

I enrolled into the Water Science program in 2001 when it was established. Being the first to go through a new program brought quite some challenges for us students, but at the same time, it was a very rewarding experience. I finished my B.Sc. in 2004 and moved on to the Masters program. During my second year, in 2006, I got the chance to move to the U.S. I did my research at Northern Arizona University (NAU) in Flagstaff, AZ and graduated with a M.Sc. later that year.

During my time at NAU I had made contacts with other researchers in the biology department and I was hired as a research specialist a week after I graduated. My own research had been in biochemistry, now I was working in analytical chemistry. After about a year, I started working for a start-up biotechnology company that was founded at NAU, but had just moved off campus. I was their first full-time employee, running their analytical chemistry lab. My education in Duisburg and Essen had prepared me well for taking on a job in chemistry, even though I had always focused more on microbiology. In the U.S., having knowledge (even if limited) of a variety of disciplines is generally considered a good thing!

After having worked in labs for a couple of years, I decided to go back to school to pursue a Ph.D. I looked at many different schools, even found one in Oregon that offers a Ph.D. program that seems to be a direct extension of the Water Science Masters program. However, I was looking for two things: an area that would allow me to spend a considerable amount of time *outside* of a lab, and a focus area that was not interdisciplinary anymore. I decided to stay in Flagstaff and applied to the School of Forestry at NAU, even though I have no background in forestry whatsoever.

To my great surprise, I was accepted into the program and started taking classes. The U.S. system is somewhat different from a European program and U.S. schools differ among each other, but here are some general points to consider:

- Students must take the GRE (Graduate Record Examinations) – not fun, but unavoidable if you want to pursue a higher degree
- Students must have the OK of a professor from the school they apply for to serve as their major advisor. In addition, graduate students need to form a committee that will support them throughout their time in school. For Ph.D. students, that committee has to consist of at least 3 other professionals in addition to the students' advisor. Committee members will also be present for the Comprehensives and the defense.
- Each program requires a certain amount of credits to be taken. My school requires 63 (with an average course having 3) – that's about 2 years (4 semesters) of classes. If a student comes from a different area, remedial courses must be taken to account for any basic knowledge that is yet to be obtained
- Ph.D. programs take about 4-5 years to finish. It depends a lot on the funding situation and of course the student progress
- After the coursework is done, a student will have to take the 'Comprehensives', a very extensive exam, that, once passed, will lead to the student changing from a 'PhD student' to a 'PhD candidate'.

Funding is not easily obtained, and when looking for an advisor, it might be good to ask about funding sources and the possibility of grant money being available. Tuition costs and the cost of living can be fairly high, and many students will work at least one job next to school to make enough money to survive.

I have just started my third year. I took over 50 credit hours in classes so far and will have my “Comps” next spring. Depending on funding, I hope to be able to finish my research in another two years. I am working in tropical wetland ecology, which is a nice combination of biochemistry, molecular biology, ecology, and forestry. I am very happy about my foundations and the knowledge I obtained in the Water Science program. Like I said before, experience and diversity is valued here, and I have never experienced any disadvantages in having a little knowledge about a lot of things as opposed to deep knowledge in only one area. The latter is what graduate school and working in a job are for anyway.

The U.S. are not just another English speaking country with a European touch. Their mentality is certainly closer to Europeans than for let’s say Asians, but it’s still a very different country and it will bring a lot of challenges to tackle. However, I am absolutely at home in this country and get homesick as soon as I leave for more than 3 days. I am in the lucky position to have a greencard, thus I never had to struggle with visas and such. I am planning on becoming a U.S. citizen later this year, and to stay and work in the Pacific Northwest once I finished my Ph.D. I am not interested in an academic career, but would rather work in research, maybe for one of the government agencies (i.e. The Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife, etc).

I am grateful to the professors and staff at the University in Duisburg-Essen to have given me a very good start into my professional career. I value the classes I’ve taken and the lessons learned, but most of all, I value the good education and personal interest that the instructors showed. Was it not for the independence and self-esteem I got there, I don’t think I would have taken on the task of completing a Ph.D. in a foreign country.

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