

Final report for the exchange at the University of Connecticut

Academic Year 2022/23, English and American Studies, Sociology

How did you decide for your host university?

I spent the academic year 2022/2023 at the University of Connecticut close to the East Coast of the U.S. The decision to study at UConn was for me relatively obvious since the University of Freiburg and my future host university have a long and friendly relationship to each other which is facilitated through the exchange program between the states of Baden-Württemberg and Connecticut. In addition, English and American Studies is my major, which I am pursuing in my bachelor's degree, so it was equally important to me to study and spend some time living in a country where English is spoken every day. UConn was also suggested to me by the local study abroad coordinator because the school has a renowned English program, which was particularly appealing to me. I also personally liked UConn's location near the American East Coast - the cities of New York and Boston were both only one to two hours away from campus, which I took advantage of as much as I could.

How did your first semester go?

My first semester went really smoothly. Although there was a lot to organize beforehand what sometimes felt overwhelming, I would definitely say that all of the preparations were worth it in the long run. I found some of the best friends I could ask for, my classes were fun and interesting, I got to travel a lot (you can really take advantage of being so close to Boston, New York City and of the beautiful nature in Connecticut, Maine, Rhode Island and Vermont) and still had enough free time to join student clubs and to spend time with my friends in bars, watch movies and just to hang out together. I also noticed an amount of personal growth I never came to appreciate before in another phase of my life. There were incidents that forced me to step out of my comfort zone, but as cheesy as it sounds, those were also the factors that made me grow as a person the most. Lastly, I also noticed how the process of accustomization to the new surroundings and American culture is way easier than I thought it would be – you rarely notice those things when they are already in progress since they really happen when you do not pay attention.

Were there orientation events, were they helpful?

Upon arriving at UConn, we took part in an orientation week that was specifically organized for the incoming exchange students. During that week, everything organizational was introduced to us – from where to get mental health counseling, over campus tours and how the meal plans work to reminders for our visa requirements we were advised in every aspect important for living on Campus in the US. Since the other “regular” students only arrived at the following weekend, this first week was the perfect time to get to know the other exchange students from all over the world and to find new friends easily. Even though it was definitely a bit of a weird situation, I really appreciate the activities of the first week and the effort the UConn international team put into making this week not only informative but also help us bond with each other. Everybody was super friendly and curious, and I made some of my best friends during those few first days, so I would advise anybody who gets to experience the same to remain open and take part in the activities proposed even though it might feel like a lot at times.

Were you able to get into the classes you wanted?

Yes, I did. I however did not get into all of my most favorable classes, but that did not bother me too much in the end. Unfortunately, one of the classes I wanted to take turned out to be fully online which was not compatible with my visa requirements. Before coming to UConn, we

internationals had to give the advisors a ranking of our top ten classes we would like to get into, but almost nobody really ended up getting all of their top four classes. This is majorly due to UConn students being preferred over international students, especially if the classes in question are a requirement for their major, which can be tricky if one also needs to get into specific classes required by one's home university. For many internationals, getting into all desired classes did then involve a bit of personal effort as well – writing the professors emails, showing up to their lectures in the first week and asking if they would be willing to let them take part in their class. Luckily, our advisors really helped a lot to sort things out and to put us into the classes we desired and often it was still possible to join a class even though it seemed to be at maximum capacity. In the end, I would get ready to not be disappointed if you don't get into all your favorable classes right away, but with personal effort you might still get into the classes you want. Depending on your major this might be more difficult than for others but there are definitely possibilities to change into the classes that you want or need to get in.

Were your classes in person or hybrid, do the pandemic-related regulations impact your studies?

All of my classes were majorly hold in person. One of my professors live streamed the sessions for people who could not make it to class, but other than that everything else hold was completely in person. However, all of my professors were well equipped and knowledgeable when it came to technology, so most of the “utilities” needed besides the class itself were to be found online. When it comes to the pandemic, regulations in the US are far less strict compared to Germany. At least during my stay in the U.S. in 2022/23, for the student visa to be acknowledged, one had to take four in person classes. As mentioned above, one of my favorable classes turned out to be an online class, so I would have had to take that class as an additional fifth course which I however wanted to avoid not to be too stressed out during the semester. If one prefers online/asynchronous classes over in person ones, this is doable as well but those courses can only be added additionally and do not count for the general rule of having to take four classes.

Did you find housing before you left or after, were there problems or did it go well?

As almost every other international, I ended up in university housing. Finding off-campus housing in Storrs beforehand might not be too difficult but requires a lot more personal effort and insecurity than just going for on-campus housing, however you will probably get more out of off-campus housing than of on-campus housing. Not having to share a room and still live on campus can be very pricy, so only a few of us internationals were able to afford such housing. Most of us shared their room with another student and so got the “classic American university experience”. Even though this may seem scary and weird at the beginning, a lot of us found great friends in their roommates and if you decide on going for university housing beforehand, you are also able to choose your roommate. This applied to my first semester here – I knew another student from the predeparture workshops offered by the exchange program and we decided to live together in the first semester. For me personally, this provided a lot of comfort and stability but also kept me more in a “German bubble” if you say so. If you really want to indulge into American culture I would advise you to just go for it and move in with an American student. Even though sharing a room for such a long time seems very unusual at first, it is way easier and more doable than you might think.

What was the hardest aspect?

Before coming to the US, my biggest worry was that I would not like it here; more specifically, that the culture would not be a fit for me, that the living conditions (having to share a room for

8 months with a potential stranger, having to share a bathroom with 20 other girls, etc.) and just not having the amount of privacy I know I need personally. However, a few weeks into the exchange I noticed that all of my worries and fears about those things did not have substance anymore. I now live under the conditions I seriously doubted myself of being able to combat but coping with them did not turn out to be this big challenge I imagined seeing myself confronted with. Coping and accommodating just happened naturally. To sum this up, I think I really learned that by just doing the things you are afraid of, they become less powerful and maybe even merge into the small, seemingly insignificant parts of daily life.

What did you like best about studying here?

In retrospect, there is a lot I could mention here. All in all, I am eternally grateful for the people I met along the way, many of whom I would call my best friends now but who sadly live in different countries or even continents. Another aspect I liked was how “easy” the classes were in comparison to the German system. The classes in the US seem way more like high school and are not as “dry” and “academic” as what I’m used to of Germany. They are a lot more interactive (some professors even take grades on participation) and the grading system is set up way more cumulatively. For my part, I came to appreciate the personal approach and that you feel closer to your professors, but some might miss the German teaching style. All in all, it is definitely easier to get good grades here since your grade consists out of a lot of small assignments that are often very easy to do, but I would also say that it’s also more time-consuming.

What expectations did you have of studying abroad? Were they fulfilled?

To be honest, I didn't have any great or "real" expectations of the stay, apart from the "classic" reasons for wanting to study abroad in the first place. That instance came mainly about because expectations tend to put certain pressures on me. I was first afraid of being disappointed if the experience didn't turn out the way I had thoroughly imagined it to, or of letting myself be guided too much by certain expectations in advance, whereby I would completely ignore other potential experiences. Apart from that, I expected to settle into the culture and to make friends that I would like to keep a close relationship with for my life ahead. I found the idea of finding a real home somewhere else a bit ambitious, but I'd conclude by saying that for the most part, this notion really did come true.

In retrospect, what were the most important lessons learned that you took away from this time abroad for your life?

An important lesson for me was that overthinking things leads nowhere, but that you should rather take action as early as possible to create what is important for you. I also learned to be more open and just "do" things; a looseness and kind of inner peace that I didn't have before my time abroad. Lastly, a general attitude I took away with was to always see the best in others first and not to trust certain prejudices from the start.

Any practical tips you can think of for future outgoings:

Besides the structural visa preparations (which you should start sooner rather than later), it helped me personally a lot to prepare introspectively. For a long time, I wasn't sure whether I should really trust myself with such a long and far journey and whether I shouldn't rather cancel it. Therefore, it was important for me to listen to myself and work out what I really wanted - and I am very grateful that I gave myself this time and space to do so. To do this, I talked a lot with friends and family, but also wrote down many of my thoughts on paper. Apart from that, the

contact with another student from my university, who was herself at my future host university at the time of my preparations, helped me incredibly. Through the exchange with her, I was able to get a much better idea of what and where I was getting myself into, and that there would actually only be reason to look forward to it.

Finally, I would like to say that you shouldn't worry too much about what could potentially go wrong. The adoption to the host country happens really a lot by itself and in fact it is much more the people who will shape the place than what you imagine about the place itself in advance.