

I spent the period between September 2013 and May 2014 as a graduate student at the Department of English, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Socially and academically, I had positive and enriching experiences during my studies. In general, the University of Massachusetts and the city of Amherst satisfied the expectations that I had before I left for the US. I strongly recommend UMASS Amherst to those who would like to gain first-hand experience about the US, to have a better understanding of American culture and its lifestyle, and to those who would like to broaden their horizon socially and academically. In this report, I will be detailing my experiences during my two semesters in this small New England town.

Preparation

Having a good preparation period solves possible problems in the US. To start with, after being granted a place in the study abroad program, it is a good idea to look for a scholarship. The deadlines for scholarships vary, but it makes sense to collect necessary documents early on. Personally, I was granted with a Baden Württemberg Stipendium for my studies in the US. There is no direct application to the Baden Württemberg Stiftung; rather, study abroad office of Heidelberg University receives applications and nominates candidates for this stipend. Similarly, it is important to arrange a flight ticket to the US as early as possible. There are many people flying from Germany to both Boston and New York City during summer. Depending on the flight, company and date, it might be difficult to find an affordable ticket.

Another important point is money transfer. Before coming to the US, it is important to inform your bank in Germany about your semester or year abroad so that you can clarify how you receive and spend money in the US. Deutsche Bank allows its customers to get money from the ATMs of Bank of America, *after* you request them to activate your account for transactions in North America. Needless to say, it is important to arrange online and telephone banking details for future money transfers. Another important matter to consider is what to bring to the US. In Amherst, summers are dry and hot; winters are really cold with a lot of snow. It is a good idea to bring appropriate clothing according to the weather forecast averages.

Arriving

The closest international airports to Amherst are Logan International Airport in Boston and John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City. There are two bus firms that run between

Boston and New York to Amherst. One of them is Peter Pan Bus Co., which is a reliable transportation firm that runs between Boston - Amherst and New York - Amherst. The other option, Megabus, runs between New York and Amherst. While Peter Pan drops off passengers in Amherst Center or UMASS, Megabus stops in Hampshire Mall, which is between Amherst and Northampton. Upon arriving from Germany, getting off at the center of Amherst saves a lot of time. In general, taking the train is not a practical way of arriving in Amherst and that is probably the reason why most international as well as American students prefer bus rides.

Getting Around in Amherst

Transportation system in and around Amherst is rather different to the transportation system available in Heidelberg. There are many areas where there is no bus service and in areas where there is a bus line, often there are not frequent buses. In some areas, buses start late in the morning and end early at night. Again in some areas, on Sundays, buses run only after 12:00. Moreover, bus schedules are not always available on each bus stop, but they are published online on the PVTA website. Buses are sometimes not punctual; so, it is important to take this into consideration when planning bus trips. Having a bike in Amherst offers flexibility during snow-free months. There is a nice bike trail between Amherst and Northampton and it is possible to go to Sunderland by bike.

Where to Stay?

Although there are many factors to think about while looking for a place to stay, personally, I think that the accessibility of an apartment by bus is the most important factor. Since transportation system is very different to the one in Heidelberg, it is highly important to find a place where there is a bus connection. As far as I am concerned, Northampton, Sunderland and Amherst are the areas where there is at least one bus line. Needless to say, the accommodation options in those areas tend to be more expensive than the areas where there are fewer bus lines, or where there is no bus at all.

Northampton is the largest town around Amherst and there are many students living there. The city offers a rich cultural life. Northampton is known to be one of the liberal and progressive cities in the US. There are frequent buses between Amherst and Northampton. There are many shared apartments in the city and it is possible to find a room in an apartment shared among other students. On the other hand, Sunderland is the smallest town among the three. There are many graduate students living in apartment complexes in Sunderland. Personally, I lived in a room in a private house in Sunderland. Sunderland is close to Connecticut River and offers a more peaceful atmosphere closer to nature.

Larger than Sunderland and smaller than Northampton, Amherst offers varying options for accommodation. Just like in Northampton, there are many shared apartments in and around the city center. Moreover, UMASS dormitories are located right next to the campus. In contrast to Germany, student dormitories in Amherst are not cheaper than rooms in shared apartments. In fact, it is possible to find better and cheaper rooms in shared apartments. It should be noted that students tend to be quite young in dorms and many of the rooms are shared with another student. The dormitory area tends to be very lively on weekends and often loud. However, it is easier to socialize with and get to know other students at the dorms.

It is possible to apply for a place at UMASS dormitories via the SPIRE system. As far as I know, it is important to apply as early as possible to be able to get a place. Rooms in private houses or shared apartments are, on the other hand, most of the time listed on the Internet. It is also a good idea to check the real estate companies in Amherst to find private apartments or a studio apartment. Most of the time, students are expected to sign a lease which determines the period of stay at a place in the very beginning. It is not always easy to annul this period or other requirements in the lease; therefore, it is important to plan and decide early. Often, students are expected to pay the first month's rent, the last month's rent and a security deposit, which is the same amount as one month's rent, at the time of signing the lease.

Shopping

Apart from CVS, there are no supermarkets in the center of Amherst. Just outside Amherst, there are supermarkets like The Big Y and Stop and Shop. Between Amherst and Northampton, there is the Hampshire Mall where many shopping facilities like Wal-mart, Aldi, Trader Joe's, Target, and Dick's are located. Behind the Hampshire Mall, there is a smaller local shop called Maple Farm, which offers fresh produce at reasonable prices. Moreover, Maple Farm provides a variety of ethnic and organic food. In Sunderland, there are farm stands where you can buy fresh produce from their producers. Northampton hosts book stores and interesting retail shops for different purposes.

Social Life

Although Amherst is rather a small city, there are many social activities for students to take part in. Several student clubs at the university enable a swift transition to the social life in Amherst. These clubs open their stands in the Student Union Building and inform new students about their activities. Similarly, there is a Craft Center located in the Student Union Building. There, it is possible to learn and practice beading, book-making, marbling, and other crafts with the help of other students. Some students spend their free-time at the Craft Center and the finished products are

really fascinating. Each semester, the Fine Arts Center of the university offers a rich program to the students interested in different forms of art. I attended interesting art events there and I highly recommend it to the students interested in American art. Moreover, the Academy of Music in Northampton offers interesting events such as concerts and plays. It is one of the venues where well-known artists perform while they are on tour in New England. There are also a few movie theaters in the area.

Furthermore, there are many social events and parties organized among students. Social events in the city of Amherst are advertised through flyers and on the Internet and they enable students to socialize with people outside of the university. Recreation Center of the university offers a wide range of sports and training options. On warm days, there are pick-up soccer games on the soccer fields next to the Recreation Center. Pick-up games are not limited to soccer; there are different options for other sports. I took the opportunity to socialize with people coming from different backgrounds in the sports area. In short, there are enough opportunities for socially active students in the area and the size of Amherst should not be discouraging.

Courses

The SPIRE system of the UMASS regulates registration to the courses. Some courses at the university fill up very quickly so it is important to register early. Since any changes to the course schedule as well as many other requests are processed through the SPIRE system, it is important to have a good knowledge of how to use the SPIRE website. There is a strict separation between undergraduate and graduate classes in general. Apart from that, it is possible to take courses in other four colleges, too. Those colleges are liberal-arts colleges and they offer the chance to try out different courses with different approaches. It should be noted that they offer mainly undergraduate classes. In the same way, there are other interesting courses at departments like Comparative Literature and History, which might interest exchange students who are going to study at the department of English.

To have a better insight into the classes, it is a good idea to have a look at the course descriptions. Some departments have those descriptions on their website. It is also possible to request the syllabus of the course from the professor before attending the course. It is allowed to change courses during the first weeks after having an introduction to the course material and approaches to be adopted. At the department of English, there are many professors and many course offerings. The period, content and approaches that the courses explore vary tremendously.

At the department of English, students' progress throughout the semester is very closely monitored. In some courses, there are frequent quizzes and sometimes pop-quizzes. Depending on

the class and the professor, there are a few papers due each semester and a few exams to be written for each class. Professors expect students to participate in classroom discussions actively. In general, there is a lot of reading to do for a class in a week and the time allocated to write papers and prepare assignments tend to be short. Some classes have two or three different sessions within a week. In the same way, professors frequently give feedback to students' papers and thoughts. Personally, I benefited a lot from the feedback professors provided on my papers. In general, English professors at UMASS Amherst have been really helpful. For a student interested in pursuing graduate studies in English, the department of English offers ample opportunities.

Research

UMASS Amherst has quite a rich library on social sciences and humanities. As the library is a part of the Five College Library system, it is possible to loan books from other four colleges without any problem. Moreover, the library system offers many books and articles online that are important for research. Significantly, there are a lot of humanities and social sciences databases to which the library allows access. What is more, interlibrary loan option allows students to loan books located in other libraries in the US without a fee. This is especially important for the students focusing on their theses or dissertations. The Boston Library Consortium allows easier access to the resources located in other member libraries. Personally, I was able to access most of the resources I needed for my research through the UMASS library system.

In addition to the library, UMASS and other four colleges frequently host insightful readings, public lectures and academic meetings at their facilities. It is academically highly enlightening to listen to prominent scholars or artists talking about their recent work. Another advantage of Amherst to research is its location. Amherst is not far away from the libraries, collections and archives located on the northeastern US. Boston has many universities and research libraries which are accessible only in a few hours. Personally, I took the opportunity to visit some important historical collections at Harvard University libraries and public libraries of the city of Boston. Furthermore, the proximity of cities like New York and Boston allows Amherst students to attend important academic events, talks, and lectures given in those cities.

Traveling

If you have your base in Amherst, it is possible to reach out different cities and areas on weekends or holidays. In fact, nature in New England is very beautiful. Massachusetts, Vermont, and other states surrounding Amherst offer welcoming camping and hiking opportunities. Moreover, there are interesting areas like Cape Cod in New England. Boston and New York are easily accessible by bus in a few hours' time. From New York, it is possible to go to Philadelphia and Washington D.C

by bus. It is possible to go further south - to Florida or Texas – by plane. In the same way, it is possible to fly to Chicago or California on longer holidays. On the north side, Canada is not far away. There are buses between Boston and Montreal which make it possible to get a taste of Quebec. Even if Amherst is a small town, depending on your interests, it offers a wide variety of places to visit on holidays.

To sum up, my experiences at UMASS Amherst in the period between September 2013 and May 2014 persuaded me that Amherst offers an exchange student what I would expect from two semesters in the US. The university provides a pleasant atmosphere, rich resources for research, a friendly environment, and a delightful platform for academic efforts. Amherst and neighboring cities like Northampton offer students a rich and engaging social life. It is possible to get a better idea of America when you are based in Amherst and interact with other students and locals. All in all, my stay in Amherst was quite satisfactory and it contributed to my personal, academic and social life profoundly. Therefore, I recommend UMASS Amherst to all students who plan to study abroad to broaden their horizon and have a better insight into the US.