



The CHUST Committee



Travel Story 2023

Name: Chantal Ronacher

Year and line of study at KTH: First year of Master in Medical Biotechnology

Which university did you visit? (Name, city, state): University of Florida, Gainesville, FL

Time Frame: 5 weeks

Visa Category: J-1 exchange visitor; Short-term Scholar

Insurance Coverage: ISP International Student Protection – University of Florida (Scholar Plan)

Scholarship Details: None

We would be grateful if you could share insights from your travel, internship, and time spent in the U.S. Kindly provide detailed responses to the following questions within 1-2 pages. Responses are preferred in English.

Project Overview:

Please describe the project you were involved in.

What was its main focus? How was your interaction with the Professor or supervisor? Describe a typical day in the lab for you.

The focus of my project was to identify functional residues in probiotic effector molecules. The Lorca Lab worked with *Lactobacillus johnsonii* N6.2, which is a bacterium shown to mitigate the onset of type 1 diabetes in rats. This bacterium produces nano vesicles with a distinct composition of lipids and proteins in comparison to the cell membrane and has been proven to impact human beta cells and immune cells. My task was to find the particular residues of proteins found in or on nano vesicles responsible for the interaction with the host cells. More specifically, I was cloning the constructs for expression of protein interaction partners including the design of new mutated proteins for the identification of functional residues. These proteins should be tested for their interaction with human proteins in a two-hybrid system as well as activity tests on human cell lines. Main focus during the time I spent there however was on the structure guided mutagenesis and the genetic engineering process.

The contact with Professor Lorca was very convenient, we were texting via email, and she was open for meetings on zoom before my arrival. She is very friendly and supportive and has answers for many questions that came up, not only concerning work but also regarding off-campus life and things like housing, transportation or the application process. During the project we had weekly lab meetings where everybody presents in a

few slides what they have done the last week and what they are planning for the coming week. In general I worked together with almost everybody in the lab, people were working on quite diverse projects and I could tag along and learn about many techniques and procedures. There was always someone available for any kind of questions.

The days in the lab varied a lot depending on the experiments running. In general, the working hours were flexible, I usually arrived between 8-9 in the morning and left between 2-5pm. This gives time especially in the beginning to get all the organizational things done. I had my individual project running which I could freely organize in terms of time management and in between experiments I would do general lab tasks or tag along and help out with my coworkers' projects.

Learning & Development:

What new skills or knowledge did you acquire during the project?

Was your prior knowledge adequate for the tasks you undertook?

How much responsibility were you entrusted with?

The list of new skills is long considering I spent only a month there. For example, I learned to work with animals (dissecting mice and isolation of different tissues and cell types) and with cell lines (human, rodent) as well as with clinical material (human stool samples) and generally getting in touch with the process of pre-clinical trials. I also learned bioinformatics skills like the use of databases to retrieve sequences, lots of literature research, protein modelling and structure analysis (PyMOL and alignment tools, benchling etc.). And of course, many general microbiology applications like protein purification/isolation/concentration, ELISA, PCR, SDS PAGE, Western Blotting, qRT-PCR, HPLC, restriction enzyme cloning or mobility shift assay as well as the planning of those experiments. Besides the laboratory skills I learned a lot about how other teams organize themselves and work together and how money flows and decisions are made which are valuable lessons for any place you may end up.

My prior knowledge in the field was easily enough. However, you are not alone in the lab and there is always someone to ask for help if you are uncertain. If you are unsure about what is sufficient prior knowledge, ask Prof Lorca before you arrive or before you write your project description and you can adjust the project scope together to reach a level that suits.

The responsibility given was enough to do the things alone that I am comfortable with, but I was never in a situation where I felt like I had too much. Everybody was very helpful and supportive.

Life on Campus:

Share your experiences of life at the university you attended. This can include aspects of campus life, nightlife, and any trips you embarked on.

At the university itself it was rather empty since most students are gone during the summer. It probably depends on the living situation, but it might be a bit hard to get around. I lived rather close to the cancer and genetics complex (where I worked) so I could walk to Uni (about 20-30min). There are also busses which are free with the Gator ID card, however they don't run very reliably and not very often (every ~20min in the summer). If you want to get around on campus, there is a campus shuttle which is also free for students/staff. You can call it with an app (like a uber), but it only stays within the campus area. This shuttle might be convenient if you go out at night because the

busses don't go after 8pm or so but the shuttle drives till late. There are 2 main regions for nightlife: midtown and downtown. There are many clubs and bars, for example barcade, which is an arcade and a bar or University Club, a gay club with regular Drag shows. If you want to do trips you have to organize someone with a car or (share) an uber, nothing really is reachable by bus or by foot (except for the natural history museum which has a butterfly area). If you want to go to nature, you can take a walk in Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park or drive to one of the springs around Gainesville. For the springs either leave very early in the morning or go on a weekday, they fill up pretty fast! The football stadium is free to enter for everybody and might be worth visiting, the (new) baseball stadium is right next to the lab.

Breakdown your living expenses in the city. How did you manage the financial aspect of your stay? Did you rely on scholarships, personal funds, or both? If you were on scholarship, were there any documents you had to submit to the university to facilitate its disbursement?

Describe your housing experience at the university. Were you satisfied with your accommodation?

I paid for my stay with personal funds since there was no compensation from the University of Florida. The groceries are a bit more expensive than in Sweden but manageable if you are shopping cautiously. The only annoying thing is that they sell many things in bulk only and there is just no way of using 15 rolls of toilet paper in 5 weeks... I spent approximately 700\$ for the month of July on food and going out including trips like to the springs or the theatre.

I also applied for a travel grant from KTH which was 7500 kr and required me to apply to do my internship as project course (BB2200) for 15 ECTS. The application process for that was very straight forward.

I found housing in a Facebook group /marketplace. There are many people leaving over the summer who are subleasing their apartments/rooms. I lived in a shared apartment with 4 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms, but only one other girl was renting at that time. For my room I paid ~600\$ per month plus 60\$ utilities. There was also a subleasing fee of 200\$ to be paid upfront, plus they wanted first and last month's rent at the move in since I didn't have an American bank account to prove my income. It was nice to live in an apartment complex with other students, the pool (or the game room) is a good place to meet people!

Application & Stay Insights:

Did you face any challenges during your stay that future students should be aware of? If yes, please detail these challenges.

I had difficulties getting my insurance which led to a late check-in process with the university. The enrolment period for the insurance plan (one of the pre-approved plans from the university) had just ended days before I arrived and then the website was down. You can ask Maryshelly Quinones for help at this email address: scholarinsurance@ufic.ufl.edu but it takes her a while to answer (since she is alone responsible for all insurance questions). Otherwise ask your advisor (person on the DS-2019 form) for help, they will connect you with the responsible person. I was also very confused in the beginning because the University required me to give them my US phone number (starting with +1) but I had purchased a prepaid plan that didn't come with a number. They told me to just put the number of my lab phone instead. In the end, it wasn't a problem that my check in was a bit late or my insurance coverage was late, as long as things are clearly communicated with your advisor!

What documentation was required by the university? Additionally, what papers were essential for your visa approval at the embassy?

The very first things I was asked for were:

- Country of Citizenship
- Country of residency
- current position and current institution
- full CV since you turned 18 years old
- (the dates you want to work)

These things are for your administrator at the UF who will hand them in for a RISC assessment (you don't have to do anything for that). If the RISC assessment is approved, you can hand in all the documents listed

here: <https://internationalcenter.ufl.edu/j-1-studentscholar/new-international-scholars/inviting-j-1-exchange-visitors/required-documents>. If you already have a degree (e.g. you BSc) you won't need a DS-7002, instead send your degree and you will be a scholar instead of a student. You will get a UF-ID number and you have to create your Gator Link (which requires you to download an app called duo mobile for additional identification). Then you will get a link to fill out some personal information and pay a fee. You will have to provide an emergency contact information and there are some "required readings" (it's really just reading information for you). When you have uploaded all documents and completed the online process with UF/ Exchange Visitor Services/ International Center then you will receive an email for you to print your DS-2019 form. Your SEVIS number will also be listed and that is when you make your embassy appointment to get your visa. There are further directions in the email you will receive from UF EVS/ UFIC. For the appointment you'll have to fill out the online DS-160 application and pay the I-109 fee and the SEVIS fee. For the DS-160 you need a picture with certain requirements listed on their website (a selfie is theoretically ok but might not have the required resolution). You can start with the DS-160 before you have all other documents ready, I think you can save and continue the application for 30 days. Once you have your DS-160 confirmation letter and your DS-2019 you can apply for an appointment at the embassy. There you have to bring:

- Passport
- DS-160
- I-109 & SEVIS payment proof
- DS-2019
- A visa photo 5x5cm
- DS-7002 (or Degree)
- ALL supporting documents (proof of funding, personbrevet from skatteverket, proof that you'll return for example that you have school here to finish, English proficiency certificate...)

Please also fill out this simple budget table.

Expense	Monthly cost (in USD)	Notes/Comments
Rent/housing (incl. utilities)	660	
Food	~450	~700 incl. going out etc.
Transport costs	None	
Health Insurance	77.25	

Your contribution will significantly assist prospective students.

Please title your document as: “University_YourName_YourProgram” and submit it as a Word file via the provided Google Form.

Warm regards,

CHUST Committee 2022-23