

Resources for International Students
in the UConn Department of Marine Sciences
"Starting your life as a graduate student at Avery Point"

The Department of Marine Sciences (DMS) welcomes you to the scenic Avery Point (AVPT) campus in Groton, Connecticut. We hope this document will help you adjust well to life in Southeastern Connecticut and we encourage you to reach out to fellow graduate students, your faculty advisor, and DMS personnel with any questions or concerns.

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More from DMS:

<https://marinesciences.uconn.edu/graduate/international-students/>

From [DMS Graduate Student Handbook](#):

"International students need to comply with policies and regulations that apply specifically to them, including visa, travel, and employment. For general information, check the website of the International Students and Scholars Service (ISSS) at <http://issu.uconn.edu/>, or contact the office by telephone (860-486-3855) or email (international@uconn.edu).

International students working on campus as Teaching Assistants need to have passed the English proficiency test. For the requirements and ways to obtain waivers, check the website of the International Teaching Assistance Service, <http://ita.uconn.edu/>. To ask questions, call its office at 860-486-2127 or email register-ucaeli@uconn.edu."

UConn-wide Center for International Students and Scholars: <https://issu.uconn.edu/>

- Be aware that much of the information is for students at Storrs Main Campus, and not necessarily at Avery Point. Some information applies to everyone in CT (driver's license, taxes, SSN, etc.)
- Useful to contact for specific legal questions and UConn policies
- ISSS Advising: "Students and exchange visitors at UConn Avery Point should contact [Neena Kapoor](#) (neena.kapoor@uconn.edu), with any immigration or international advising questions, or to arrange for travel signatures. You can also schedule a virtual appointment with Neena. Students and exchange visitors at UConn Avery Point can meet with an ISSS advisor [in-person] when they visit campus, which is usually one time per semester."

Contributors: Present and former international graduate students in DMS, and sections adapted from, "Start your life as a new grad student in Avery Point," by Yipeng He, Ph.D. ('23)

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Pre-arrival to Avery Point

Before you start your international and/or domestic travel to Connecticut, you should save and print copies of your offer letter and other materials from DMS. You should receive your student ID and NetID by your registered email. Your NetID is your unique username for logging-in to any UConn website, such as Student Admin System (<https://studentadmin.uconn.edu>) and Employee Self Service (<https://ess.uconn.edu>). If you haven't received these materials before you travel to UConn, please let the Program Assistant know.

After new graduate students arrive, there will be an orientation hosted by UConn teaching students how to register their semester, enroll in classes, get a student ID card, and receive salary paychecks. The Program Assistant will assign you an office space with a desk, filing cabinet, and bookcase, and give you keys.

All resources for any new students can be found on the website (<https://students.uconn.edu>).

Transportation

Train station to Avery Point

If you take Amtrak train to New London, you can get Bus #2 (about \$5) or take Uber/Lyft (about \$15) to Avery Point campus. There are convenient trains to Boston and NYC via Amtrak at New London station, but be sure to reserve tickets well in-advance for best prices. The MetroNorth commuter rail trains are located in New Haven that go to NYC and Hartford.

Bus or public transit

There are not many bus routes in Groton, Bus #2, Bus #3, Bus #11. These buses can take you to most of the regions in Groton for shopping or eating. Bus 11 has a stop at Avery Point, but only at request (Phone number: 860 886-2631).

- Map: <https://seatbuslive.com/map>
- Website: <https://southeastareatransitdistrict.com/routes/>

U-Pass will allow students to have free travel on local buses and trains in Connecticut. Be sure to apply each semester here: <https://park.uconn.edu/students/upass/>.

Bicycle, e-Scooter, or e-Bike

If you live in Groton, you probably can choose to bike between home and campus, even markets, which usually takes you 20-30 min. You can buy a bicycle from Walmart, Target, or online (about \$100-\$200). You can also buy a second-hand bike from Facebook Marketplace or Craigslist. You will need to buy a lock, otherwise you will lose your bike. If you live near campus in Groton, you can probably choose the electric scooter or electric bicycle, however it is not a good option during the winter and bad weather.

Car

If you live in Mystic, New London, or even a further place, you probably need to drive yourself between home and campus. There are several car dealers in Groton and New London. Also, you can buy a car from a recently graduated student. Prices can vary widely. So be prepared for it. You will also have to have a drivers license to buy a car, as with an international license you will pay hefty higher prices for insurance. The next section details more about driving.

Advice from DMS international students about transportation:

"There isn't good enough public transportation in the area and nothing is walking distance. Car is essential to live in this particular area (and CT as a whole). You see a lot of people when going for a hike, but not as many walking the streets because of lack of pedestrian infrastructure (very car-centric)."

"Transportation, make plans to buy a bike on arrival if you won't be driving immediately. It is cumbersome to rely on the public transport in Groton. If you have a driver's license in your country, try to discuss your travel plans with your issuer regarding your international driving license. Just so you know, some countries' licenses are not compatible with the USA. Check the ISSS website for information about acquiring a driver's license in the US."

"For the car stuff, I had difficulties figuring out the requirements for having a car that is road test worthy, the insurance required, etc. I used a driving school's car for my road test to simplify things, and ended up buying a car afterwards, but there needs to be more advice readily available for best navigating this."

Driving in Connecticut

If you already have a driver's license in your home country or another country, you can bring it with a certified English translation to the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) in CT. The closest DMV to Groton is the Old Saybrook office: 7 Custom Drive, Old Saybrook, CT 06475. The DMV will probably issue you a US driver license replacing the one you have. If you do not have a driver's license or driving experience, you will need to find a driving school to learn and get a certificate.

Driver's education classes, driver's permit, and driver's license steps are detailed in these links.

- https://portal.ct.gov/dmv/licenses-permits-ids/get-a-drivers-license-ct?language=en_US
- <https://issu.uconn.edu/drivers-license/>

Some driving schools are available nearby:

- The Next Street (New London): <https://www.thenextstreet.com/ct-driving-schools/new-london-county/next-street-new-london>

- Epic CT: <https://www.epicct.com/>
- Rae's Driving School: <https://raesdrivingschool.com/>

Tips for buying a car

- You will need to have car insurance setup before buying a car and you will need go to the DMV to register the car
 - If you are buying a car new from a car dealership, they usually handle the paperwork for registering
 - If you are buying used from somewhere else or directly from a person, you will need to do the paperwork and go to the DMV
- Geico or Progressive are usually affordable car insurance companies, and you can do so online or on phone

Setting Up Your Finances

Social Security Number (SSN)

- ISSS instructions: <https://iss.uconn.edu/social-security-itin-2/>
- SSN is very important for you to build your credit record in the US. You can apply for your SSN after you check in and register your student status with UConn International Student Scholar Services (ISSS) and wait 10 days.
- SSN and your birthday are very sensitive information, which need to be kept private to prevent any personal information leaks.
- SSN is needed for applying for a credit card and driver license.
- SSN is not required to set up a bank account.

Bank account

It will be urgent for you to have your own bank account, as your salary may be deposited to your bank account directly. You will need to go in-person with ID, passport, UConn enrollment letter or offer letter, and money to deposit.

Two types of accounts associated with your bank account: checking account and saving account:

- Checking accounts can deposit money or withdrawal money without limitation.
 - Your paychecks can be directly deposited into your checking account after filling out a form
 - Your debit card is connected to your checking account
 - Paper checks can be requested from your bank if you need them (i.e. rent checks)
- Savings account is safer and has a low interest

- Using an ATM that isn't connected to your bank usually results in a fee, about \$3.50 per transaction

Nationwide banks in Groton: Bank of America (address: 738 Long Hill Rd, Groton) Regional/local banks in Groton: Chelsea Groton Bank, Liberty Bank, Citizens Bank, M&T Bank

Credit cards

In the USA, it is important to build a "credit score," especially if you are interested in working in the USA long-term. Financial institutions and housing companies usually check credit scores to have confidence in your ability to pay bills. Beginner credit cards immediately help with this process. Be sure to pay your credit card bills immediately to avoid interest! Most banks offer credit cards with benefits for students, just ask about details. Discover or Capital One cards are good first credit cards to build a credit score.

Taxes

Federal and CT State taxes are due in April for the previous year. UConn provides tax assistance if you would like help: <https://vita.business.uconn.edu/>. There are many free tax filing services (TurboTax, H&R Block, etc.), but some of them are only available for residents. *Sprintax* is usually the only option for international students. Also your country might have treaties with the US which changes how you do taxes for the first year. It will be useful to ask current international students how they have handled filing their taxes.

Advice from DMS international students about finances:

"Double-check with your local bank to ensure that your debit/credit card will work in the USA once you arrive. You may want to carry cash (USD) as well, however; you won't be allowed to pay for train tickets with cash so plan accordingly (e.g. purchase online in your country before traveling). Some countries have a limit on the maximum amount you can transact with the USA (e.g Nigeria nothing more than \$100 USD per month), so plan well."

"Try to get an idea of the charges if using a foreign card in the US. I got charged \$60 USD for withdrawing \$100 USD. Your bank may be different but double-check."

Mobile Telephone (cellphone) Service

The three main telecommunications companies in the USA are AT&T, Verizon, and T-Mobile. You can choose your cell phone plan depending on usage, such as, Monthly Plan, Prepaid Plan and Family Plan, Unlimited, etc. All three service providers have a good signal in and out of Groton, so you can choose based on your budget. Mint Mobile is another cellphone service provider but

its coverage is less reliable in rural areas. Usually, there will be a new customer discount, which can be referred by an existing customer. Please ask current grad students for more information.

Health Insurance and Doctors

Follow the health insurance enrollment instructions, which are usually sent in emails. If not, contact the Program Assistant. Health insurance and dental insurance are covered by the graduate student UConn plan: <https://hr.uconn.edu/ga-health-insurance/>.

Doctors that are "in-network" will likely have most or all costs covered by your health insurance. However, if the doctor is "out-of-network" almost none of the costs will be covered and you will be responsible for the price. Be sure to check before seeing a doctor if they are "in-network." Before going to a doctor's appointment, request your health insurance and dental insurance cards on the respective insurance websites. You will need to show the health insurance cards when going to your doctors and when ordering a prescription from a pharmacy.

Prescription medications are covered at CVS pharmacies and there is a 24 hour one in Groton. Over-the-counter medications and other health items (bandages, vitamins, etc.) can be found at any pharmacy, such as CVS, Walgreens, inside the Big Y grocery store, or Walmart.

Advice from DMS international students about healthcare:

"Healthcare is expensive, and beware in advance that your health insurance will not cover everything."

"Finding a PCP [primary care physician] has been frustrating. The Anthem Blue Cross [health insurance] website has a list of doctors with their practice phone number as well as a statement saying they're accepting patients. However, you have to actually cross check this against other websites to figure out if this is true or not. After I had assigned someone as my PCP, I called to book an appointment, but the Anthem Blue Cross website had the wrong number. Once I had the right number from the receptionist, the next call to the right practice told me that the doctor was not in fact taking on any more patients. It's all resolved now, but it has been a merry-go-round process!"

English as a Second Language (ESL) Classes:

<https://www.newlondonadulted.org/adult-academics/english-for-speakers-of-other-languages/>

More Advice from DMS International Students:

What was the biggest culture shock when starting at UConn?

- "One of the biggest culture shocks was the difference in classroom etiquette. In my home country, it was customary for all students to stand up and greet the teacher when they entered the classroom. However, here at UConn, I noticed that most students would remain seated and not pay much attention to the teacher's arrival. Additionally, back home, we addressed our teachers and supervisors using their last names, while in the USA, it is common for people to be addressed by their first names."
- "I'm not sure if it's a culture shock. Taking classes. Because it was my first time taking classes that were totally taught in English, except for the English class I took before. Also, the American education system is different from my home country's, so it took a while for me to know how it works and what I should do."
- "Differences in the educational system, be prepared and ready to adjust to a different format of learning."
- "The biggest culture shock for me is the differences in education systems. I was able to manage things much better in the second semester, but the first semester was tough. ... with a lot more deadlines from assignments, tests, and the review papers on top of that, my time had to be managed with a much higher level of precision; for example: "work on assignment A from 9-1, then test B from 2-3, then research from 3-5," rather than, "work on assignment A this week." This, on top of my TA duties in the first semester, meant that I had many more obligations to fulfill and a lot more hats to wear."

What is a specific thing that you find strange about living in the USA?

- "One aspect that I find strange about living in the USA is the absence of bidets in restrooms. In my home country, bidets are commonly used for personal hygiene after using the restroom. The lack of bidets here can be quite annoying."
- "Giving tips everywhere, which is different from most of the countries in the world I heard."
- "People will say nice things about your appearance (clothes, hair, nails, etc) and that can be a bit strange for some cultures. You will quickly adjust to it and end up enjoying it. They also don't use the metric and Celsius. You will never learn it."
- "I can't really point one out in particular, but I would say that there is a lot more choice at the grocery store, and LOTS more different restaurant chains than I am used to! I would also say that just living in a different country from where you have lived for all your life is a strange feeling in general. Unless you search for it or ask your friends and family, you have no semblance of how life is going on back in your home country."

Adjusting to life in Connecticut

- "American friends helped me to know how to live my life here and Chinese friends helped me to reduce my homesickness. Then, I got used to life in CT."
- "Trying my best to be part of this culture. Americans are incredibly ready to help, and this certainly was essential to survive in the first months. Also, having American friends not only helped me to be part of the culture, but also improve my English, learn expressions etc."
- "Quite easily, I have lived in suburbia and I'm used to this climate, ... so adjusting was pretty simple."
- "Weather, be sure to check the environmental conditions of Connecticut before living, this way you can dress accordingly."
- You will need a photo ID card that has your date of birth (i.e. your passport or a CT drivers license once you get it) to buy alcohol in a store or at a restaurant/bar
- "Food, there are some international markets around. Just ask google!"

What advice do you have for incoming DMS graduate students?

- "Network and build relationships: Connect with your peers, faculty members, and professionals in your field. Attend departmental events, seminars, and conferences to meet fellow students and experts in your research area. Building relationships can lead to collaborations, mentorship opportunities, and a strong support network."
- "DMS is a really amazing place where you can improve yourself a lot, no matter from research or your personal life. Treasure your time at DMS, because it's gonna pass very quickly."
- "Don't be shy to open yourself to experience a totally different life in this foreign country. Being silly is ok and you will make a lot of precious friends who are like your family here."
- "Above all, do not be shy to ask for help if needed. "A closed mouth is a closed destiny," people at UConn are very welcoming and always willing to help."
- "Try to make an effort to get to know your cohort, and make friends in other cohorts too, go on trips and days out. The department and campus is small, and you'll be with these people for a long time. I would also suggest trying to find activities to do outside of work with others, because although people in DMS are great, the reality is there aren't many of us and so it could potentially be difficult to find those who have similar interests."