



COUNTRY OVERVIEW

& PACKING GUIDELINES

Mexico: Migration, Borders, and Transnational
Communities
Spring 2020

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COUNTRY OVERVIEW

GENERAL INFORMATION

Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos (The United Mexican States), more commonly known as Mexico, gained independence in 1821 and is a constitutional republic of 31 federated states and the capital, Mexico City (known in Mexico as the *Distrito Federal*, or “DF”). Mexico is the fifth-largest country in the Americas by total land area and has a population of almost 128 million, making it the 11th most populous country and the most populous Spanish-speaking country in the world. The DF is one of the largest cities (by population count) on Earth.

As the only Latin American member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) since 1994, Mexico is generally a middle-income country that is relatively more “developed” than many other countries in the region. The country was ruled for most of the 20th century by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), which held almost hegemonic power in Mexican politics from 1929 until the end of the century. Beginning in 1977, consecutive electoral reforms allowed opposition parties to win more posts at the local and federal levels, culminating in the 2000 presidential elections in which Vicente Fox, a candidate of the *Partido de Accion Nacional* (PAN), or National Action Party, became the first non-PRI president in 71 years.

In 2006, Felipe Calderon of the PAN faced Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the *Partido de la Revolucion Democratica* (PRD) in an extremely close (0.58% difference) presidential election that was widely criticized as fraudulent. On September 6, 2006 Felipe Calderon was declared President-elect by the electoral tribunal. His cabinet was sworn in at midnight on December 1, 2006 and Calderon was officially sworn in as President on the morning of the same day in a very quick ceremony in Congress, amidst screaming, yelling and insults from opposition lawmakers. Calderon finished his term in 2012.

After a 12-year hiatus, the PRI party, in alliance with the National Action Party (PAN) returned with the election of President Enrique Peña Nieto, drawing protests for alleged voting irregularities, media bias, and campaign fund controversies.

During the most recent presidential election in the country (2018), the vast majority of Mexicans voted for Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and his political party MORENA which stand for “Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional.” Andres Manuel López Obrador’s main goal as the new president of Mexico is to fight systemic corruption and to implement a socioeconomic reform that can improve the standards of life of millions of Mexicans.

The state of Oaxaca, with a capital city of the same name, has a population of about 3.5 million; roughly 300,000 live in the city of Oaxaca with 650,000 in the greater metropolitan area. Oaxaca is located in the southern part of the country, bordering the states of Guerrero, Puebla, Veracruz and Chiapas as well as the Pacific Ocean. Oaxaca, the historic home of the Zapotec and Mixtec peoples, contains more speakers of indigenous languages than any other Mexican state. Approximately 87% of Oaxacans are indigenous.

Oaxaca was the sight of a popular movement called the *Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca* (APPO) that has become a model of creative popular protest for grassroots movements throughout the country. The APPO, a broad-based grassroots organization, initially emerged in solidarity with the objectives of the Oaxaca teachers’ union, which staged a massive strike in May 2006, and later in forming a joint front to advocate for the resignation of the corrupt state governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. The APPO continues struggling to create positive social, political and economic change in Oaxaca City and state, along with myriad other grassroots community and non-governmental organizations.

The current Governor of Oaxaca is Alejandro Ismael Murat Hinojosa, affiliated with the PRI party, which has dominated Oaxacan politics for most of the last

century. His father, José Murat Casab was also governor of Oaxaca from 1998 to 2004.

CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

Mexico's climate varies greatly according to altitude, ranging from humid, tropical and rainy in the south and on the coast to semi-arid in the north. The rainy season runs from early summer through October, with September being generally the rainiest month. "Rainy season" does not mean guaranteed rain, though; more often it means sunny mornings and a rainstorm in the afternoon. Mexico City also has a temperate climate, with high temperatures in the 70s or low 80s most of the year. San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas is higher and much cooler than Oaxaca, which has a pleasant spring-like climate. The coast of Oaxaca state is hot and humid. You should be prepared for all of these climate and temperature variations.

DIET

Participating in the local food culture is a central aspect of daily life in Mexico. Special or restricted diets may not always be fully understood by your host family, although they may have previously hosted a student with similar dietary restrictions. By trying to replicate your diet at home you may miss out on an important part of your host culture.

Mexican cuisine is known for its intense and varied flavors, colorful decoration, and variety of spices. Oaxaca itself boasts a tremendous diversity of regional cuisine. An abundance of fruits and vegetables are grown in the central valley, tropical fruits are found throughout the north, and fish and seafood dominate the cuisine of southern Oaxaca.

The state is known for its chocolate, cheese (*quesillo*) and a breakfast specialty called *huevos oaxaqueños* – eggs poached in chili-tomato soup. Another specialty is *chapulines*, that is, barbecued grasshoppers. Corn is the staple food and the preparation of corn dough varies widely, from *tortillas* and *empanadas* (turnovers) to *tamales* and *entomadas* (tortilla ribbons bathed in salsa and cheese). Black beans are another common ingredient, as is the Oaxacan chili pepper, which gives many dishes a distinctive hot, smoky taste and red color.

Cooked food is safe to eat in homes and restaurants; raw vegetables and food items sold on the street usually are not. Tap water is not potable and should not be used anywhere in Mexico. Host families and other program facilities and accommodations will provide boiled or filtered water at all times.

Mexico is a vegetarian-friendly place. Meals are generally not focused on meat, though it is certainly available. Students who are vegan or gluten-free may encounter challenges but the Oaxacan diet is varied and with effort and communication students should be able to follow their diets during the program. There is not a strong Jewish presence in Oaxaca; thus keeping kosher would be very difficult.

Note: if you have special dietary needs, including allergies, please inform our office prior to the start of your program. We will advise you on realistic expectations about avoiding or incorporating certain foods within the program context.

SAFETY, SECURITY, AND HEALTH

Maintaining good health is critical to having a successful semester. To help you do that, we have provided [Health Guidelines and Requirements](#) for your program.

It is very important that you read the Health Guidelines and Requirements document as early as possible and examine it with your medical provider. The guidelines include recommended immunizations; a suggested calendar for immunizations and other prophylaxes; and valuable information on how to avoid exposure to common carriers of disease.

Professional, competent health care is available in Oaxaca and our excursion sites. SIT Mexico is well-connected with various local health care providers.

Students will be in a malaria risk area for up to 11 days during the Southern border excursion. Prevention of malaria is possible with the help of a prophylactic drug and protective measures to minimize exposure to mosquitoes. Please consult with your medical provider as to the number of pills required. Students must start their malaria

prophylaxis *before* the excursion. Please consult the [Health Guidelines and Requirements](#) for more information about the prophylaxis timeline and personal protective measures. Consult your doctor to determine which malaria prophylaxis is best for you.

There are good crisis centers and counseling services available in Oaxaca and Mexico City. There are bilingual counselors available; recommendations and other support are available from program staff should they be desired.

Students are thoroughly briefed on safety considerations during in-country orientation and are updated throughout the semester if and when circumstances change. For information regarding safety and security, emergency communications, SIT policies, accident and illness insurance, and general program tips, please read the [Safety, Security, and Health](#) document and [Student Handbook](#).

The current US State Department warning for Mexico urges US travelers to avoid certain areas in Mexico and Guatemala deemed high risk due to drug-related violence, to stay informed of potential risks, and to take common-sense precautions to ensure safe travel in other areas in Mexico. The State Department warning also acknowledges that hundreds of thousands of Americans travel safely to Mexico each year for business, travel, or study.

SIT Study Abroad staff—both in the US and in Mexico—place student safety at the forefront of program delivery and regularly monitor and evaluate health and safety issues in Mexico. SIT staff closely follow media reports, State Department recommendations, and ongoing evaluations by Mexican human rights and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Additionally, we draw on the extensive experience of SIT Mexico program staff at each of our program sites.

We have tailored safety and security measures to current circumstances at your program site and will provide detailed safety and security briefings for you during orientation and throughout the program. We expect students to take responsibility for adhering to our safety and security parameters, as these are in everyone's interest to ensure the best possible program experience.



HOMESTAYS

As many SIT Study Abroad alumni will tell you, the homestay experience can be one of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of the program. We hope you will come prepared for the experience and committed to moving beyond cultural immersion as you begin to question, distinguish, and analyze the host culture vis-à-vis your own culture and come to a deeper understanding of both.

Family structures vary in every culture. SIT Study Abroad values the diversity of homestay families, and your family may include a single mother of two small children or a large extended family with many people coming and going all the time. Additionally, please bear in mind that, in many countries, the idea of what constitutes a “home” may be different from what you expect. You will need to be prepared to adapt to a new life with a new diet, a new schedule, new people, and new priorities and expectations.

Each program's homestay coordinator will be responsible for placing students in homestays. These placements are made first based on health concerns, including any allergies or dietary needs, to the extent possible. **Please note: in order to ensure the best fit for students and families, SIT may make final adjustments to homestay placements after student arrival in country. Therefore, SIT will not provide information about your homestay family before you depart for the program.**

On this program, you will live with host families for the seven weeks you spend at the program base in Oaxaca. You may also have opportunities for homestays during the excursions into rural

communities and during the independent period when you are carrying out an internship or Independent Study Project, giving a unique window into Mexican family and cultural traditions. In Oaxaca homestays will be in middle class homes and have their own bedroom.

OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

The group will stay in hostels, private homes and small hotels during the rest of the program. You will be sharing accommodations with other students in the group while on excursions. You should bring a medium-weight sleeping bag and a sleeping pad for the community stay during the program.

Some students stay with their homestay family in Oaxaca City during the ISP period, or a homestay or hostel in another community most convenient for conducting research.

TRANSPORTATION

The program office is centrally located in Oaxaca City, and students will be able to walk many destinations in the center. There are inexpensive and efficient public buses on the main routes in and around Oaxaca. Taxis are also plentiful and relatively inexpensive. ISP travel is NOT included so budget accordingly.

COMMUNICATION

While you may want to be in regular communication with friends and family from home during the term abroad, please bear in mind that different time zones, unreliable phone lines, and changing program activities can complicate communication.

It's important to be clear with family and friends about your availability during the term. Many students recommend making an appointment to call home or to receive a call. You should also consider the impact of constant communication with friends and family at home on your cultural immersion.

PHONES AND E-MAIL

As part of SIT's commitment to student safety and security, all students are required to have a working smart phone capable of making and receiving both local and international calls throughout the duration of the program. For that purpose students are

required to either (a) bring an open, unlocked smart phone from the U.S. to the program that is able to accept a local SIM card, and is compatible with and usable at the program location, (b) work with the academic director within the first week upon arrival in country to purchase a smart phone locally, or (c) bring a dual SIM smart phone. During orientation, with assistance from SIT Study Abroad staff, students will learn how to use their cellphone, how to purchase and use an appropriate local SIM card, and how to acquire minutes for calls and texting. SIT Study Abroad requires that each student have a local number for communication with the homestay family and program staff.

While we recognize that alternative communication methods can be free or cheaper than cell service i.e. Facetime, Skype, WhatsApp, etc. those programs alone do not satisfy our need for regular communication with the local program staff and partners, nor do they meet our emergency communication needs. Therefore, local cellular capacity on each student's phone is required for the duration of the program. Students are required to maintain a minimum amount of phone credits at all times for emergency calls. Full compliance with this policy is expected.

Since you will obtain a local phone number, do not purchase an international plan for your US phone number unless you have a dual SIM smart phone.

A local SIM card will cost approximately \$10. Students will be responsible for maintaining minutes on their phones and reasonable phone usage should cost about \$20 per month. If you do not have an unlocked smartphone, a smartphone can be purchased locally and may cost upwards of \$80.

Mexico is in the Central time zone and observes Daylight Savings Time (DST).

E-mail and internet access is readily available in urban areas through internet cafes in Oaxaca city and at the program center. When the group is on excursion in rural areas internet and phone services will be difficult to access if available at all.

MAILINGS

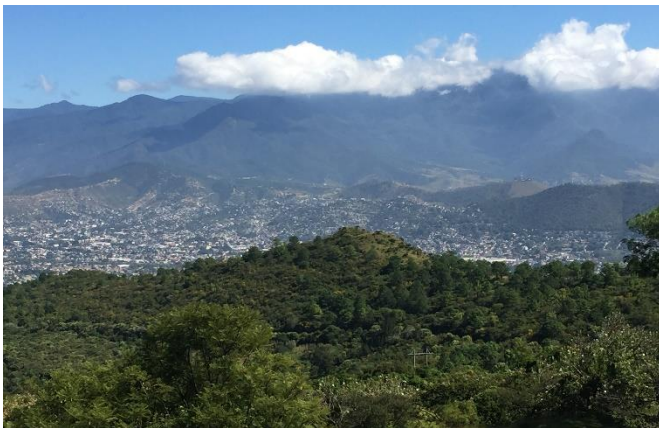
Unlike receiving a package here in the US, receiving a package at your program site is usually

expensive and **problematic**. Customs agents must inspect all packages and you, as the recipient, are responsible for duty and storage fees. In addition, there are cases of items being lost in the mail or taking so long to reach the recipient that the recipient is nearly back in the US by the time the items are received. For these reasons, sending packages should be done only for emergency situations. Additionally, sending valuables is highly discouraged.

For this program, **DHL, FedEx, UPS services are available in country**. Despite cheaper prices, reliance on the US Postal Service is not advised due to delays and unreliability. When given the option, it's always a good idea to send packages certified and with a tracking number that allows the sender to track the package.

If it is necessary for someone to send you mail, then it should be sent to the following address:

Student Name c/o Omar Nunez
SIT Study Abroad
Melchor Ocampo 710,
Centro, C.P. 68000
Oaxaca, Oax., México



MONEY

In addition to tuition, SIT Study Abroad program fees cover room and board throughout the program. When room and/or board are not taken with the group, students will be given a stipend to cover related expenses. SIT will cover daily commuting costs, if any, and excursions that are part of the normal program itinerary. During the ISP period, students will receive a stipend for basic room and board only, based on the cost of living at the

program base. **Any domestic travel, interpretation services, or supplies necessary for the ISP are the students' responsibility.** Please plan accordingly.

Students from past semesters recommend that you bring some cash and debit cards. Debit cards, particularly those with a Cirrus, Visa, or Mastercard logo, will work to withdraw money at ATMs up to a certain daily limit in *pesos* (the official currency). Please be aware that ATMs often do not operate 24 hours and sometimes are "down" for several hours at a time. It can be difficult to exchange traveler's checks, so it is not recommended that you bring them. Wire transfers through companies like Western Union are very expensive but safe and reliable in the case of an emergency.

The Mexican currency is the *peso*. Students can check country currency and current exchange rates at: <http://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/>

If using a debit and/or credit card, you should contact your bank and/or credit card companies regarding your travel plans. If you don't inform these companies that you will be away, they will often assume the card has been lost or stolen and will put an immediate hold on the card. You should also check on costs of withdrawal, as these costs vary and can sometimes be very expensive. Renewing and receiving reissued credit and debit cards while on the program will be an expensive and highly inconvenient process. Before you leave for your program, please check the expiration dates on your cards to ensure that they will not expire while you are abroad. It is also very important that you make photocopies of all your debit/credit card information and leave them with someone you trust in case your card(s) is/are lost or stolen.

Following are suggestions for spending money during the program, including estimates for textbooks, ISP-related expenses, medical expenses, personal spending, and gifts. Figures are based on recent student evaluations, though individual spending habits vary widely and **these costs are averages**.

A suggested total amount of money to budget ranges from **US\$1200 to \$1800**. To determine where you might fall in this range, please examine your spending habits during a typical semester at

your home school and consider any exceptional expenditures you may have on the program, including travel costs for your planned ISP or a specific personal expense.

Check current exchange rates:

<http://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/>

Please budget approximately:

Personal spending (from past student suggestions):	\$800
Books, printing, supplies:	\$100
Up-front medical costs:	\$50/visit
Cell phone costs:	\$100-300
Potential ISP travel expenses:	\$50-200
Estimated total:	\$1200-1800

VISITORS AND FREE TIME

SIT strongly discourages and will not provide support for any visitors to students during the term, due to the rigorous nature of the program and the disruption that such visits cause in program flow and group dynamics. Students should be sure that relatives and friends are aware of this policy and that visits are scheduled for dates after the formal conclusion of the program. Students will not be excused from program components to attend to visitors. See the Attendance and Participation section of the [Student Handbook](#).

Please note that any visitors during the course of the program must plan their own independent accommodations; SIT Study Abroad homestay families can accommodate only their assigned

student and, due to cultural and contractual understandings with SIT, should not be asked to host students' guests.

During the program, students follow an intense schedule of classes and field-based learning assignments, even during the ISP. Free time for pursuing an independent interest or hobby during the program will be limited. Your admissions counselor can advise you about particular interests you may have. For example, if you must keep in shape for your next athletic season, or if you play a musical instrument and want to know whether to bring it, we can help you to understand your schedule and any concerns or limitations that may exist. Please note that you will not have a long break during the program, such as Thanksgiving or Spring Break.

Opportunity for independent travel during the program is limited and cannot be guaranteed due to the rigorous schedule and disruption independent travel may cause to semester responsibilities. Requests to travel independently will be considered on a case by case basis by the academic director. Further details regarding the independent travel policy can be found in the [Student Handbook](#).

For free weekends and/or ISP period students are not allowed to leave Mexico.



PACKING GUIDELINES

LUGGAGE

Please pack lightly and include only necessary items. You should be able to carry all your luggage significant distances on your own. Try to minimize both the number of bags and weight of your bag(s) since you will likely be acquiring more belongings while abroad. Remember to bring a smaller bag for carrying your books and personal items (or this can be easily purchased in country).

If carrying prescription medications, you should carry a letter from your doctor to prevent any concerns at customs or in transit. (Please see the “General Health Tips” section in the [Safety, Security, and Health](#) pre-departure document.)

Please check the current requirements of the Transportation Security Administration (<http://www.tsa.gov>) as well as those of the airline on which you are flying for domestic and international baggage restrictions.

CLOTHING GUIDELINES

While informal dress is acceptable and common in most settings, it is *very* important to keep a neat, clean appearance. Oaxacans dress modestly; you should do the same. You will see tourists wearing shorts in Oaxaca, but virtually no Mexicans do. In Mexico, shorts are generally worn by Mexicans at the beach and/or for athletic or recreational purposes only. It is advisable for you to avoid wearing shorts in Mexican cities and towns. It is culturally inappropriate to wear shorts in indigenous communities that we will be visiting. However, it's fine to bring along a pair of shorts for sports activities and/or for the beach. Bring a raincoat, a sweater/fleece and a jacket, and comfortable walking shoes or light-weight hiking boots. Rubber sandals or “flip flops” are NOT recommended, particularly during excursions. Students wearing them have been injured; you will need to wear more protective footwear. However, you may want to bring a pair for showering.

Past students report that they wish that they had packed more underwear and socks (laundry is often

hand washed and hung up to dry. Depending upon the season, it may take a few days for your clean clothes to get back to you). Furthermore, they suggest cutting back on everyday clothing items but advise that you bring along something for going out at night and/or to wear to a homestay family wedding or other special celebrations. Inexpensive shirts and skirts can be easily found in Oaxaca's stores and principal markets as well.

People in offices, development agencies, etc., are apt to be much more open and responsive if the visitor shows respect by dressing accordingly. This is especially true for your ISP interviews. It is not necessary to be fashionable, just neat and clean.

EQUIPMENT

You may want to bring a small digital voice recorder or video camera for recording interviews during ISP research or ensure your phone has enough memory if recording with your phone.

You should bring a medium-weight sleeping bag, and for added comfort, a sleeping pad for excursions. A small fold-up umbrella and a parka for rainy weather are handy to have.

COMPUTERS AND OTHER ELECTRONICS

It is recommended that you bring a laptop computer. If you bring a laptop, the computer will be your personal property and responsibility. It is recommended that you insure your computer or other valuables for full coverage in the event of loss or theft. SIT is not responsible for any duty tax you may have to pay when you enter the country, theft, or loss.

Many students in the past have brought their laptops and found this useful for assignments and the ISP. **As anywhere, there is a risk of computer damage or theft.** You may wish to purchase supplemental insurance and be sure to back up your hard drive on a regular basis.

You will have computer access at Internet cafés in Oaxaca and at the program center.

Be aware that any technology such as laptops, MP3 players and other electronic devices are items that

can attract attention. Be careful using such items in public, and aware of the message they might send to those around you (one of wealth as well as detachment).

Please see the following website for information about electricity, voltage and electrical adapters. <http://www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/>.

GIFTS

As you might imagine, it is best to be prepared with a gift to offer your homestay family in gratitude for their hospitality and as a means to share a part of your culture with them. We suggest one or two gifts that the whole family can enjoy. You may also wish to consider gifts for people outside your homestay family. Try to choose gifts that represent you or the part of the country and/or community you live in. Think about what your city, state, or local artisans produce. Draw upon your personal interests or hobbies for ideas. Pack a couple of small gifts for children, such as small games, bubbles, or a Frisbee. Even if your homestay family does not have small children, chances are that you will engage with children in your homestay community. Once you are on the program and learn more about the local culture, you will discover other ways to thank your family. Remember to bring pictures of your friends and family to share.

Former students have recommended calendars, picture books, postcards, music, or gifts from your

hometown or college bookstore. *Please do not bring alcohol as a homestay gift.*

WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT OBTAIN IN COUNTRY

Basic toiletries and school supplies are widely available in Mexico, though insect repellent and sunblock are more expensive. If there is a particular item or brand to which you are loyal, you will probably wish to bring it with you as the variety of items available can be limited and/or expensive. It is suggested that you bring enough to get you going (a new tube of toothpaste, etc.) and then plan to buy replacements in Mexico, by which time you will be more familiar with availability and where to obtain things. Items such as batteries, battery chargers, and other electronic equipment can be expensive, so you may wish to bring extra from home.

ALUMNI CONTACTS

If you have further questions, please contact your admissions counselor and/or ask an alumni contact: <http://studyabroad.sit.edu/admitted-students/contact-a-former-student/>.



Don't miss the Packing List on the next page!

These packing guidelines are based on suggestions from past students and your academic director.



PACKING LIST

GENERAL

- 1-2 dressy/professional outfits for important meetings or family events
- 1 outfit appropriate for going out in the evenings
- Underwear (2-week supply)
- Socks
- Pajamas
- Flip-flops for around the house/bathing
- 1 pair comfortable walking shoes/sneakers/hiking shoes
- 1 pair sandals, comfortable for walking
- 1 pair of nice shoes for family gatherings, interviews, or going out that are not walking sandals
- Swimsuit
- Medium weight coat
- Waterproof raincoat or poncho
- 2 sweaters-1 medium and 1 heavier
- 2- 3 lightweight dresses or skirts
- 5-7 blouses or shirts
- 2-3 cotton tank tops/t-shirts
- 2-3 pairs casual pants
- 2-3 pairs of shorts

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

- Passport
- Yellow WHO Card (see the [Safety, Security, and Health](#) document for more information)
- 2 photocopies of your passport stored separately from your actual passport

HEALTH/TOILETRIES

- Adequate supply of any medications you use regularly, including birth control medication
- Small first aid kit with Band-Aids, hydrogen peroxide, moist towelettes, and over the counter drugs for minor pain, diarrhea, anti-itching cream, motion sickness medication, and oral rehydration packets for diarrhea and vomiting.
- Antimalarial medication, as recommended by your doctor (sufficient for 14 days during the southern border excursion plus for during 1-month ISP period if you intend to conduct your ISP in an area with exposure to malaria). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends chloroquine phosphate and other antimalarials.

- Extra eye glasses or contacts and contact solution
- 2-3 bottles of sunscreen (at least SPF 15)
- Sunglasses and or/wide-brimmed hat
- 3-4 bottles of insect repellent (natural or with DEET up to 30% for use on skin or 100% for use on clothes)

OTHER IMPORTANT ITEMS

- Flashlight/headlamp
- Mediumweight sleeping bag
- 1-2 towels (quick-drying would be helpful)
- A duffle bag that is larger than a backpack for excursions
- A simple tote bag – better for carrying books and water bottle than a fancy backpack
- Homestay family gifts
- Small digital tape recorder or video camera for digital assignments and ISP interviews
- Small lock for your locker at the Study Center
- 2 (or more) USB flash drives
- Durable water bottle
- Mosquito net

OPTIONAL

- Spanish/English dictionary (a Latin American Spanish dictionary would be even better)
- Sleep sheet
- Camera and batteries/charger/etc.
- Pocket knife with small scissors (pack in *checked* luggage, not carry on)
- College or university ID
- Anti-bacterial hand gel/cleansing towelettes
- Zip-top storage bags of various sizes
- Ear plugs (noise levels in Mexico are different than most US communities)

