

I am spending the period between September 2013 to May 2014 as a graduate student at the Department of English, the University of Massachusetts Amherst. In this report, I will be detailing my experiences in the first four months of my stay in Amherst, MA. In general, I had positive and enriching experiences and I am socially and academically glad to be in Amherst. I recommend UMASS to those who would like to gain first-hand experience about America, to have a better understanding of American culture and its lifestyle, and who would like broaden their horizon socially and academically.

Preparation

Firstly, after being granted a place in the study abroad program, it is a good idea to look for a scholarship. The deadlines for scholarships throughout Germany vary. Personally, I was granted with a Baden Württemberg Stipendium for my studies in the US. 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. 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 once the account is activated for North America. Needless to say, online and telephone banking details are important for money transfer. 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.

Location

The closest international airports to Amherst are Logan International Airport in Boston and John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City. Peter Pan Bus Co. is 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 the bus in Amherst saves a lot of time.

Getting Around

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; thus, it is important to take this into consideration when planning a bus trip.

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 the transportation system in Amherst 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 of Northampton offers a lively night life and a rich cultural life. Northampton is known to be a liberal and progressive city in the US and it is easily accessible by bus. It is possible to find a room in an apartment shared by other students in Northampton. On the other hand, Sunderland is the smallest town among the three. There are many graduate students living in the apartment complexes located in Sunderland. Personally, I live in a room in a private house in Sunderland and I really enjoy it. Sunderland is close to Connecticut River and offers a more peaceful atmosphere close 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 Amherst center. Moreover, UMASS dormitories are located right next to the campus and very close to the city center. In contrast to Germany, student dormitories in Amherst are not cheaper than the 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 also 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, on the other hand, are most of the time listed on the Internet. It is also a good idea to check the real estate companies in Amherst to find a private apartment 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 or other requirements in the lease; therefore, it is very important to 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 bigger 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 rich variety of ethnic and organic food.

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 many 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. Fine Arts Center of the university offers a rich program each semester 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. 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 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. I took the opportunity to socialize with people coming from different backgrounds while doing sports. There are at least two movie theaters in Amherst. 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 offer the chance to try out different courses with different settings. It should be remembered 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 of the department of English.

At the department of English, there are many professors and many course offerings. The period, content and approaches the courses explore vary tremendously. 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, 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 feedbacks professors gave on my papers.

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 crucial for research. Significantly, there are a lot of databases the library allows access to at least in humanities and social sciences. What is more, interlibrary loan option allows students to loan the 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, which includes the UMASS library, allows easier access to the resources located in member libraries. Personally, I am able to access most of the resources I need 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.

To sum up, my experiences at UMASS in the period between September 2013 and January 2014 have persuaded me that the university provides a pleasant atmosphere, rich resources for research, a friendly environment, and a delightful platform for academic efforts. Moreover, Amherst and neighboring cities like Northampton offer students a rich and engaging social life. All in all, my first semester at UMASS was quite satisfactory and I am looking forward to the next semester. I recommend UMASS to all students who plan to study abroad to broaden their horizon and have a better insight into the US both academically and socially.