

Final Reflection on My Experience at the WashU High School Summer Scholars Program 25'

By Francis Bu

Going into the summer before my junior year, I still felt like a lost freshman—unsure of myself and uncertain about my future. However, over the course of the five-week program at Washington University in St. Louis, I gained clarity about my goals, formed meaningful friendships, and learned valuable life lessons along the way. I could not have asked for a more welcoming, supportive, and intellectually inspiring community of students and instructors to accompany me on this journey.

Why WashU?

After attending the Michigan Math and Science Scholars (MMSS) program at the University of Michigan last summer, I realized that I was seeking a greater academic challenge—something more closely aligned with the rigor and lifestyle of college. After speaking with my good friend Robert Wigfall, I became highly intrigued by what Washington University in St. Louis had to offer. I had seen photos of the campus both online and through Robert's GFF updates, and I decided to apply. One of the aspects that particularly appealed to me was that the High School Summer Scholars Program at WashU allows students to earn actual college credit and receive an official university transcript. Following my relatively "easy" experience at UMich, I was eager for a more demanding and immersive academic environment. Additionally, this program spans five weeks, compared to the two-week program I attended last summer, offering a more in-depth and sustained experience.

Academic Experience

During my time at Washington University in St. Louis, I enrolled in a course titled *Biology of the Brain* (Bio120). This course explored the scientific principles and mechanisms underlying learning, motor function, and sensory processing in the brain. Our in-class content consisted of discussions, sample questions, analyzing physiological diagrams, and working together on clinical diagnoses. From the very first class, I could tell my time at WashU would be an invaluable experience. The content was engaging, the sessions were well-structured, and being on such a prestigious campus, surrounded by bright peers, motivated me to learn and study. Initially, the idea of taking a college-level course as a high school sophomore was somewhat intimidating. I was uncertain about the level of difficulty and what to expect in terms of study material and class dynamics. However, I am happy to say that my concerns were unfounded. Having now completed my first college course—alongside actual college students—I can confidently say that I found it more enjoyable and intellectually stimulating than typical high

school classes. The course structure aligned well with my learning style and pace: review the material independently, complete assignments, and use class time for discussion and clarification. It struck an ideal balance between guidance and independence. Our classwork consisted of daily knowledge checks (homework), weekly quizzes, and weekly exams. Because of our reduced timeframe compared to a typical semester of college, we had to move at a much faster pace. I finished the class with a 97%, and overall, I am extremely happy with the knowledge and learning tools I developed during my time at WashU.

Routine

At WashU, I took two courses—one online and one in person. The online course was graded on a pass/fail basis, while the in-person course followed a letter grading scale and provided college credit. I had class every day from 1:00 to 2:45 PM. Most mornings, I slept in until around 9:00 AM. After waking up, I made my bed, brushed my teeth, and got ready for the day. I typically grabbed a protein shake or smoothie from the Danforth University Center (DUC) to get me ready for the day. Then, I returned to Nemerov Hall, my dorm, to review the day's course material and complete any outstanding homework. Having a structured routine is important to me, so I appreciated how quickly I was able to settle into a consistent schedule. Our classes usually involved working through practice problems, engaging in group discussions, and clarifying concepts from the previous night's pre-recorded lecture. After class, I walked back to the DUC with friends, picked up another protein shake, and returned to the dorm to relax. I waited until 5:00 PM to go to the South 40 Fitness Center to lift for an hour or two. Since I wasn't yet 18, I didn't have access to the main WashU Rec Center. In the evenings, I either ordered food through DoorDash or ate at the DUC. One thing I quickly learned about WashU is that you'll have no trouble getting your daily steps in—I averaged 10,000 to 15,000 steps a day just walking around campus. After dinner, I usually joined friends at the Swamp, the campus sports/social area, to play basketball or football. It was nice to be surrounded by peers who were both physically active and intellectually driven. In many settings, people tend to lean heavily in one direction or the other, but here, there was a strong balance of both. By 9:00 PM, I returned to Nemerov to sign in for the night. From there, my friends and I often played board games, chatted, or watched movies together until 11:00 PM, when we had to return to our individual dorms. Back in my room, I typically showered and reviewed the day's class material before going to bed. Overall, I'm extremely satisfied with how the High School Summer Scholars (HSSS) program at WashU was organized. The dorms were comfortable, and the daily events and outings were well planned—creating great opportunities to connect with others and build lasting friendships.

Takeaways

Through my experience at WashU this summer, I've learned a great deal about myself. I now know that I want to pursue a pre-med track in college, work in a lab, and hopefully become either an orthodontist or an orthopedic surgeon. I've also realized that I work best independently, yet thrive when surrounded by like-minded peers. Where you are—and who you choose to surround yourself with—shapes the person you become. Over the past year, I've grown in my understanding of who I am, what I want to achieve, and what I hope to provide for myself and my family. Yes, I'm only 16—but that also means I still have time to explore, learn, and refine my path. One lesson I've learned is that people will come and go, but the memories made and the lessons learned stay with you forever. Not everyone will be who they seem or who you want them to be, and that's okay—because I believe God has a plan for each of us. I've learned to live in the moment and embrace the people, places, and experiences that have shaped me—you never know when they might come to an end. Surround yourself with people who inspire you, challenge you, make you happy, and push you to grow in all the right ways. At the end of the day, it's your life. You only get to live it once, so live it with intention, protect your peace, and seek out the opportunities that bring you fulfillment. Life has so much to offer each of us—it's simply a matter of finding what that is.

Final Remarks

I am forever indebted to the Garwin Family Foundation for their sponsorship, and I look forward to one last ride next summer. The GFF's mission and staff are truly something special, and their hard work and dedication towards the students of Southern Illinois should never be taken for granted. I am deeply grateful for the memories I've made, the connections I've built, and the academic opportunities I've had the privilege to experience this past summer.