

Erfahrungsbericht/Field report

General impression of your research stay abroad

Inspired by the high quality of science and the vast scientific opportunities in the United States of America, I decided to spend a year at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) to conduct the practical research part for my master's thesis and broaden my personal and scientific horizon. I got accepted into the research group of Professor Michael McManus, which focuses on developing new technology to answer fundamental questions in biology and biomedical research. Out of the big science hubs in the United States – like Boston, New York, Seattle and San Francisco – I chose San Francisco due to its reputation to be a creative and open-minded city. I felt this creativity and open-mindedness of San Francisco not only in my life as a scientist, but also in other, non-scientific aspects of daily life in the city. This has inspired me in many ways for my future life and scientific career.

My laboratory was located in Parnassus, and from my desk I had a nice view over the Golden Gate Park, and I could even see the top of the Golden Gate Bridge. My lab colleagues were and are amazing people. We had a lot of fun and in times of hardship I could rely on them as much as they could rely on me. I am incredibly grateful for the lifelong friendships that grew out of this adventure and cannot wait to see them again when our paths will cross in the future, be it in Europe or the US or anywhere else in the world. I have had the pleasure of experiencing California, especially the Bay Area and San Francisco, in a way different from what travelers do, with all its people, sights and nature. Furthermore, I got an insight to what it means to live in this part of the world – with all the positive and negative aspects – and for this experience I am truly thankful. I do want to point out that there is also poverty and suffering in San Francisco and the US, and that especially the poor are often living in conditions that we as Europeans cannot imagine. From my experience the divide between poor and rich is much larger than here in Europe, and I do not have to explain the sorrow that is caused by the healthcare and welfare systems in the United States. Living there also spawned a deep appreciation of how beautiful life is in Austria.

I was lucky enough to live decently during my research stay in San Francisco. Living abroad and being responsible for oneself was a life-changing experience, and I grew both as a scientist and as a person more this year than almost any other year of my life. The year definitely had its ups and downs, but that is part of science and part of life, and the beautiful moments and amazing people made all the hardships well worth it. Looking back, this year would not have been possible without the generous support by the Marshall Plan Foundation. And for that, I am forever grateful.

Quality of the host institution

UCSF is one of the leading universities in the biomedical sciences, and the best university in the world focused exclusively on health. It harbors some of the world's smartest and most innovative minds, which can be felt by its ambitious goals to drive revolutions both in basic and clinical research. UCSF also contains the best hospital in California and is recognized worldwide for its innovative and high-quality patient care across all specialties, building on latest technologies and research. The university is unique in the way that it does not have an undergraduate population, which frees up a lot of potential and resources to fuel intense research and discovery at the highest level. It definitely benefits greatly from its proximity to Silicon Valley and to the disruptiveness and innovation of the tech industry. Furthermore, UCSF also draws from the creative spirit of the multitude of artists and entrepreneurs that reside in the bay area. The ability to recruit top talent that is drawn to this Mecca of

innovation also contributes to a constant influx of new ideas and approaches and sets UCSF apart from other top universities in the country. The success is apparent across basic science and biomedical research: UCSF is home to research that enabled physicians to control the AIDS epidemic as well as to the development of recombinant DNA techniques that laid the groundwork for today's biotechnology industry. The scientific excellence and innovation at UCSF also spawned other, world-changing discoveries, and five of them were distinguished with a Nobel prize. To conclude, UCSF is one of the leading institutions in the biomedical and basic sciences, with a vibrant community that enables revolutionary discoveries.

[Contacts within the host institution, inclusion in the organization](#)

UCSF offers an open-minded environment with strong emphasis on diversity and collaboration. I felt this emphasis in every aspect of my daily life in the lab, and it made establishing connections and feeling included much easier. When a project called for a certain method or piece of equipment or advice, I could get support from anyone at UCSF that was most able to help. Moreover, if laboratory supplies had run out, I could always count on the generosity and helpfulness of the other labs. Of course, this collaborative spirit and readiness for others went both ways, and I was more than happy to help out anyone that needed the help as well. As a result, I had a close relationship especially with the labs on the same floor and we would enjoy exchanging ideas and advice or just joking around during lunch breaks or incubation times. I also took part in journal clubs, where I met with similar-minded researchers and discussed current science on a weekly basis, which also helped my inclusion a lot.

It was inspiring how accessible and open even the scientific leaders at UCSF were. For example, our lab invited a principal investigator every now and then to talk over lunch about her or his career and life. During those chats, I had the chance to bond with some of the best scientists in the world and I have received invaluable career advice. I had a very close relationship with the people in my lab and spent a lot of time with them both in and outside the lab. We even went to the quantitative biology conference in Hawaii, which was a wonderful experience – both scientifically and personally. UCSF generally attracts a lot of international people, and I had the pleasure of meeting a lot of extremely smart scientists and physicians from all over the globe during the multitude of events that UCSF organized, such as a thanksgiving dinner, a bonfire at the beach, a hike through the Berkeley hills or a cinema night to name a few. I also had the pleasure of attending conferences and retreats such as for example the biomedical sciences program's retreat in Lake Tahoe or the Cancer Target Discovery and Development meeting in Portland.

[Recommendations for future Marshall Plan students and fellows](#)

From my experience as a Marshall Plan fellow, it is very important to keep in mind that you are not only a guest in the US, but you are also an ambassador of Austria. A lot of the times, you are the first Austrian that people have ever met, and they will paint their picture about Austria from how you present it and how you present yourself. I also think it is paramount to be tolerant and respectful at all times. While challenges and peculiarities exist in the US – just like in any other country – you should keep an open mind and focus on the awesome people and positive aspects that this beautiful country has to offer. Since you are the stranger in a way, you should also be the one approaching people and seeking the dialogue, and you should generally show a lot of enthusiasm in all things you do. Of course, there can and will be challenges and hardships, after all it is a long time in a new environment far from home. But if you trust in your potential and strength in those times, you will grow profoundly both as a person and as a scientist and will have an inspiring and life-changing experience.