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# Scientists Worldwide: An International Perspective on an American Research Lab Setting

Jessica Maya

Science is an international subject: it transcends languages and cultures alike. In the United States alone, groundbreaking research is being done in every scientific field, from cancer to aging to biomedical engineering. Many young scientists come from around the world to perform research under the guidance of mentors in America. A recent study shows that foreign students account for the majority of enrollments in U.S. graduate programs in many of the STEM fields<sup>1</sup>. At UAB alone, there are more than 665 international students in both the undergraduate and graduate programs<sup>2</sup>. Because of this, it is imperative to hear from these voices to see where our strengths are as a leading nation in the STEM fields, as well as to acknowledge our weaknesses. Three international graduate students were interviewed about their experiences at UAB and in their home countries.

One M.D. from Hungary, Andras Rab, has been working in research labs since his days in medical school back home. For several years, he gained experience working in translational research by analyzing patient samples for diagnostic purposes. Once he began his residency in Hungary, he had the opportunity to work in a research lab in the Department of Cell Biology at UAB. When asked about the different mentors he has had across the board, he says his experience depended more on each mentors' personality rather than what country they were from. He says, "I believe the mentor should be your teacher in research and also in life." When asked why he came to America to perform research, he explains that funding and grant support were very limited in Hungary, which significantly decreased the effectiveness of his research. His biggest challenge coming to America was the language barrier, forcing him to learn both the everyday language as well as scientific jargon.

Another student here at UAB has worked in many labs, including academics and industry, in both India and the U.S.A. He likes what he has experienced so far at UAB and says, "You get the freedom to think like an independent researcher and work on your hypothesis." He thinks the mentors here provide more freedom of thought compared to other mentors and has observed a high level of work ethic at UAB and in America in general. When asked what made him want to perform research in America, he responds with his interest in the cutting edge technologies and his zeal to find something new. While he says that it is always a challenge for a foreigner to blend in with the current settings in the lab, he thinks he is fortunate to have exceptional colleagues who have supported him throughout his experience.

Anukul Shenoy, another Ph.D. student from India who received his masters at the University of Mumbai, has done

research in the clinical and experimental field for the past few years. He is interested in immunology and microbiology and is now doing his doctoral project on pneumococcus pathogenesis and the host-pathogen interaction associated with pneumococcal infections. He contrasts the different academic environments of India and America: "In my opinion, [America is] such a dynamic environment [that] allows for broadening of horizons and understanding of different topics out of the field of syllabus which otherwise wouldn't be possible with the rigid atmosphere [in India]." To further explain this point, he suggests that his relationships with mentors in India were associated with a level of formalism that limited his experience as a mentee. Mentors could only be contacted by message or calls during office hours. Here, he says he has been very fortunate with his mentor, who makes it a point to extend his mentorship beyond the scope of the lab and research work. "Discussions, criticisms, praise and complaints are welcome equally," he says. "I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Carlos J. Orihuela for his help, patience, and belief in my abilities and to make me a better person capable of making sound decisions." Coming to America was a decision he made due to the limited available options and lack of leading labs working in bacterial pathogenesis. His adjustment to UAB and the U.S. in general was not so difficult, he says, because he loved collaborating and making friends. He still finds it hard to address his elders and teachers less formally or by their first names, but he is slowly adopting the practice and is adjusting well to his new environment and peers.

These three scientists have made and will continue to make discoveries in their respective fields. Understanding both the good and the bad that we as a country, and as a university, have to offer to make our community great is crucial. It is because of them and their colleagues that we at UAB can say that our STEM field is ever growing.

## References

1. Anderson, S. International students are 70% of EE grad students in the U.S. *Forbes.com*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2013/07/15/international-students-are-70-of-ee-grad-students-in-u-s/#5939bb9e4da5> (2013).
2. International recruitment and student services. *UAB Information Booklet for International Students*. Page 9 (2005).