

Field Report

The University of Florida (UF) in Gainesville is one of the best public universities in the US. Gainesville is in the middle of Florida, in between Orlando, Cedar Key and Jacksonville. It is a small city with a lot of green areas, parks, lakes, and recreational areas. Nevertheless, the biggest part of Gainesville is the campus itself. Since Gainesville is a university city, most of the inhabitants are students, researchers, and professors.

Before I even arrived in Florida I was asked by an organization called “navigators”, if I want to join their trip to New Orleans. The navigators are a group of UF students, who organize trips and events for international students from all over the world. I decided to take part, since it was only a short trip just before my internship started. This was a good opportunity for me to meet other students right from the beginning on.

Besides several university organizations the UF offers a lot of free-time activities, which are either free or less expensive for UF students. Every Friday night the university organizes so called “gator nights”, where students gather for playing games, watching movies, eating, and drinking. This is a great opportunity to getting to know new people. Every Tuesday and Thursday night the UF offers free Salsa and Bachata lessons, which is also a lot of fun and bring together various types of people. A big thing at the UF are the popular sport events like basketball-, football-, baseball games and gymnastics. Even when you are not fond of watching other people doing sports, you should give it a try in Gainesville, since this is a whole new experience. When I went to my first basketball game, I was fascinated not only by the quality of the game itself but also by the euphoria of all the students, the marching band, the cheerleaders and the sense of togetherness.

There are a lot of free time activities at the UF. Unfortunately, I was not able to participate in everything I planned on, because mid-March most of the activities have been cancelled due to COVID19.

As soon as you are part of the gator union, you get your own university ID card (Gator ID), what allows you free use of public transport and also provides reductions in bars, restaurants, etc.

In the south of the campus, near the hospital and Lake Alice, you can find the College of Pharmacy, which is ranked as number 5 of the best Colleges of Pharmacy in the U.S. I decided to apply for an internship at the Department of Pharmaceutical Outcomes and Policy, since this is a new research field, that is not as good developed in Austria as in the U.S. The research topics revolve around pharmacoepidemiology, pharmacogenomics and pharmacovigilance, which will play an important role in future pharmacy. Before I arrived in Florida I have already been in contact with Dr. Winterstein, professor and chair of the department and also organizer of the internship program. She introduced me to Dr. Brown, who agreed on being my advisor at the UF.

I was welcomed by the whole department in a really nice way. I was invited to free dinners, presentations and get together with master students and PhD students from the UF. I got the chance to meet a lot of interesting people at the beginning of my internship. Dr. Brown soon offered me to participate in some courses from the PhD program. They have not been mandatory for me but still I decided to take the opportunity. Twice a week I had a course named “Intro to POP (Pharmaceutical Outcomes and Policy)”. This introduction into the department gave me a good overview about the different topics the department deals with. Every professor of the department held his own lessons, which normally consisted of the presentation itself, the discussion about “pre-class-preparations” (most of the time the professor asked us to read specific papers and answer questions of understanding in advance) and in-class role-plays.

Around every three weeks all the PhD students from the College of Pharmacy met for the so called "Journal Club", which is mainly about the discussion of a specific paper, that has been chosen and prepared by any PhD student.

Every week there has been the "POP Seminar", where members of the College of Pharmacy, no matter which department, present their research project or their research results. This is not only a good way to learn about the various research topics, the UF deals with, but it also gives all the participants a good opportunity to exchange ideas and help each other with occurring issues.

Since my advisor is also the advisor of other students, we had a group meeting every two weeks, where we either presented our research and results or analyzed and peer-reviewed papers together.

Once a week I had my individual meeting with Dr. Brown, where I presented my work in detail, received feedback, and could ask questions about ongoing tasks. Our discussions went well. I was happy with Dr. Browns advice and he was with my research.

Occasionally there have been special events, where the UF invited professors and lecturers from other universities, in order to get to know as many people and research fields as possible. Meeting a pharmacoepidemiology professor from Harvard was an extremely exciting experience. After his presentation he sat together with us, nine PhD students and 3 interns, to talk about work-life balance, his experience in various research fields and pharmaceutical companies. He answered our questions individually, but he was also interested in our research and our interests.

I really enjoyed getting the opportunity of learning so many new things besides my research and I also appreciated the fact that everybody was open-minded, interested in everybody, no matter where people come from or how good/bad their English is. It is great to see that the POP department consists of a lot of international students from all over the world. The more diverse a department, the more different characters, qualities and point of views you have, which you could see very well in group discussions.

Unfortunately, the situation changed a lot mid-March with the pandemic and lockdown. Although it was not a big deal for the Department of Pharmaceutical Outcomes and Policy to change everything to online (ZOOM), it was still a pity to not meet people personally and not go back to university anymore. Since students and faculty members of the POP department are not dependent of labs or other research facilities it was easy for everyone to work remotely without any issues.

I was lucky that I had chosen the POP department for my research, because if I would have worked in a lab, I would not have been able to continue my research at the UF. The focus of my work was extracting and sorting data from FAERS, the pharmacovigilance system of the FDA. I created a lot of tables and calculated numbers, which are necessary for the descriptive analysis of case reports about medicinal cannabis in the older population. I was also asked to learn SAS, a statistical program, via several tutorials, in order to be able to analyze FAERS in a more efficient way. In the end, I did not use the program though, since FAERS itself is a quite messy and incomplete database, what would lead to not reliable statistical results. I am still happy that I got the opportunity to learn a statistical program, that is used worldwide for statistical analysis of case reports. (See Research paper for more details).

I have the feeling that my roommates and I dealt well with the pandemic. During the week we worked remotely for around 40 hours. On the weekends we made bike trips, trails, and a lot of things in nature, since most of the free-time activities have been cancelled because of the corona virus. We figured out a good life-work balance and made the best out of the situation.

Before I left Florida at the end of July, my advisor organized a fare-well party for me at his place. He invited some of his grad students and asked me to invite whoever I want to. He prepared a delicious

vegan-friendly meal, some snacks, drinks, and we enjoyed a great evening by the pool next to the fireplace. I have never thought that there could be such a good and personal relationship in between professors and students, and I am so thankful of having been part of this great university!

For all of the above reasons, I highly recommend to every Marshall Plan scholar to apply for an internship at the UF.