



I'm trying to find a good balance

Scientists from 94 countries around the globe work at the Max Planck Institutes. Here they relate their personal experiences and impressions. Gabriel Antonio Guerrero from California is doing his PhD at the Max Planck Institute for Biology of Ageing in Cologne. When he finishes, the 29-year-old plans to return the US, initially to attend medical school. After that he would like to obtain a position as an assistant professor of biomedicine.

I was born and raised in California and was just wrapping up my first year as a PhD student at the Sanford Burnham Prebys Medical Discovery Institute in La Jolla when I considered applying for another PhD position at the MPI for Biology of Ageing in Cologne. During my first visit to Europe I truly fell in love with the idea of living in Germany – a place where I don't even speak the native language. In the US, we believe that San Francisco is the most European of all American cities, so I figured that Cologne would be just like San Francisco. Of course that's not true at all, and it took some time to get used to life in Cologne. For example, on a typical morning in La Jolla I'd go to the beach around 7 a.m., surf for 1.5 hours and be in the lab by 9 a.m., whereas in Germany I'd have to travel 500 km to get to the nearest natural surfing spot: the popular Eisbach in Munich. So I took up climbing as a recreational sport instead – indoors for now, but if I find some other people who are interested, we can take a trip to some outdoor climbing spots.

When I first met my boss at the MPI, I was convinced that Max Planck is a place to do world-class research – simply because there are only two things that limit me here: my work ethic and my creativity. Molecular biologists spend a lot of time in the lab, but I have to say that I really like the German approach to work-life balance. People here really value their free



Gabriel Antonio Guerrero (29) studied biology and economics at San Diego State University while conducting research at the University of California San Diego. He initially began his PhD at the Sanford Burnham Prebys Medical Discovery Institute in La Jolla in the field of proteostasis. Since January 2015, Guerrero is doing his PhD at the Max Planck Institute for Biology of Ageing in Cologne. As a geneticist, he is investigating *C. elegans* and how neurons trigger protective mechanisms in the rest of the organism and what role these signals play in the aging process.

time and rarely take work home after an exhausting 12- to 14-hour day at the office. It's nice this way; the research might progress a little more slowly, but it's a lot more fun – so I'm trying to find a balance between the German science culture and the much more stressful one in the US.

Research is extremely competitive everywhere, but I would still like to stay in academia. My plan is to finish my doctorate at the MPI, then go back to the US and spend another four years in medical school before trying to find an assistant professorship in the biomedical sciences. I just love the idea of teaching other students – and I know that I have to conduct research myself before I can teach others how to do it.

It will take quite a while before I reach this goal, but it makes sense to invest time in education. My father is an assistant dean and professor of medicine. My parents had me just as my dad was starting his doctoral degree. They met at university, but both of them are children of first- and second-generation immigrants with Mexican and Native American backgrounds. My parents attained an unusually high level of education – even today, only around 5 percent of all PhD holders in the US are of Mexican descent.

In my previous PhD program I was one of only two Hispanic students, which is when I realized that I was part of a minority. Personally, though, I'm very Americanized. I've never experienced open racism in California, the state with the highest percentage of Hispanics, at roughly 40 percent. It was different for my parents though; it was only thanks to full scholarships that both of them could even afford to attend university, and they often felt discriminated against.

Equal access to education is still a problem for young people in the US today. That's why a school system that offers access to quality education for all students regardless of their social or ethnic background is more important than ever. There's still a long way to go before everyone in the US has the same educational opportunities that I had.