

# **Final Reflection on My 2024 Summer Enrichment Experience at Washington University**

*By Robert Wigfall*

I have concluded my attendance at the Washington University High School Summer Scholars Program and my corresponding enrollment in their “Biomedical Ethics” course. Seeing as this was my longest-lasting summer program, I was able to take great advantage of the many resources at my disposal in St. Louis. Thus, in my description of this program, I struggle to give articulable justice to my experiences this summer. My time at WashU has proved greatly transformative in all aspects of the world: ranging from my classroom and study habits to the relationships I hold with others, and even the way in which I view myself. As I traverse through my recollection of outstanding memories and personal discoveries made this summer, I hope to communicate an overarching message that, during the span of just five weeks, I found a home in WashU.

Time management and punctuality have been personal struggles of mine for the majority of my high school career, often susceptible to falling behind or arriving late due to my crammed schedule. At WashU, I still had an incredibly demanding schedule – the only difference was – this was a fresh start: these were new people who had never met or known of my past tendencies. This was an opportunity to try at a fresh start: to prioritize punctuality, actively manage my schedule with realistic expectations, and enforce self-discipline to restructure habits about which I’d been previously unsatisfied. And, like with all opportunities that present themselves to me, I did my best to take advantage of it.

My largest struggle at WashU was finding a routine in which I could situate myself. Due to the vast newness of the program, apparent in its beginning, I found it hard to create a routine by which to hold myself as my daily schedule was constantly changing. However, that eventually ceased, with life at WashU seeming much more normal. Then, I was able to create a set of behaviors that added great consistency and purpose to my day. Much of this routine revolved around my coursework.

Entitled “Biomedical Ethics,” my course at WashU was incredibly stimulating and affirming of my interest in humanity-based studies. Within this course, we discussed a plethora of ethical issues and dilemmas in the biological world. These included moral philosophy, the definition and value of health, death, and disabilities, the permissibility of abortion, euthanasia, physician-patient relationships, medical paternalism, healthcare, pandemic ethics, and even genetic engineering. Only maintaining a meeting period of about two hours, most of class consisted of lecture and prompted discussion regarding a reading about one of the preceding issues. On a typical class day, we would begin lecture promptly at 11:00 AM, in which my professor would review the previous day’s reading(s), asking a multitude of leading questions to prompt discussion. Through this collaboration, much academic discourse was inspired; there

were typically differences in opinions throughout the classroom, making the ability to defend your views in a concise manner a necessity. Following this, we would often preview the night's readings, existing as our homework assignments, that would fuel the next day's discussion.

I was decisive in my choice to speak quickly and consistently during class discussions. I soon realized that such an objective could only be achieved if possessing a well-thought-out understanding of the ethical issues at hand. Thus, though we typically only had assignments in the form of readings, I found myself in the library every day after class for hours: reviewing and practicing articulating my opinion regarding that day's reading. While it was completely unnecessary, I saw the effects almost immediately. I had a greater understanding of what was being discussed and could readily participate in almost all facets of discussion because I had given the topic such consideration. I attempted to approach each new topic from all angles possible, considering many arguments and their counterparts. I found beauty and purpose in preparation.

When class came around, I was among the first people to speak, attempting to set a lasting impression on my classmates that my opinion was ready to be shared. But, much to my surprise, my classmates were incredibly shy. In my attempt to make myself heard, I noticed that not many others were speaking. It even got to the point that, after a question was asked, the room was completely silent. Hoping to give others a chance to speak their mind, I often found myself speaking when no one else was willing.

This eventually changed, through class discussion and collaboration. Seen as a more talkative person in class, I did my best to encourage others to speak. So, not only did I find success in my ability to participate in class, but I did so to the extent that I ended up in some sort of leadership position to those around me. It was certainly a new experience and helped me feel more comfortable in this classroom setting.

In addition, I found the actual course material extremely engaging. Often inspiring me to fill whiteboards with my writing, the topics discussed and read about inspired an interest that extended beyond the classroom: I've never had an experience quite like that before. I found myself independently researching issues and arguments, testing my hypotheses on peers, and truly applying the material of class to aspects of my decision-making outside it.

To add to the academic environment of WashU was the incredible opportunities available. As I was staying on campus, I came to learn quite a few details about life at WashU. Through this, I learned of their PNP major. Standing for Philosophy, Neuroscience, and Psychology, this major is unique to WashU and can be used to choose a specialty within those three fields or as a pre-med or pre-law track. Completely rounding off my academic interests up to this point, the PNP at WashU not only piqued my interest, but has inspired me to want to apply this coming fall.

My academic experience and development at WashU were unmatched and could only be compared to my social development during my stay on campus. As I mentioned in my first few

reports, the main cause of nervousness for me when entering the WashU summer program was my ability to make and maintain positive friendships. Though I did get off to a bit of a slow start, my efforts to be outgoing and inviting eventually allowed me to find my group of friends. The friends I made at WashU were some of the most kind and empathetic individuals I'd ever met. From program assistants to instructors to fellow students, an overwhelming majority of people I came across were exceptionally friendly and welcoming. Meeting people from all over the world, as soon as I found my group, we certainly stuck together. Venturing out into the city to popular tourist locations and on program-scheduled trips, my friends and I became close quite quickly. The connections I made and bonds I formed are that which are irreversible, united in a plethora of shared experiences, laughs, and memories.

Most of all, the greatest takeaway from my WashU experience was my journey of self-discovery. In past situations, I sometimes found myself shying away from important opportunities for development. I was nervous to meet new people on the grounds that I wanted them to like me and our interests to align. I was susceptible to enhance or repress certain characteristics or traits to promote integration with a group of people. I was insecure about my academic interests and their future. I was conflicted with my lack of direction and definition. I was too easily influenced by my environment. However, now, through my participation at WashU, the independence I held, academic and social experiences I underwent, and the fresh start that fueled them, I am more defined in my personhood. I love philosophy and psychology. I am stimulated most by engaging in academic discussion. I, as a person, possess a set of interests that exist independently from that of others: it is okay that my interests will not necessarily overlap with others'. It is okay to unequivocally speak what remains true to myself without the influence of the potential perception of others. It is okay that my personhood can at times be rigid to the environment around it, for that is the only way to maintain a sense of true self. If always altering and changing and adapting, what is it that I become other than a set of behaviors?

WashU, above anything else has caused me to learn more about myself and inspired me to continue doing so. Through my stay in STL, I've reached a level of contentment with the expression of who I am. I've grown in the way I see relationships and most importantly, the way I see and understand my own development.