

From our alumna: Jessica Yuan, KU Leuven / University of California, Berkeley (Spring 2011)

I participated in the EuroScholars during the Spring 2011 semester at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium, doing research in organic chemistry under the supervision of Professor Wim Dehaen. My project involved the synthesis of novel fluorescent dyes based on a BODIPY core. First, I'm very grateful that I had the opportunity to be immersed in a research environment for an extended period of time. It's a very different experience from working in the lab during the school year, when classes and extracurricular activities are also competing for your time. Focusing on research allowed me to be trained in new techniques faster, and also greatly sped up progress in the lab. The foreign setting of the program makes it even more of a unique opportunity for American students. Leuven, the city in which I stayed, is a college town with a very vibrant student life, and many exchange students come to study there every semester. While I was there, I made a group of friends of other international students, and we would get together for dinner each week. During these dinners, as is typical of the exchange student experience, we usually each prepared dishes from our respective home countries, while often engaging in playful discussion about cultural differences.

One thing I miss about Belgium is immersion in the local language. In Leuven, the local language is Flemish, which is a regional variant of Dutch, and it is something I have never received exposure to in the States. While in Leuven, I used Dutch to communicate everyday in the lab, and although it was a challenge at first to relearn the names of all the chemical compounds and terms, it was an interesting experience that I would not have been able to replicate anywhere else. Outside of the lab, I was also able to practice my Dutch with my classmates from the language course I was enrolled in. Since we were all Dutch learners, it was fun to be able to practice our language skills on each other outside of class in a low-stress environment. What was most meaningful to me, though, was being able to speak Dutch with my childhood friends from Leuven, with whom I reconnected this past semester. Although many years had passed, when I was there with them, I felt as if I could step back into my childhood for a moment.

I think the one most valuable thing I gained from my semester abroad would be the affirmation of my interest in organic chemistry. Every day in the lab brings new surprises, challenges, and unexpected results, and that's what keeps it interesting. I had previously worked in a molecular biology lab at my home university, but upon returning home to complete my degree, I joined an organic chemistry lab to gain more research experience during the school year. I do feel that my training process upon joining my new lab was greatly simplified by the lab experience I gained in Leuven. I am currently in the process of applying to graduate programs in organic chemistry, so in this regard, my semester abroad greatly helped me to clarify my research interests. With guidance from my enthusiastic and supportive research supervisors at Leuven, I feel like I accomplished and learned more during my EuroScholars semester than I would have in a regular semester at Berkeley, which made it a very worthwhile experience and one I would certainly repeat.