

FIELD REPORT

Sending the application to the Polymer Engineering Center (PEC), University of Wisconsin-Madison, for being considered for an internship was a big step for me. But getting a positive feedback from the co-founder of the institution (Prof. Tim A. Osswald) only some hours later, after submitting the application, confirmed my decision. A second, even bigger step was to pack all my stuff and leave Austria to move to a foreign country all by my own. I arrived in Wisconsin at the end of January in the depth of winter at approximately -15 °C and an ongoing snow storm. Therefore my supervisor (Sebastian Goris, M.Sc. and PhD candidate) offered to pick me up at the bus stop and drive me to my apartment. He not only welcomed me really warmly, but also encouraged me to drop in the office any time before my internship starts. Furthermore, he invited me to the weekly group meeting to introduce me to the group. The next day after my arrival I was introduced to the whole group, I got a place to sit, a tour through the lab, was invited to lunch and introduced to the Professor. I was part of the working group right from the beginning and therefore can still think of no better way to start my stay abroad!

Prof. Tim A. Osswald as well as all PEC-members agree on the importance of teaching and sharing knowledge. Proof of this is the fact that every Ph.D. and graduate (=Master) student is working with undergraduate students (=Bachelor), to get help with their research on one hand, but also to transfer their already gained knowledge. The undergraduates get an insight into a specific research field, improve their technical skills in a realistic setting outside the classroom and learn how to bear responsibility for specific tasks. My supervisor entrusted me the responsibility for independently training and mentoring an undergraduate research assistant. This not only helped me making faster progress in my research, but also taught me to share the workload. Moreover, I was able to share my knowledge and attention with my undergraduate student. After the completion of his program he told me that I influenced him not only in the professional realm, but also personally. This made me really proud since it was my first time of mentoring a student. But since I had a lot of role models within the research group who lived the open door policy, welcomed and engaged new ideas, were available for questions anytime and showed continuous support, I also adopted these characteristics and tried to be a "little role model" and good mentor for my undergraduate – like my supervisor has been for me the whole time.

Prof. Tim A. Osswald as well as my supervisor Sebastian Goris demanded a high quality of work in all endeavors and therefore made it possible to improve myself every day. For example: At the end of my stay they told me that there is going to be an Automotive Composite Conference and Exhibition in Michigan, USA (7-9 of September, 2016) and they wanted to present my work in a poster. Since I have not made a poster before I was a little worried if I can make a good job, but they told me: "Sara, you can learn and you will get help anytime if you need it." This encouraged me to bring out the very best in myself. My supervisor presented my poster at the conference and it was really well received and was awarded first place out of thirty graduate student posters! I was really proud of myself and my team!!

The PEC was the perfect place to be, not only because of the big labs equipped with the latest machines and instruments, but also because I was pushed out of my comfort zone into areas I have never worked on, like Simulation and Modeling. This enabled me to improve myself and showed me that I can also be successful in other fields if I just work really hard and show effort.

It has been a period of intense learning for me, because the research topic was quite different from my major. I learned a lot, I laughed a lot, I worked a lot, and nevertheless I traveled and met incredible people (Figure 1) which I really hope to meet again! I would like to express my gratitude to the Marshall Plan Scholarship for enabling me to afford my stay in the US and therefore made it possible to improve myself not only in the professional realm, but also personally!

My recommendation for future Marshall Plan students and fellows is: Just go for it! Although it might be a little bit scary at the beginning leaving everything behind, but it's definitely worth it. It is a challenge where you can exceed yourself! An advice: Do not underestimate the regulatory requirements you have to meet before you can move to the US. Additionally, a lot of things still need to/can only be organized in the US.

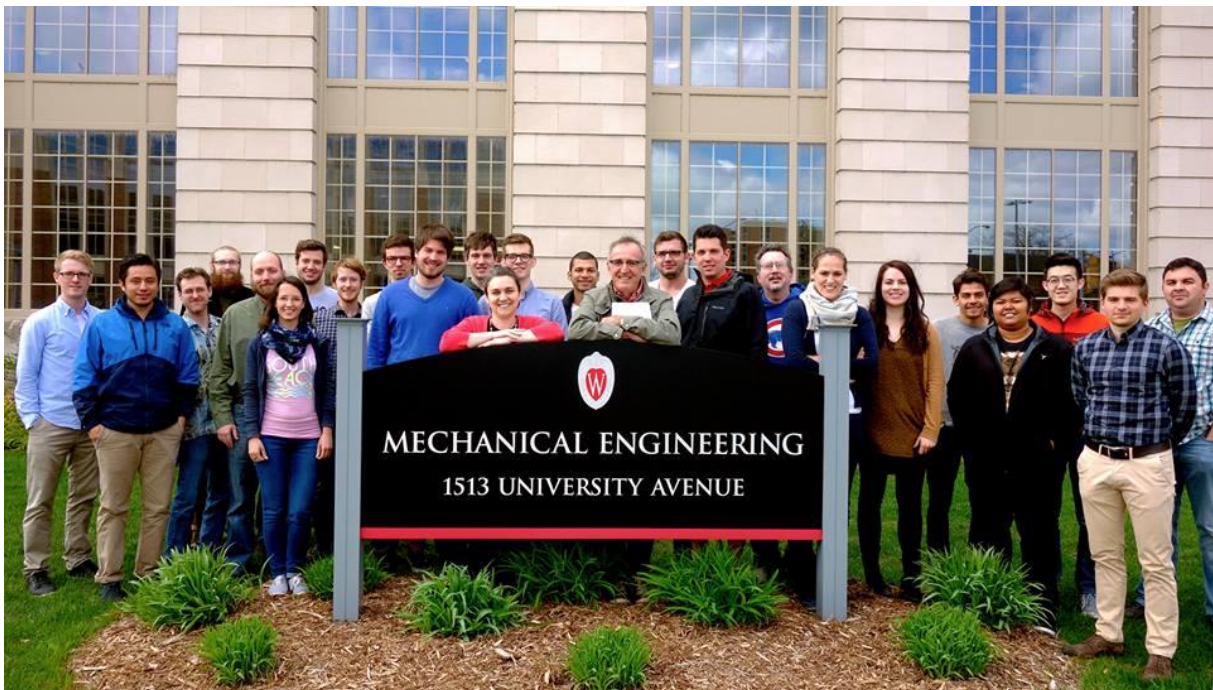


Figure 1: Prof. Tim A. Osswald and Prof. Natalie M. Rudolph with their research students.

Contacts within the Polymer Engineering Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

- Prof. Tim A. Osswald: tosswald@wisc.edu (+1 608 263 9538)
- Sebastian Goris, M.Sc. and PhD candidate: sgoris@wisc.edu (+1 608 772 1451)

My contact information

- Sara Andrea Simon, B.Sc.: sara.simon@gmx.at (+43 664 9738988)