

## **Final Reflection of My Summer at the Research Development Institute at WashU**

Tanya Arun

When I first found out I was going to the Research Development Institute at Washington University in St. Louis, I was not entirely sure what to expect. I thought it might be more focused on scientific experiments or lab work, but it turned out to be more about theoretical research and learning how to analyze texts and sources deeply. Over these two weeks, I learned so much about what research really means—not just collecting facts but thinking critically, analyzing different perspectives, and building a clear argument. The program challenged me in ways I did not expect and helped me grow both academically and personally. I am very thankful to the Garwin Family Foundation for giving me this chance.

Academically, the program pushed me beyond what I had done before. The biggest challenge I faced was developing a clear, focused argument for my research project. My topic centered around internal monologues—the voice we hear inside our heads—and the fact that not everyone experiences this inner speech the same way. Some people have a constant inner voice, while others report very little or none at all. I wanted to understand what causes these differences and how the presence or absence of this internal monologue affects daily life. At first, forming a thesis was difficult because I could see the positives and negatives on both sides.

As I dug deeper into research, reading scholarly articles on the cognitive aspects of inner speech and a condition called anendophasia, which refers to the lack of an inner voice, I learned that an overly negative inner monologue could lead to issues like anxiety, depression, or cognitive overload. My primary source, a Reddit thread where people shared personal experiences with their inner voices, added a relatable layer to the scientific research. Together, these sources helped me shape a more focused thesis: while the internal monologue is a common and natural part of thought, it often carries more negative effects, especially when it becomes overly critical or overwhelming. Developing this argument required careful analysis and the ability to connect my sources meaningfully.

Learning to distinguish between summary, analysis, and interpretation was a major part of the academic challenge. I had to make sure that my research did not just repeat information but engaged with it by asking what patterns repeated, what contrasted, and why those differences mattered. Receiving detailed, constructive feedback from the instructor was very helpful in this process. I finished all of my assignments on time and received a “complete” for each one, but I still got feedback from my instructor. It was not because I had done anything wrong; it was more about pushing my ideas further and strengthening my writing. The professor’s comments helped me strengthen my argument and think more deeply about how to use evidence effectively, even when it was difficult to figure out exactly how to revise.

The program’s workload was not too heavy the first week, with just a few readings, but in the second week, it got more intense with more writing assignments, source analyses, and final presentation preparation. We had to balance everything in a short time, which was not easy, but it helped me practice managing my time and staying organized. On top of this, I was also taking Spanish 201 at John A. Logan College, which added its own set of responsibilities. I had a lot of

assignments and essays to complete for that class too, so I had to stay on top of my work outside of the RDI program. Doing both made the experience more demanding, but it taught me how to prioritize and keep focused. I was able to successfully juggle my program assignments, keep up strong scores in my Spanish class, spend time with friends, and still get enough sleep each night, which made me feel proud of how I managed my time.

Reflecting on my preparedness for the program, I realize that my English coursework helped lay a solid foundation for the research and writing we did. However, the theoretical focus of the RDI program pushed me into new territory. It forced me to think abstractly and to connect ideas across disciplines, which was challenging but incredibly rewarding.

Preparing for the final presentation was nerve-wracking. I was the first one to present on the last day, which made me a little anxious, but my friends helped me practice. Once I was up there, it went well. It was rewarding to share what I had worked on and to hear everyone else's projects. The variety of topics was incredible, and I learned a lot from my classmates' perspectives.

Living on a university campus added a new layer to the experience. I was nervous about living away from home, but my fears faded quickly after meeting my roommates and forming a group of friends. We bonded immediately during orientation and shared many meals, walks to class, and game nights in the dorm lounge. Playing games like Uno and Mafia and talking about our lives and backgrounds brought us closer, and these friendships made the program feel like a supportive community rather than just a class. I additionally enjoyed the dorm layout, and with individual rooms for each of us, I had the personal space I needed to recharge. Living independently also came with small challenges like remembering to take out the trash, which I honestly did not do until the very last day, but managing those responsibilities helped me grow and prepare me for college life.

The campus itself was beautiful, featuring castle-like buildings among lush green spaces, which created a serene atmosphere for our walks to class. Visiting the library to research my topic was one of my favorite parts of class; the vast psychology section and flexible study spaces made me want to spend hours there. The location of the program at WashU and in St. Louis itself was a benefit. The university campus provided an ideal environment for learning, while the nearby city gave us opportunities to explore and connect beyond academics.

One of the most memorable parts of the program was not just the work we did in class, but the time we spent together outside of it. We celebrated one of my roommates' birthdays by going to the mall. We were all a little lost trying to navigate the metro, but once we got there, we enjoyed walking around, browsing stores, and just talking as we shopped. That same weekend, we took a program trip to Union Station. Visiting the aquarium was amazing, and I loved getting up close to stingrays and jellyfish. Riding the Ferris wheel gave us a beautiful view of the city, and the whole day felt like a reward after all the hard work we had put in. These shared experiences created memories that made the program so much more than just classes and homework.

After days of eating the same food at the Danforth University Center, a few of us decided we needed a break. We headed to the Delmar Loop one evening during the week to enjoy a different meal and explore the area a bit. Then, on my last day there, we went back again for one final dinner together, making it a meaningful way to end the program with the friends I had bonded with.

I did not expect to become as close to my friends as I did during these two weeks. We started off as strangers from different places, but by the end, we were like a little family. We shared our stories, our worries, and our dreams, and supported each other through the challenges of the program. Saying goodbye was harder than I imagined; it felt like leaving a part of my summer and a group of people who had made it so special. Even though it was sad to leave, I am grateful for the time we had together and the friendships that made this experience unforgettable.

One of the greatest takeaways from this experience is how much my thinking and confidence have grown. I learned not only to develop a research question and argument but also how to present my ideas clearly and respond to feedback constructively, which are skills I will carry with me into college and beyond. Looking back, I think my greatest accomplishment was taking a complex, abstract topic like the inner monologue and turning it into a clear argument backed by real research and personal stories. The program changed how I think about research; I now see it as an ongoing conversation, not just looking for a single right answer. It reinforced that research is not just about finding answers but about asking better questions and engaging with others' viewpoints. This mindset will help me in my future studies and career, especially as I consider pursuing psychology and cognitive science.

Being on a real college campus for two weeks gave me a better sense of what college life might actually feel like. Walking to class every morning, eating in the dining hall, and living in a dorm with roommates made the idea of going to college seem less intimidating and more exciting. I also got to experience what it is like to manage my own time, juggle assignments, and stay organized, which helped me feel more confident about handling college-level work. The class itself, especially doing my own research and presenting it, made me even more interested in psychology as a career path. Learning how internal thoughts work and how different people experience them showed me how much more there is to explore, and now I am even more curious about the field. This program made me realize that I enjoy doing deep thinking and research, and it gave me a clearer picture of the kind of environment I want to be in after high school.

I would definitely recommend this program to other students in the Garwin Family Foundation. It is challenging but supportive, and the mix of academics and community makes it a unique and valuable experience. I am so grateful for the chance to be part of it and to learn in such a special environment.

I am deeply grateful to the Garwin Family Foundation for making this experience possible. These two weeks have been transformative. They offered a combination of academic challenge, personal growth, and meaningful social connection. I will carry the lessons, friendships, and memories with me as I move forward in my academic journey and life.