

Marshall Plan Scholarship – Field Report

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General impression of my research stay abroad

My stay at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) was overall very positive: the atmosphere welcoming, supportive and motivating. Choosing appropriate housing was easier than expected, although personal inspection of apartments was not possible and arrangements had to be organized from afar. The set-up of a foreign bank account proved to be uncomplicated as well, most likely due to the large number of internationals and non-residents on campus, with banks offering standardized services for this consumer group. My host institute, the Carl R. Woese Institute for Genomic Biology (IGB), as well as administrators of my research project helped with the completion of crucial administrative tasks required by the university and the US Department of State. Free access to public transport offered to UIUC staff and students facilitated the move-in process and everyday errands such as grocery shopping. My host lab allowed flexible working hours as long as progress-targets were met, late working hours were not recommended but a common occurrence as this is the status-quo in the life sciences. However, advisors showed awareness to possible mental health problems arising from sustained overworking of graduate students and the university offered multiple helplines, a welcome sight from my perspective although I did not encounter problems of this sort. Although my work pendum seemed often inflated, this was not ordered by my supervisors but rather self-imposed and therefore was not regarded as a burden for most of the time.

Quality of the host institution

Not knowing much about the campus initially, I was pleasantly surprised to learn about the state-of-the-art research being conducted at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, i.a. in the engineering, crop and computer sciences. Hosting the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA), high-performance computing is made accessible to a broad range of scientists from different fields. IGB hosts multiple service facilities which support strongly the work as a life scientist. For example, the Computer & Network Resource Group offers access to a biocluster for high-performance computing for -omics research and the neighboring Roy J. Carver Biotechnology Center instrumentation and know-how for next-generation sequencing applications. Furthermore, IGB houses the iBioFab genome foundry, an automated research platform for synthetic biology systems with the capability of high-throughput bio-manufacturing and metabolic engineering.

Contacts within the host institution, inclusion in the organization

The host institute made it possible to network on multiple occasions with professionals from different fields and backgrounds. Generally I was approached at eye level and the temporary nature of my stay did not lessen the inclusion into the team as well as the recognition as colleague. Instrumentation and resources were allocated on a similar level as for long-term employees, which I deem very respectable. I have made lasting connections to my host-supervisor, Professor Stephen Long, former and current Post-Docs as well as fellow graduate students, some of whom I now count to close friends.

Recommendations for future Marshall Plan students and fellows

I regard the acquisition of a bike a crucial step that allows mobility early on when coming to Urbana-Champaign. The free usage of the bus system is only possible after initial administrative tasks are completed, but until then, the bus can be used for a relatively cheap fee. The purchase of a bike in connection with the bus renders it possible to not rely on a car, which considerably lowers the expenses. Urbana-Champaign is by no means a large town so coming from a bigger city, this circumstance can make one feel somewhat isolated, especially without a car. In this case the purchase of a car is advisable. Chicago is reachable within about 3 hours by Amtrak or via Bus and shuttle services, although these services vary greatly in their reliability.

The general open-mindedness in the U.S. made it easy to approach people in general. When initial fears of contact are overcome, one is greatly rewarded by the experience of kind and fascinating people.