

Sarah Schweighofer, molecular biology, Master's Thesis project lab work

New Haven, Yale University, January-August 2016

I was very excited to go to the USA, because I had no idea about how it was really going to be. Of course you get information from the media, you meet people from America while traveling other parts of the world and you meet people who are not American, but who lived there for a certain amount of time. However, all of this information only reflects a very confined picture of how it really is. So I wanted to go out and see it with my own eyes.

The first thing that almost made me regret my decision before I even had started my travels was the organizational effort you have to take. Getting the right documents for the visa, proofing that you have enough money (a lot!), making your way to the consul to get the visa, managing your insurance situation and so on and so forth, almost made me go crazy. I have never experienced something quite like that before.

Other international scholars I have talked to, experienced the same thing, so I didn't seem to be the exception. Therefore, be prepared for a lot of bureaucracy once you decide to visit this country!

Once the preparatory marathon in Austria was over, I thought nothing could go wrong anymore. Well, think again. The office-hopping did not stop until after a full month of my stay in New Haven. I had to give the same set of data over and over again to various secretaries and people I didn't even know what they were doing. I wouldn't get an access card until two weeks after my start date, because I was registered in the wrong system or so. Finally they messed up my taxes, which took ages and hundreds of unanswered emails and calls until I got that fixed. Apart from Yale, seemingly small tasks like getting a social security number and opening a bank account etc. are major hurdles as well.

Luckily, my laboratory was a whole different story. I was welcomed so heartily and everyone was so nice, I could hardly believe it. After a short and very useful introduction into the lab and the on-going research by my direct supervisor who was a Post-Doc in our lab, I could freely choose on which experiments to spend my time and on which parts of my research to focus on. My group leader, Dr. Joerg Bewersdorf, is the most awesome boss I've ever had (and probably ever will have). Our lab also organized many memorable activities outside of the lab and my direct supervisor became a dear friend of mine.

The research I performed was cutting-edge and very interesting. I investigated the endoplasmic reticulum and one of its shaping proteins in living cells with super-resolution light microscopy. Nothing comparable even exists to date in Austria and I wish I could continue working on this project now that I am back. Yale University is certainly one of the most high-class research performing institutions world-wide. However, I have to admit that I was surprised about the bad state of the building and the laboratory

rooms within, the bare minimum of cleaning that was performed and the noncompliance with safety measures.

As I was not enrolled in any program, but only signed up for half a year of lab work, it was rather hard for me to find contact to other people that were not in or in close proximity to my lab. Of course, this was also due to the limited time I had because of my research. Many networking activities were provided by Yale that would otherwise have served this purpose.

Thankfully, I had very nice roommates in a five-bedroom house and some of them also became true friends. I highly recommend to choose roommates carefully, because especially in a new situation, without friends and family, nice roommates are a must!

A big mistake I made was not to buy a car immediately. Grocery shopping without a car is very inconvenient in the USA, except for probably NYC. I was discouraged by the fact that many people told me, registering a car as a foreigner was going to be another long office procedure. I was so fed up with American bureaucracy by that time that I just dropped the thought. However, shopping, a fundamental part of the living experience (which I only realized, once it was such a hassle without having a car), and weekend activities would have been so much easier, especially in a more rural area, like New Haven.

Generally, I can say that it was a very interesting experience that I definitely wouldn't want to miss. However, I highly recommend to start the application process as early as possible and be prepared for a lot of nerve-racking bureaucracy. Also choose your city carefully! In retrospective I think I would rather have gone to a bigger city like Boston or NYC, but then on the other hand I wouldn't have performed the research I did. It is certainly a hard balance...

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