

Studying abroad: An unforgettable exchange year at Harvard University

Personal motivation and how I got there

Since I started studying, I always wanted to spend some time abroad at another University. I saw it as the perfect opportunity to broaden my horizon, extend my network, and experience academia outside of Switzerland. With lots of lectures, tight schedules, and block courses during my Bachelor's it seemed unlikely to spend a semester or year abroad during that time, so I chose to do it during my Master's. The master's thesis itself appeared to be the best opportunity for it as the guidelines make it fairly easy to work wherever one wishes to. The only requirement being to have a Professor from the University of Basel that is willing to supervise the research project. By attending and conducting internships in a variety of different topics during my Bachelor's and Master's I was able to narrow down the research area I was most passionate about. After identifying leading research institutes and their professors in countries I was interested in, I was left with around 15 Universities worldwide. I contacted each one of them and went through multiple interviews. I was thrilled when I got accepted into my first choice which was Harvard University in Boston, USA. The research lab I applied for was part of the infectious disease and immunology unit where I would work in malaria research. To finance my stay in Boston, I applied to over 30 Swiss scholarships of which 5 were willing to support my project. Once everything was set up, I left for Boston.

My research and work experience

Arriving in the US and settling in was very exciting and fairly easy as the university had a well-structured and organized enrollment process. I was warmly welcomed in the lab and was able to start working on the project right away. The scope of my work was to develop a protein expression system for vaccine candidates of the malaria organism *Plasmodium vivax*. The parasitic eukaryotic single-cell parasite can't be cultivated in vitro so far and neither can most of its native proteins be expressed in transgenic systems. This makes it very difficult to develop vaccines against it which is one of several goals from a global health perspective. To come up with a solution for this issue was challenging in multiple ways as I wasn't used to having that much intellectual freedom in tackling an actual problem while also being solely responsible for its outcome. I went through several failures and had to adjust the project multiple times, but in the end, there were a lot of skills acquired and lessons learned. Spending long days, nights, and weekends in the lab, I got to experience how different American and Swiss work culture is when it comes to work-life balance. Another cultural difference that I witnessed was how engaged people are outside of their university courses and research projects. Most students are part of around 3 to 4 social and sports clubs where they participate in weekly events. To get to know people outside of my work environment I joined the leadership team of Nucleate Boston as well as the Harvard Quidditch Team.

Getting socially involved outside of my research project

By joining Nucleate, a student-led organization that facilitates the formation of life sciences companies, I was exposed to a lot of motivated students and start-up founders. I was able to learn a lot about the process of starting your own company while also acquiring a more entrepreneurial mindset. While it started in Boston, Nucleate can now be found in over 18 locations in the US, Europe, and even Switzerland which gave me an incredible global network. Another big commitment during my time in Boston was joining the Harvard Quidditch Sports Team. Yes, you read that right. Harvard has an official team that plays the sport you probably know from Harry Potter. Players run around on brooms and tackle each other while trying to score points by throwing a ball through hoops or by catching the snitch. When I first read about it on the Harvard Website, I laughed about it and then gave it a shot for the sole reason of playing a sport that I never heard of before. Practicing 3 times a week became quite

a commitment but having breakfast or dinner in the dining hall afterwards was a good way of socializing, staying in shape, and getting healthy food.



In the left picture, you can see me and my friends from Switzerland in front of the Widener library on the Harvard campus where I used to study, in the picture on the right side you can see me and the Harvard Quidditch Team at the National Championship.

Personal takeaway and advice

It is impossible to summarize an entire year full of experiences and learnings in a few words but what sticks with me the most is how many talented people I've met and how this year pushed my personal growth. This is why I would advise any student to spend some time studying abroad as you will make experiences that you otherwise wouldn't.