

FIELD REPORT

Columbia University, New York

Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics, Landweber Lab

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Going abroad to do research, to study or to teach is a unique endeavor that for most people turns out to be very rewarding. It's something that wants to be experienced as words often fail to accurately describe the bits and flashes of such an adventure.

I personally got excited about ciliate research at a conference in France, where my then future PI gave a fascinating talk about genome biology in Oxytricha. I took the chance and applied to do a research internship at Columbia University in New York. Because of relatively high living costs and limited student salaries I am very grateful to have been granted the Marshall Plan Scholarship to help covering my stay in New York.

General impression of my research stay abroad

Summing up, I could fully focus on my research without technical hurdles, got all the support I needed as well as intellectual help from my lab colleagues. However, I could plan my project independently and incorporate my own ideas, something I strived to learn as preparation for a future PhD project.

Quality of the host institution

The lab I worked in was located at the medical center of Columbia University. The location was embedded in an urban environment and did not have the classical campus feel to it, something that I found appealing and that made me enjoy arriving at the institute every day again.

From a scientific perspective there was nothing to be missed as well. The lab was flexible and helpful in setting me up with everything I needed as for example literature, reagents or protocols. The department offered technical expertise through core facilities that were easy and efficient to communicate with and provided great services.

Contacts within the host institution, inclusion in the organization

The lab I worked in was located at the medical center of Columbia University. The location was embedded in an urban environment and did not have the classical campus feel to it, something that I found appealing and that made me enjoy arriving at the institute every day again. On my first arrival, I was guided through different stations to fill out paper work, officially register to Columbia University and meet the lab. Everything was well organized and people took time to answer my questions – I only had to follow the instructions I received per email. In addition, I got assigned a contact person in the HR department I could direct all my administrative and other questions to. This made the administration of the internship easy and more pleasant than it would be otherwise. Apart from that, my research experience was specific to the lab and the department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics. I felt warmly welcomed, there were a lot of interesting seminars I could attend and we regularly had social meetings and activities with neighboring labs.

Furthermore, the department organized a 3-day scientific retreat in upstate New York, which was a wonderful opportunity to meet people and hear about interesting scientific developments. The general atmosphere in the department was very open and allowed me, as a student intern, to fully participate and engage in all kinds of activities.

Recommendations for future Marshall Plan students and fellows

Accommodation in New York

New York is a truly multicultural and cosmopolitan city with its districts providing home to people from all over the world. Every area has its own unique flair and makes up a small ecosystem with specific perks and potential disadvantages. To pick the right spot, I'd initially choose between University housing (offered by Columbia but you need to apply way ahead; ask your supervisor as soon as possible) and private accommodation. If you choose private accommodation, as I did, I can strongly recommend to initially sublet an apartment for 1-2 months (those sublets are easier to find from abroad), to get a feel for the city and be able to make a more thoughtful decision. Once you know what you want and where you want to live, be direct and focused and you will find something nice :)

Balancing out

If you are a little like me it's natural to take a deep-dive and be soaked up by your research project. While it's important to push scientific progress, there are many different ways that can help you develop, scientifically as well as personally. In retrospect, I tremendously benefit from doing things out of the (personal) ordinary while viewing my time in New York as a learning adventure as much as it was research stay. Go to lectures out of your scope, talk to people you'd not usually get the chance to, be open and flexible towards everything and also: take some time off work, stroll around the city, do your thing, take the bus to the Catskill Mountains, take the bus to anywhere and be a tourist for some time – it's worth it!

My time at Columbia University was a truly unforgettable and rewarding experience. It helped me realize how much I like basic science, I made friends and memories, immersed myself in American culture and will remain a part-time New Yorker until the end of my life.