Intro I spent the summer and fall of 2013 at a co-op in the student city of Leuven, Belgium. Working in the lab of Vincent Bonin at the NERF research institute, I studied the visual system in mice. NERF is located within imec, an engineering research institution and is affiliated with KU Leuven VIB. These institutions provide an environment in which state-of-the-art research can be conducted with ample opportunity for education.

Activities I analyzed video data of eye behavior while mice were performing a running task on a treadmill. My daily responsibility was to train the mice to perform the running task that we used for our experiments. I lent my skills elsewhere in the lab, such as in performing histology. Along the way I picked up new skills such as computer programming. I also presented my research at lab meetings and frequently attended seminars and poster sessions about research being done elsewhere in the department. Outside of work, I enjoyed the sociality of the Flemish culture and, given the location of Belgium, had the privilege of traveling around Europe – even attending a Polish wedding.

Outcome This co-op was certainly the most significant experience I’ve had up to this point in my life. I learned new skills as well as learned how to confront issues I have not yet dealt with. I am currently working on a publication of the data analysis I performed and am expecting to return to Belgium this summer to finish it.

Reflection This co-op was very challenging and I had to learn skills that I has previously found intimidating. I did struggle at times which helped me grow both personally and professionally. The Flemish experience as well as the internationality of NERF really opened my mind. It was the ideal way to cap off my undergraduate career and prepare for a career in research.

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Video of mouse eye during running behavior

Bonin Lab, December 2013

Neurons in a visual area of the mouse brain loaded with a fluorescent dye and expressing genetically encoded Calcium indicators. Bonin et al (2011)

Marktrock Music Festival in Leuven