

Marshall Plan Scholarship Field Report

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General Impression of Research Period Abroad

In the past semester, I had the unique possibility to visit the DevoLab research group of Dr. Charles Ofria. DevoLab is one of many research groups located at the BEACON Center for the Study of Evolution in Action at Michigan State University (MSU).

Although I was forced to return to Austria after only five weeks instead of after five months due to the pandemic arising, I would not want to miss this fantastic time. I think a research stay abroad does not only push you forward professionally, but it is an incredible personal enrichment as well!

East Lansing, where MSU is located, is a small and friendly university town. Whilst not having time to enjoy the beauty of Michigan during planned but not executed road trips, I thoroughly appreciated travelling around East Lansing and its neighboring cities using the outstanding public transportation provided by CATA.

Quality of the Host Institution

MSU's, and especially BEACON's dedication to excellence was obvious from the outset. The Office for International Students and Scholars was more than helpful with all my many questions, facilitated a swift adaptation to the American way of life and connected me with other scholars. Aside from that, Connie James, the business manager of BEACON, assisted me in all possible situations.

From the academic side, being introduced to research in an environment like BEACON offers, is the best thing that can happen to someone who is interested in the intersection of computer science and biology. The people whom I had the honor to work with are brilliant and the university has great facilities and equipment, including high-performance computing clusters that immensely facilitated doing my research, both while in the U.S. and from Austria.

Contacts within the Host Institution

From the very beginning, I felt like I had been part of DevoLab for a much, much longer time than I actually was. DevoLab unites excellent researchers from various backgrounds and I am forever grateful for having been able to collaborate with them. They introduced me to many exciting new technologies and to the research field of Artificial Life, all while I was writing my master thesis. The whole group was more than welcoming and made me instantly feel at home in the United States. Charles, my host, not only ensured that I was picked up from the airport, but also constantly stayed in touch with me, making sure that I had everything I needed. He went above and beyond, assuring that I felt comfortable and included. Even before my first official day at the lab, I had lunch with my future colleagues, visited my future workplace and was introduced to a lot of people. It was a very warm welcome

and it somehow felt a little bit like coming home to a place you have never visited before. As the days moved by, I got the chance to attend several events hosted at BEACON and I was invited to DevoLab's board game parties, which were a lot of fun. Moreover, I visited a basketball game and got infected with MSU's Spartan spirit.

Back in Austria, I continued meeting with people from DevoLab on a daily basis. Additionally, I was invited to all the social events they organized (including academic karaoke, film nights, a professional writing workshop and Zoom meetings for having lunch - or in my case dinner - together). I feel like I am truly belonging to the group and those social get-togethers definitely eased demanding research days.

In July, I got the chance to participate in the International Conference for Artificial Life and was even invited to present my work. It was an ineffably great experience for me to talk about my research in front of experts on this field of Artificial Life.

Recommendations for Future Marshall Plan Students and Fellows

During my time in Michigan, I met many inspiring people and learned more than I could express, both for my professional and personal life. Living abroad opens completely new perspectives and I can strongly recommend spending some of your lifetime in a foreign country if you get the chance to do so.

For future Marshall Plan students and fellows, I would recommend starting early with the preparations, as I underestimated the visa application process. It was not until 1.5 months prior to my departure that I learned that I need a document for the visa application, which must be issued from the host university and sent via letter mail. Again, BEACON did not spare any efforts and sent said document via priority mail, allowing me to apply for my visa just in time.

Moreover, I think it is very beneficial to have an open mind, be receptive to new circumstances and experiences, openly approach other people and - above all - enjoy trying out something new! All in all, make the most of your time and appreciate every second of it. Either you have the best moments of your life or you grow, but in any case, you win!

It would not have been possible to fulfill this lifelong dream of going abroad without the help of Dr. Stephan Winkler, my supervisor from the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria. I am very grateful for this opportunity and the overwhelming support I received from both, my home and host university!

Recalling all of those memories, I feel eternally grateful for my short but intense time in the United States. I got to know a lot of absolutely stunning people with whom I hope to stay in touch in the future. Thanks to the Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation, I could live out this dream of mine and I will forever treasure that experience!

In this spirit: Go Green, Go White!

Nadine Strasser