

Conducting research abroad: How a few months can change your future

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Last summer I travelled to Sapporo for three months, Japan to conduct cultural research as a visiting graduate student at Hokkaido University. My experience there was second to none both socially and professionally, and I would like to share some of the benefits that such an opportunity can afford.

One of the greatest benefits of being a short-term visiting graduate student at another institution is that the deadline by which I had to complete all of the tasks that my host supervisor and myself had planned to accomplish is very definite and, try as I might, will not budge. As graduate students we know all too well that the deadlines we set for ourselves often come and go without us having attained all that we set out to achieve. Visiting and working at another institution for a short period of time, provided me with the right amount of time pressure such that my supervisors (both back home and hosting) and myself were impressed by, rather than disappointed in my level of productivity.

Another reason why my productivity increased is that I was not conducting research at my host institution according to my home institution's methods. Odds are that the host institution will carry out at least one aspect of the data collection process in a way that is more efficient than how it is done at your home institution. For instance, recruitment at Queen's University involves waiting for participants to sign up for my study and then waiting for them to not show

up for my study. The psychology department at Hokkaido University employs research assistants whose primary responsibility is to call and schedule participants, making full days of data collection (with few no-shows) a reality and completing data collection within a few days an ordinary occurrence. In conducting research at another institution, I was exposed to new and effective ways of doing so, which I can now export to my home institution.

Last, but certainly not least, I found my host institution to be a fruitful foundation for establishing research connections with other graduate students and faculty members. Both graduate students and faculty members were willing to discuss their research with me at the drop of a hat, allowing me to easily discern whether or not any of their research programs are of further interest to me. Also, by completing my own research tasks in a timely and successful manner (which will no doubt be the case) I demonstrated to those around me that I was indeed an asset to any collaborative effort. As a result of these factors, I left my Hokkaido with the ground work laid for future collaborations!

Although I have focused solely on the advantages associated with being a visiting graduate student, there are important drawbacks to consider before deciding to spend a semester or two abroad. Preparing to move and study in a new country requires

organization, planning, and money. Also, in most cases, bringing loved ones and friends along is not realistic, which may contribute to feelings of disorientation and loneliness (albeit only initially). Regardless of these realities, I maintain that there will be light at the end of the tunnel. The advantages

afforded by being a short-term visiting graduate student are numerous and I have only highlighted a small sample of them. I strongly encourage those of you who have read and are now intrigued by this article to go and experience these and the rest of the advantages for yourself.