere else. And who knows? You may fall in love with the culture and choose to stay on to earn a graduate degree tuition-free there.

### Conclusion

In 2015, both the FSJ and the BFD boasted nearly 39,000 volunteers, of whom 27,000 served in the Voluntary Social Year. Among the older volunteers, the age cohort 51-60 was numerically the strongest, reflecting a trend toward early retirement. Another factor that has influenced the number of Germans choosing to serve in a voluntary capacity in the past is the recent elimination of the military draft. Beginning in 1961, conscientious objectors could choose to render civil services in federally certified institutions instead. This option was chosen annually by an average of 97,000 young men during the last decade of the draft from 2001-2011 (Bundesamt für Familie, 2011). By 2015, fewer than 39,000 volunteers worked in civil service for society, of whom 27,000 fell into the FSJ category (Bundesfreiwilligendienst.de, 2015; Stemmer, 2009). This means that approximately 58,000 of previously staffed volunteer spots go unfilled each year. Germany is experiencing a significant shortage of volunteers with a strong commitment to social justice. Therefore, the country not only welcomes civic-minded people from other nations, but also strives to make their service there meaningful and pleasant.

My experience affirms this conclusion. I began promoting the FSJ opportunity in my college classes only this semester. Two of my students applied immediately. Each sent out less than a dozen emails to institutions that provide services aligned with their majors or interests, and they received numerous replies. Within two weeks, both had secured volunteer positions. One student, who graduated with a degree in psychology and intends to go to medical school after this gap year, will start a one-year position in a psychiatric hospital in Berlin. The other student had majored in anthropology and is interested in working as a museum curator; he found a slot in a bicycle museum nestled in the scenic Rhön mountains. Moreover, both received their paperwork in German and English, were promised intensive support, and could set their starting

dates. The volunteer coordinator in the Rhön will personally pick up his American guest from a train station and drive him to the remote resort town.

I anticipate that both volunteers will derive as many linguistic and internationalizing benefits from their year abroad as their peers who studied there, but at little cost to them. They will have gained practical work experience. In addition, they will have matured because of their service to others. And that, one can argue, is a reward in itself.

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