

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Germany, Political Science

“Wir Schaffen Das:” A Comparison of Initiatives for Refugee Integration in Franconia

At age seven, I packed my bags and informed my family that I was setting off to explore Europe and northern Africa. Though blessed with their support in many of my endeavors, I never made it across the Atlantic Ocean that year. Due to my brother's disability, even our twice-annual road trip to visit relatives in Michigan required extensive patience and preparation, and my parents continued to reiterate that they preferred I stay close to home. However, I never lost the desire to explore, travel, and study another culture.

During my senior year of high school, an opportunity finally emerged: my teacher announced that the American Association of Teachers of German was offering a scholarship for one student to live with a host family in Germany for three weeks. The scholarship would be awarded based on an application and placement test. To prepare myself for the scholarship placement exam, I watched German films, listened to German music, tuned into countless podcasts, and read poetry. I developed my initial appreciation for German literature and culture that deepened in my college years.

I passed the exam with flying colors and received the scholarship, but I was quickly humbled. Upon my arrival in Braunschweig, the language barrier felt humiliating. It took arduous effort not to give in and speak English. But the rewarding moments when I connected with my German family and peers inspired me to march on and commit to becoming a fluent speaker; the evening during dinner with my host family when my numerous attempts to say the word *Streichholzschächtelchen* (little box of matches) left us in tears of laughter.

Although I was not allowed to go far from home for college, Kalamazoo College's emphasis on international study set it apart. After I declared a German/Philosophy double-major, one class opened my eyes to the political challenges that exist alongside rewards of modern national identity: a political philosophy course in migration, integration, and citizenship. Referring to sophisticated arguments on both sides, we considered questions such as “what does it mean to be a citizen?” and “can national self-determination justify closing borders?”

Still grappling with these during study abroad, I volunteered five hours per week at “Internationaler Bund” (International Alliance), a social work organization largely focused on young immigrants. Teaching basic German, and helping a woman seeking asylum fill out her paperwork, served as a turning point. In my position of privilege, I only ever considered German to be a hobby, an affinity, and a major to defend at family reunions. Now, I saw what it meant to her to immigrate, and integrate, out of necessity.

When I began working as a paralegal, I took advantage of opportunities to assist on pro bono cases. I currently help to represent a woman seeking to reapply for asylum after her residency was denied due to incriminating personal data provided by her home country. In the coming years, I hope to gain the knowledge, wisdom, and the credentials necessary to commit to more leadership in cases like this.

I would consider myself fortunate to supplement my studies in political science by learning from German communities and the displaced people becoming part of them. Like my seven-year-old self, I still hope to travel. There are many ways to pursue my desire in maintaining a lasting relationship with Germany. I now want to advocate for a better standard of international mobility along the way.