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Further study abroad – a Swiss research scientist's view

Post-doctoral fellowship in the USA

Research studies abroad are an integral component of a natural scientist's career. What are the attractions of post-doctorate study abroad?

First and foremost there is the exposure to other ways of working and thinking," says Stephan Lengweiler, a Bernese biochemist, explaining the motivation behind his recently com-

Alice Baumann

pleted post-doctorate research studies in the USA. He began contemplating taking up a post-doctoral fellowship even as he embarked on his post-graduate studies. The reasons were many and varied, but the main argument was that a post-doctoral stint abroad constitutes an integral part of a natural scientist's education. In addition he wanted to satisfy his own sense of adventure and his unquenchable curiosity for other countries and cultures.

In his search for a suitable institution the young research scientist, who specialises in the molecular and cellular components of human blood, focused on reputable experts and institutes of learning in Europe and the United States. When he discovered that it was much easier to get into research institutes in the USA than their counterpart in Europe, he turned his attentions to various scientists at well-known research centres in San Diego, Washington DC, New York and Boston.



(Photo: zvg)

Swiss grant

His project proposal attracted the attention of Professor Barry S. Coller of the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, a leading figure in his field. After a regular exchange of information, a detailed collaboration concept was worked out. This was endorsed by the Swiss National Science Foundation in the form of a grant to cover Lengweiler's living expenses.

At the end of September 1997 he took up his new post on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. He recalls that he was struck by sheer density of proven experts and the excellent research in-

frastructure. "I can't find this concentrated environment at home," he adds. "In Switzerland we have only just begun to pool our strengths."

New York pace

During his daily work in the laboratory as well as at numerous seminars he was also impressed by the fundamental difference in his American colleagues' approach to scientific problems. Whereas in Switzerland questions of feasibility often dominate project evaluations and determine the fate of an idea, in the USA the experiment would be spontaneously attempted. Failures, he explains, are accepted more easily. Stephan Lengweiler smilingly suggests that this attitude possibly reflects New York's fast-paced, competitive spirit.

Now busy preparing for the publication of his results, the Swiss academic looks back on his "cultural" experiences as a particularly valuable contribution to his scientific career. This, he says, also explains why, quite apart from its high technological standards, study in the USA continually enjoys special favour among Swiss research circles. According to Lengweiler, "Helvetic negativism and a tendency towards complacency will only impede future chances. But there are lots of doors open to those who know how to combine Swiss perseverance with American optimism to get results."

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