

Fulbright Scholar Travels 8700 Miles from Zimbabwe for a Biomedical Sciences PhD at Tulane

Diane Blake, PhD
blake@tulane.edu

Benjamin Bhunu was looking for opportunities to study abroad after graduating with a first-class honors degree in biochemistry from the University of Zimbabwe, located in the capital city, Harare. In the year after he graduated, he visited the EducationUSA Advising Center, sponsored by the US Embassy. There he learned about the Fulbright program and began the arduous 18-month selection process that brought him to the Tulane Graduate Program in Biomedical Sciences.

“The Fulbright application varies from country to country and is very competitive”, Bhunu told us. “In Zimbabwe, the program admits only three people each year. The application process has two stages. First you apply and compete at national level. If you get shortlisted for and you pass the Fulbright national interview, you then submit a second application, which is reviewed in the United States by representatives of the Fulbright commission. The Fulbright staff helps you to select and apply to schools that meet your career needs and interests.”

Bhunu received multiple acceptances at US universities, but ultimately decided on Tulane. “As a budding academic in a developing country”, he told us, “I wanted to lay a strong foundation for my career by learning at a prestigious institute while engrossed in a cultural and racially diverse environment. Only an institute like Tulane could provide that. The Biomedical Science Program at Tulane is multidisciplinary and allowed me to explore different fields in the biomedical sciences before making an informed decision on the area I wanted to specialize in. The University is also equipped with distinguished professors who are globally at the forefront of biomedical science research. Apart from academics, the University is strategically located in the culturally rich community of New Orleans.”

Bhunu is currently in his second year of the PhD program and is already hard at work in the lab. He is studying how cardiovascular disease can be ‘programed’ by an adverse environment in the womb. He is using a mouse model to study the

molecular events that link low birth weight to obesity and high blood pressure later in life. He is currently focusing on leptin, a hormone predominantly made in fat cells. He wants to understand how leptin interacts with brain receptors to increase cardiovascular complications.

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