

Student's Research Adventure - 2011

Sean Fleming - Nottingham University



"So, are there any study abroad programs for Chemistry majors?" I, as a wide-eyed prospective freshman, asked this fateful question to my future advisor **Robin Rarick** during orientation. I braced for the worst; I had heard that many science majors do not get the chance to go abroad due to their comprehensive curriculums.

"Actually, we do. We have a program with the University of Nottingham in England." As Robin said these words, my mouth dropped. I was first surprised that such a program exists, and second, that the program was at the [University of Nottingham](#) ^[1], of all places. So, before I had even begun my first university course, I knew I was headed across the Atlantic for my junior year.



Some background information is required: in high school my brilliant

Chemistry teacher, Mrs. Fari Khalili, showed her class a video on Sodium, where Dr. Martyn Poliakoff, a professor with glasses and grey, Einstein-esque hair gave insight on the unique properties of the metal, and then another professor showcased an experiment demonstrating its reactivity. This video was part of The Periodic Videos, a project run by the Chemistry Department at the University of Nottingham that set out to create a YouTube video for every element. I enjoyed the video in class so much that I continued to watch the videos at home - I could relate to Dr. Poliakoff's zeal and excitement for the elements. I might even say these videos were instrumental in me choosing Chemistry as my major.



This is not to say I left for Nottingham without any hesitation - at the end of the sophomore year, I thought to myself, am I really about to start anew at another faraway university? Just two years prior I had moved across the country from Boston to Tucson. And in Tucson, I had friends, a job, a lab to do research in: do I need to go? However, I was unmoved, and in September of 2011 I boarded my plane to Heathrow.

The historians have named the bond between America and Britain "The Special Relationship," as cultural and social ties allow the countries to cooperate in a way like no other. And I've truly seen it in action. Save for learning to look the opposite way to cross the street, I experienced no culture shock. I spoke (mostly) the same language as the locals. My American-ness, with my accent and odd vocabulary, was a point of excitement during Freshers' week, the rowdy UK version of Wildcat Welcome, when I met all my housemates and coursemates. I fit right in! I joined the choir, and found a home in the university's active LGBT society. I have made great friends who I will keep, yes, for a lifetime. And I plan to visit all of them soon!



For now, back to Chemistry. Upon arrival, I soon met with [Dr. Jon McMaster](#) ^[2], a Nottingham professor and former colleague of Dr. Lichtenberger at Arizona. We went over my class schedule - excuse me, my selection of modules - and he helped to welcome me to my new Chemistry department. Dr. McMaster acted as my 'personal tutor' (or academic advisor) and we continued to meet throughout the year.

The beauty of this study abroad program lies the fact that while I took my physical and inorganic lectures and labs that were required for my degree back in Arizona, I was able to take some very cool modules, including Atmospheric Chemistry, Catalysis, and the class that blew my mind, Bioinorganic Chemistry. I was struck by the interdisciplinary nature of this branch of the science and the amazing feats Biology pulls with the help of a redox reaction.



The interesting part (and sometimes the challenging part) of this program was experiencing the surprising differences between the American and British university systems. To start, there are no tests, quizzes, midterms during the semester and homework is rare. You are assessed by one exam, worth a hundred percent of the grade, at the end of the semester - a bit terrifying when you are used to continual benchmarks. This means you have more time during the semester, but the three weeks before the exam period you are expected to do some heavy "revision" or as we call it, studying.



The most fun aspect was undoubtedly the amount of travel I was able to accomplish. Nottingham itself is an extremely historical town - founded in the 1200s, I lived a 15 minute walk from Nottingham Castle, the former home of a certain infamous sheriff. I lived a 30 minute bus ride away from Sherwood Forest, Robin Hood's rumored stomping grounds. Across the street from the university lies Wollaton Hall, a 17th century manor used as Wayne Manor in the most recent Batman movie. With my Youth Rail Pass I rode their efficient train system up and down the country - from the urban grit of Manchester to the mountainous coast of North Wales, to the Scottish Highlands, and of course, to the great city of London.

Now that I'm back in Arizona, I, understandably, have a lot of people asking, "How was England?" And I tell them that it was the absolute best.

[Undergraduate](#)^[3]

Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry at The University of Arizona
P.O. Box 210041, 1306 East University Blvd., Tucson, AZ 85721-0041
Phone: 520.621.6354 Fax: 520.621.8407

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Links:

- [1] <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/>
- [2] <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/chemistry/people/j.mcmaster>
- [3] <http://www.chem.arizona.edu/taxonomy/term/11>