



University of
Lethbridge

NEWS RELEASE

For immediate release — Tuesday, June 9, 2020

Foreign study placement leads to post-doc at Princeton

Connor MacNeil, a PhD student in chemistry at the University of Lethbridge, is headed for Princeton University and a post-doctoral fellowship, thanks to a semester-long foreign study grant.



MacNeil, as a recipient of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council's (NSERC) Alexander Graham Bell Canada Graduate Scholarship, was able to secure the prestigious Michael Smith Foreign Study Supplement. That gave him the opportunity to spend last fall working in Paul Chirik's lab at Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey.

"I'd been interested in the work that Paul Chirik was doing at Princeton since I started graduate school and it had always been a dream of mine to work in that area of chemistry," MacNeil says. "It was a bit surreal because you hear about all the amazing research that this group does and then, all of a sudden, you're dropped in and you're a part of the group and conversing with people that you've admired. Everybody at Princeton is at the top of their game and that was a world I wanted to immerse myself in."

At Princeton, MacNeil focused on doing the best he possibly could with the short amount of time he had. The first month brought a lot of trying and failing. He persevered and often found himself working away in the lab near midnight with a smile on his face because there was nowhere else he wanted to be.

"I think I made a positive impact on the group and, in the four months I was there, I was able to complete a project and actually publish a paper in [Angewandte Chemie](#)," he says. "I'm going back — I was offered a post-doctoral position at Princeton after I conclude my studies here. My time there was highly productive and Paul Chirik and I got along really well. The way he thinks about science is something that fits well with my goals."

MacNeil is currently working on writing his PhD thesis and plans to finish it this summer. He says he hopes to spend time with family in New Brunswick before moving to Princeton at the end of the summer, depending on border restrictions and public health directives.

While doing his undergraduate degree at New Brunswick's Mount Allison University, his research supervisor, Dr. Steve Westcott, suggested he call a former student of his, Dr. Paul Hayes, a chemistry professor in the U of L's Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry and a member of the Canadian Centre for Research in Advanced Fluorine Technologies (C-CRAFT). Westcott mentioned they had similar research interests and thought they would get along.

Westcott was right and MacNeil moved to Lethbridge to begin his graduate studies.

"It has been a true pleasure working with Connor over the past few years," says Hayes. "We both enjoy brainstorming ideas and often find ourselves drawing out new chemical reactions long after most of our colleagues have gone home for the evening. Connor has really matured as a scientist, so when the opportunity came along to work with Prof. Chirik at Princeton I knew he was well prepared for the challenge. It was not a surprise that he was an outstanding ambassador for the University of Lethbridge and that he flourished in the high-pressure environment. His future is incredibly bright and I look forward to following his career and continuing to bounce ideas back and forth."

Read more on [UNews](#).

Photo by Jon Darmon.

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