

Only a Month ^[1]

Submitted by [Mathini Vaikunthan](#) ^[2] on 30 June 2016 - 4:22pm



^[2]



Playa Sucia

On the first day of this REU program, we were asked why we chose to come to the University of Puerto Rico Mayaguez for an entire summer. The answer was quite simple for me: it was a perfect opportunity for me to learn more about a vibrant, intricate culture while being immersed in what I loved-- research. The idea of coming here got me through finals and a tough first year at Princeton. I daydreamed of the amazing experiences I would have here through my short summer break, and then realized I might be setting unrealistic expectations for my time here. What if I did not like my work? What if there were no opportunities to actually experience Puerto Rican culture? It's been a month into this program, but I can assuredly say that my daydreams of the experience were far more accurate than my anxieties.

It's only been a month into this program, but I have developed many new insights to what it means to be a professional researcher. It seems like so long ago that eight year old me said I wanted to be a "scientist," not fully knowing what that meant. My idea of what I wanted to be became more and more specific as I grew older, because I felt that's what growing up was defined by: figuring out what you wanted to do. But this experience has showed me that eight

year old me had a clearer idea of what I wanted to do than eighteen year old me. I learned in this program that science is everywhere and can help with everything. For example, I was slightly worried when I learned I was working in a Mechanical Engineering lab, because I am a Chemical and Biological Engineer. I naively thought that Mechanical Engineers just work with large machines, leaving chemistry books to collect dust. But now, I have learned that Mechanical Engineering involves just as strong an understanding of chemical concepts as my own major (in addition to the whole machinery bit).

I learned that being a researcher encompassed a variety of job descriptions (in addition to the whole scientist bit). I learned it was also being a manager, of time, money, and resources. It was being a writer, of papers, theses, and proposals. It was collaboration and innovation and sometimes frustration when experiments fail. I guess that was one too many words for a job description, so “researcher” took the cake. I feel constantly stimulated by the work I do here, and this program has served to crystallize my vague ideas of a future.

Finally, my immersion into Puerto Rican culture has been wholeheartedly aided by the wonderful people who live here. From eating mofongo, to visiting different pieces of the island every weekend, to having conversations in Spanish, to even taking salsa classes, I can say that I have learned so much in so little time. And I have not just learned about the amazing aspects of Puerto Rico, and Colombia, and Venezuela from the people I work with, but the troubles that are unique to their countries. It has been a truly eye opening month. The program has been the perfect opportunity to learn more about the vibrant, intricate world of research, while being immersed in something I have come to love-- Puerto Rico.

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