

The Machi program, hosted by Rice University, is a five-week exchange program that offers a flexible schedule, allowing participants to experience both the research environment of graduate life and the vibrant city of Houston. This year, ten Taiwanese students from various STEM majors participated. I was assigned to the Information Retrieval Lab under Dr. Xia Hu, which closely aligns with my research experience.

During the program, I worked on a project related to vision-language models and attended weekly meetings with my mentor and the lab. The environment was highly interactive and provided me with many opportunities to explore different research directions. Not only did I receive valuable academic guidance, but I also got great recommendations for delicious meals from my labmates.

Besides academics, I had an incredible time exploring Houston. On weekends, we visited various tourist attractions and enjoyed diverse cuisines for dinner. Since our visit was during the NBA season, we took the opportunity to attend a game between the Houston Rockets and the Golden State Warriors. This was one of the most surprising experiences for me. Although I am not a basketball fan, the atmosphere in the stadium was amazing, and the game was incredibly intense and exciting. Seeing professional basketball players in person was also a unique experience.

Houston is well known for its museum district, which features museums covering a wide range of topics. We visited the Contemporary Arts Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, and the Houston Museum of Natural Science. One great thing was that Rice students could get free tickets to these exhibitions, making it both convenient and worthwhile. Additionally, Rice hosted a graduate student event at the Natural Science Museum, allowing us to explore the museum at night while enjoying a buffet next to the dinosaur exhibits—definitely one of the most special experiences of the program.

Other notable places we visited included George Ranch, the NASA Space Center, and the Houston Zoo. Compared to Taipei Zoo, the Houston Zoo is much larger, and the animals were surprisingly interactive. We witnessed gorillas fighting, fed giraffes, and even saw Kirby, a newborn elephant.

One of the most exciting aspects of our trip was the Houston Rodeo Festival, a month-long annual event. We were lucky that our program coincided with it. The festival featured Texas-sized food, thrilling carnival rides, fun games, livestock shows, and concerts. We tried various rides, won stuffed animals at the carnival, and watched a livestock show—a completely new experience for me. The cowboys showcased incredible skills, performing dangerous yet thrilling techniques that truly represented Texas culture.

Apart from exploring the city on our own, we also had the chance to meet Taiwanese graduate students at Rice. They were incredibly welcoming, offering us valuable advice and taking us to different places and events. It was great to connect with them and have fun together.

One recommendation for future participants is to obtain an international driving license and have some driving experience. This would make the program even more enjoyable and provide more opportunities to explore Texas. I was able to visit Austin and San Antonio, in addition to Houston. Each city had a distinct vibe—San Antonio felt traditional with strong Mexican influences, Austin was modern yet retained some Southern architectural charm, while Houston was the most contemporary in my opinion. Texas is vast, and traveling between cities requires long drives, but the experience was absolutely worth it.

Although much of what I shared focuses on entertainment and travel, my time in the research lab was equally rewarding. Our final week included a presentation session where we shared our projects, and it was fascinating to learn about the research conducted in other

labs. I gained hands-on experience in a new area of information retrieval and was given the opportunity to continue working on my project with my mentor, refining it into a more concrete result that may even lead to a paper submission.

Overall, I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Machi program. These five weeks were not too long yet not too short—just the right amount of time to explore Houston while gaining insight into graduate life. It was truly an unforgettable experience, and I highly recommend it to anyone considering applying!

