

## **Hampshire College Experience Report**

Academic Year 2017-2018

### **Overview**

Hampshire College is a small liberal arts college in Amherst, Massachusetts with a student body of about 1400. It was founded in 1970 as an experimental alternative to the standard college education, focusing on personal improvement and written reports instead of grades, to move away from a system that didn't accurately reflect or accommodate a student's personal strengths and interests. Hampshire College is a partner with the FU Berlin as part of the direct exchange, and I hope that some of the information I've put together here can give you some insight as to what will expect you, should you decide to go.

### **Academic Philosophy**

As mentioned in the overview, Hampshire doesn't have grades, but instead has written reports. Instead of having a plethora of classes and then a thesis, the undergraduate program is divided into the 3 sections (called *divisions*), each with their own portfolio and unique requirements. In addition, lots of the feedback you get is what you give. Hampshire focuses a lot on reflections and observing not only what you learn in a given class, but how you learn it. As I said, it's an alternative education. Hampshire also is very interdisciplinary and has no majors or minors, just areas of study, which makes answering the question "*what do you study?*" a bit more complex. It allows students to pursue very different interests if they choose to and allows for a lot of intersectionality between areas of study. So, you could study biology and computer science, or photography and economics, or whatever caters to your interests and your strengths.

As an exchange student, this applies a bit differently to you. You must take classes that generally fit your major and minor at the FU, but you can still take classes that don't fit for fun. Not being restricted to a major allows you to engage with areas that you might otherwise not be able to, or that you just want to try. I can highly recommend that you try it, and should you decide it's not for you, you can always drop a class within the add/drop period.

Hampshire College is also part of the *Five College Consortium*, which includes the neighboring colleges and universities; UMass Amherst, Amherst College, Holyoke College and Smith College. You can take classes at any of these colleges, and I highly recommend it. You not only get to experience other colleges, but meet different people, and find classes that fit your interest extremely well. For those classes you will receive standard grades, and you will have to commute to the different campuses, but

busses run every 20 minutes between them, so that isn't an issue. You can't apply for these courses when you get accepted to Hampshire, but once the add/drop period starts for all colleges, you can sign up then. Don't worry too much about it, because there will always be someone to answer your questions. The nicest thing about the *Five Colleges* is that you have access to all their classes, libraries, and services. If a book isn't available at the Hampshire library but is at UMass, you can request to have it sent over within a day or you can just go there. I found that going to other libraries and different environments helped me study and work better, so see what works out for you.

In addition, the college will help you and provide you with the resources you need. I'll describe it more in detail later, but the support for academics, administrative issues, personal issues and looking beyond just what Hampshire offers is phenomenal.

The last thing I wish to mention about Hampshire's philosophy is social justice. It's very LGBTQ+ friendly, and people introduce themselves with their name and their preferred pronoun. It might seem unusual at first, but it becomes natural within a week. Another important factor is diversity and minorities, not so much in an affirmative action way, but recognizing that we all come from different backgrounds and have different struggles. This once again might seem a bit overly liberal, but after a short while you'll see how important it is to understand and how it helps with your learning experience. Hampshire is also a very environmentally conscious institution, and you will notice all the recyclable materials, awareness of your environmental footprint, and renewability. Hampshire is actually powered entirely by solar power generated from the on-site solar farm.

## **Classes**

Classes at Hampshire are different than most colleges in the US and in Germany. Almost all classes are seminar based, with discussions and direct engagement being the focus. There were maybe 2 "*lecture*" based classes, but that was due to many students attending, and more often than not the sessions would have a discussion section at the end.

Hampshire does not give grades, but instead written reports on a student's work, strengths and weakness. As an exchange student, you will be given a letter grade (ex. A-, C+, B, etc.), but will also get written evaluations on your progress in class. In my experience, there are not many other exchange students at Hampshire, so it would be a good idea to remind your instructor to give you a letter grade. Grades and evaluations can be accessed via the online portal "The Hub", which you will be introduced to thoroughly in the first month.

I personally found that the workload and class structure was very different that at the FU, or specifically the JFKI. Classes would almost always be twice a week for 80

minutes, and accordingly the syllabus covered a lot more than many of my previous classes. It also means that there is a lot of reading and a lot of smaller writing assignments. There will be essays and larger projects, but everything is clearly outlined or explained. I found that the readings and assignments went very well together to help you engage with the material and made the larger workload manageable. That being said, it's very important to stay organized and keep on top of things! Keep your work and printed materials organized from day one and use a planner to keep track of assignments, meetings, Hampshire events, and when you need to do what paperwork.

Instructors at Hampshire are simply put, phenomenal people. They are driven, motivated, unique, and are at Hampshire for the same reasons the students are there: alternative education and finding what best suits you. The classes are fairly small, so you will get to know your instructors, and it is very common to talk to them and befriend them. I can personally say that being able to talk freely with your teacher adds to the overall learning experience, and it also enables you to work out issues efficiently. If you have a problem, or even if you just have an interest or suggestion, they will hear you out and work with you. Don't be afraid to ask questions and network with them. They will give you new ideas and direct you to new people that you never would have picked up on your own. Take advantage of that; I promise that it's worth your time!

Another cool thing about Hampshire is the *Independent Study*, which is very unique. If you want to learn about something and create your own curriculum, you can! You will need a supervisor that you meet with and you will have to negotiate with them to see what work they expect from you, but it opens up a lot of options for what you can do. Feel like reading and writing short stories and looking into their publication by doing a weekly blog with academic essays? Can do! It is however challenging to stick to it consistently, so I would recommend setting aside time slots like as if it were any other class. You can take two classes and an independent study and dedicate a lot of time and work into it, which is great. If you want to explore a topic for your bachelor's thesis, you could do some prep-work as an independent study, but at the end of the day the Independent Study is what you make of it.

Lastly, I want to mention OPRA courses and trips. The Outdoor Programs, Recreation and Athletics offers courses like kayaking, rock climbing and martial arts, which you actually get credits for, as well as trips over breaks. I went on a Ski Trip to Canada over spring break and it was the most fun I've had, and it's incredibly cheap through them. Even if you don't think you're outdoorsy or that active, definitely give it a shot! I can only speak highly of OPRA.

## **Campus & Housing**

Hampshire's campus is a bit strange. Either you think it's gorgeous or you think it's ugly, or you don't really care that much. I personally loved the campus and found it to

be gorgeous. Located in the Pioneer Valley, you have lush forests around the campus, as well as a few mountains a short hike away. The buildings at Hampshire range from being built in the 70s, to the Kern Center, a zero-waste building that was completed only a few years ago. The campus has several academic buildings, a large library, cafeteria, gym, pool, post office, metal and wood workshop, health services, a convenience store, and several dorms.

Dorms at Hampshire are interesting because all first-year students are required to live on campus. You can specify in your application to Hampshire if you want to live in a substance-free, or quiet, or single gender hall, or if you want to live in a “mod”. Mods at Hampshire are like apartments where you live with other students, as opposed to a traditional dormitory. Housing in general is very nice and as part of the exchange program you are required to live on campus. There are two dorm buildings, *Dakin* and *Merrill*, and the mod groups are *Prescott*, *Grennich*, and *Enfield*. If you would prefer to live in an apartment or house type accommodation, you have the option to do so, but I can personally recommend the dorms. You also have the option in your application to specify what interests you have and what you expect noise wise. I had the good fortune of being in a video game hall with no quiet hours, which resulted in a lot of fun evenings. If you live in the dorms, you will get close to your neighbors, and it really makes living there very fun.

You will additionally have a Resident Advisor (RA) that lives on your hall or in your building, that you can approach with questions and concerns. They’ll gladly help you register for classes, tell you where to buy what, resolve issues you might have with your neighbors, and can act as an anonymous mediator between students and staff. Make sure you read their emails and keep in touch with them; they’re a useful resource.

As for the rooms, you have a bed, desk, shelf unit, drawer unit and a place to hang clothing. It may seem a bit spartan when you first get there, but if you catch the poster sale and take time to make it your own, it has a very nice feel to it. You can ask the Global Education Office (GEO) to borrow linens and sheets for the first night, but organized trips to the local mall will give you a change to buy what you need. GEO also has some things left behind by other exchange students, so ask if you can see what they have. It saves you a quick buck and all the items are clean and in good condition. I was lucky and had a view out over a field and parking lot with the mountains in the back, which made for some amazing sunrises and sunsets.

If you live in one of the dorms, you will be on a full meal plan, and will have 18 meals a week in the cafeteria, affectionately know as *SAGA* despite the operator having changed several times since then. If you live in a mod, you can get a partial meal plan, where you prepare some food yourself, but still have some meals per week in the cafeteria. The food is great, diverse, plentiful, and caters to all tastes and dietary needs. Hampshire has a lot of vegetarians and vegans, and the meals accommodate that lifestyle. However, the cafeteria hours are sometimes a bit restrictive if you have

a busy schedule, especially around lunchtime. You can pick up lunch at the *Bridge Café* if you only have a few minutes, but I found scheduling to be very manageable. The mods have kitchens and *Merrill* dorm halls have a kitchenette, but Dakin does not. There are however community kitchens that you can use if you want to, but sometimes you need to reserve them. The kitchens are open all year round and 24/7, so if you want to have a dinner with other people that aren't going home over thanksgiving, or feel the urgent need to make lasagna at 4 in the morning, those options are there for you.

The campus has all that you could ask for, and is small enough to get around easily, but still spacious and green. You definitely feel that you're in the relative countryside, but it makes Hampshire and its campus feel like a real community.

### **Student Life**

Life at Hampshire is what you make of it, much like the academic interests you can pursue. Hampshire is a very social environment, and you will meet lots of people and constantly be around them, which is not as intimidating as it seems. People at Hampshire are friendly and eager to introduce them and are generally very laid back. Hampshire also offers a lot of clubs and student initiatives, so you can do everything from ultimate frisbee to blacksmithing, to being part of a student led film studio, to radio podcasts. There is something for everyone, and most people are active in 2 clubs. It's a great way to meet like-minded people and to socialize.

Hampshire also offers sports, and while the college is infamous amongst the student body for not being a very sporty college, there are still many options. Soccer, basketball, track and field, and cross country are very popular, and should you want to do something that isn't offered at Hampshire, you can join teams at one of the other Five Colleges. I strongly recommend that you do a sport because at Hampshire it isn't as aggressively competitive and the people that join the teams are there because they are passionate about it.

Apart from that, there are many student organized events, and if you have met a lot of people and keep in touch, you'll get to meet half of the campus within the first month. There isn't too much of a divide between different years, so you will have all different types of people in your class, but socially it really depends who you spend time with.

### **Student Resources**

As I mentioned earlier, Hampshire is very supportive and has plenty of resources for students. You will always be able to reach an office and talk to someone who will explain what you aren't clear about, or at least refer you on to someone who can help you better. The international office / Cultural Center will be great resource for you as an exchange student, and they can answer every question you throw at them.

The library also has the Writing Center, which can help you with your work. It's in the evenings and a tutor will help you overcome any writers' blocks, do citations, proofread, and so on. It did help me when I had problems structuring longer essays, and having someone else look over it was very beneficial.

As part of the exchange program you also need to have the student health insurance, the Blue Cross / Blue Shield. Hampshire has its own health services which functions like a clinic, and it also offers counselling and mental health support should you need it. Health Services is your on-site general practitioner, and because you are a Hampshire student, also completely free. You might be charged through the health insurance if you go off-site, but you can get all the information and answers you need at the reception. I found the local health insurance to be very practical as opposed to international options, and as far as I know you can't opt out of the insurance fee.

Lastly, the Career Options Research Center (CORC) is a phenomenal resource. If you want to do an internship in the US after Hampshire, or want to see what jobs are out there or anything related to post-study, they can help you. In case you do wish to do an internship in the summer, you will have to get your visa extended, but they will tell you all you need to know. I can *strongly* recommend that you go talk to them and take advantage of every opportunity. Networking is key, so make sure to maintain your connections, and don't be afraid to reach out to anyone. I promise that it'll be worth it.

### **Why Hampshire?**

So then, why choose Hampshire? Simply put: because it is an experience unlike any other, both academically and socially. The options are endless as to what you can do and the institution and staff are there to get you where you want to be. The classes were very interesting and engaging, the instructors experts in their field, and staff members kind and approachable. The students at Hampshire are quirky and at times a bit very "liberal artsy", but they all have very individual stories and aspirations. If you want to go to Hampshire by now, you will get along excellently with the people there.

Furthermore, Hampshire is situated in an idyllic environment, and really lets you breathe. The atmosphere is always pleasant and welcoming, and people are open to talk about anything. Hampshire College really welcomes you and gives you a blank canvas upon which you can unfold yourself, and if you want to take an art class, quite literally so.

### **Personal Notes**

If you haven't been able to tell by now, I had a great time at Hampshire and can speak very highly of it. An alumnus of Hampshire College once told me that once you're a Hampshire student, everything comes back to Hampshire. At first, I didn't believe it,

but seeing the network of people and the mutual mindset of being free-thinking and creative individuals made me reconsider.

If you google Hampshire College, or just read up on it, you may see that it's described as a "hippy school" or a school that doesn't take academics seriously because of a lack of grades. At times it did seem very alternative, but it does not take away from the academic seriousness. Hampshire is a great institution and demands the best from you, but will also accommodate and help you along the way.

Amherst itself is a beautiful small town. The neighboring town of North Hampton is also gorgeous and has many cool shops and places to eat. Busses run from Campus to North Hampton and downtown Amherst, but it'd be very useful to have a friend with a car in case you want to do things farther away or if you need to do grocery runs.

The Hadley Mall (or Hampshire Mall) is a large and open Mall with almost any shop you will need. For most people that boils down to Target and Trader Joe's, but there is also a Whole Foods, Walmart, Barnes and Nobel's, Home Depot, Macy's and many other shops. If you're looking for a grocery store, I would recommend Big Y and Stop n Shop in Amherst. Get their rewards card to get discounts, because food in the US is more expensive than it is in Germany.

Lastly, getting a SIM card or phone is easy. You can choose between AT&T, Verizon and Sprint as carriers, but most places on campus and many stores have their own WiFi. I got a prepaid, monthly renewing SIM from AT&T for \$30 a month, but sadly the plans don't come too much cheaper. Just ask other international students what they're doing, and that should help you out a lot.

Trips to Boston and New York City are easy to do, and with the bus are around \$40 roundtrip, and if you can get some friends on board it could be a great road trip. Sometimes there will be college-hosted trips to Boston, which I highly recommend you sign up for. Travelling around New England is really pretty, and you should really take a camera along for all the beautiful sights.

So that's my extensive report, but I have included everything I wish I had known about, lots of relevant things to consider when applying. I made it this long because I like Hampshire a lot, and don't think that 3 pages can hold the full extent of how amazing the experience is.