

MARSHALL PLAN SCHOLARSHIP - FIELD REPORT

Gudrun Kainz, Gustavus Adolphus College, February 2020 - July 2020

General Impression of my Research Period

Since 2020 so far was a year completely out of the ordinary in many regards, I cannot tell for sure how things would have come for my stay abroad, if it wasn't for this pandemic. I suspect, I would have found a different perception of St. Peter and its inhabitants. If one excludes this whole Covid-19 topic, this is the remaining general impression:

St. Peter is a lovely little town of around 11,000 inhabitants, the campus situated on a hill, equipped with beautiful parks, through which you can stroll. The people are, just like the Minnesotan way, kind and open-minded. Gustavus is a private college that lives up to its name. As far as I have noticed, teaching there is excellent and all the laboratories are well equipped. In fact, during my stay there was an extension to the laboratory building in construction. The Chemistry Department in particular stands out in that it produces a fair amount of publications together with the students during lecture free time. Altogether it left me with the feeling my learning curve there was comparatively higher than elsewhere.

Since I do not want to sugarcoat anything in the overall impression, I have decided to also describe how social distancing and a lockdown did shape my time in Minnesota: The campus was cleared three weeks after my arrival. I had decided to stay, because I got the prospect of being able to still attend the laboratory, which in the end I wasn't allowed to most of the time during the lockdown - which was no problem, I had my data to evaluate. After all I had been encouraged to generate as much of it as possible in the two weeks preceding the lockdown. The real problem arose from the psychological consequences of the lockdown: Never in my life have I experienced isolation to this extent. From a brief phase of excessive work I fell into a hole of uncertainty and not knowing what to do with my time, having this unpleasant time delay between me and all contacts from back home that I maintained online. In real life I had the walks in nature, as Gustavus is situated in the countryside. Since Covid-19 remained a matter of uncertainty also after the lockdown ended, I was afraid of another shutdown of the laboratory. Thanks to my supervisor Dr. Stoll and his supportive personality I was able to get on the next flight heading towards home, a month earlier than originally planned. It was the right choice, as the whole lab staff indeed was quarantined due to a positive case roughly a week later.

Quality of the Host Institution

At Gustavus you get the full private college experience; from the large sports fields to the facilities dedicated to learning, to the wild rabbits living all around the campus, to teachers who really care about making their students understand their subjects. I was thrilled when I attended a free chamber music concert with professionals and found out that it's „just“ part of a lecture. Additionally, the Stoll Laboratory in the Chemistry Department conducts applied research in cooperation with renowned companies, as Dr. Stoll is one of the leading separation scientists. He is equally concerned with research and teaching. His team consists of ambitious young people who are entrusted with their own small projects, so that independent working is possible. Presentations and talks complete the lab time and provide insight into the areas that are being researched by others.

Contacts within the Host Institution, Inclusion in the Organization

During normal operation time the campus would offer a fair amount of things to do and social events to attend to - which is necessary since the neighboring city barely holds any leisure activities for strangers to join in and the public transportation system isn't suitable to really get you to other places at useful times of the day. Gustavus is a college, so the average Gustie is at age 20 maximum. If you're old enough to notice the age gap regarding conversational topics and likewise, I would recommend asking for the contacts of the official host families of the college.

Recommendations for future Marshall Plan Students and Fellows

Gustavus is just the right place for you if you want to devote a good amount of your time abroad to high-quality research in an environment of highly motivated people and „get a taste of the country air“ as we would say in Austria. If you can get your hands on the guest scholar apartment on campus, that would be great, as all other living options I have overheard of are either rather expensive or would involve you finding natives to help you finding and contacting them. In any case, start looking for accommodation as early as possible. While you are still in Austria, upgrade your driving license to an international so that you have the possibility to go by car. (Depending on how often you would need the car, buying an old used one might even be cheaper than short term leasing.) It is possible to rent a bike at Gustavus for free. If you're into different styles of music, you will find many gems in and around Gustavus, beginning with the bluegrass festivals in the Twin Cities - one of those will definitely be a broadening of your horizon. Spring is very short in Minnesota, during a typical summer semester, temperatures can be very low (I experienced -20°C) and high (so that you can go for a walk at 27°C at night) by Central European standards. This to keep in mind. Finally, ...well, I cannot recommend it specifically, because I have never done it so far, but I heard, there's so many marvelous destinations to travel in the US.