

My Experience at the Environmental Studies Institute at Washington University in St. Louis

By: David Johnson

I want to begin just by mentioning how much I enjoyed this program. One of the main factors I was searching for in a program this year was an in-person, collaborative, and engaging environment that wasn't limited to something like an hour-long lecture with some homework on the side. This program, simply put, checked all the right boxes, and I'm so glad I came here. I want to thank GFF for this amazing opportunity and will not forget the time I spent.

The program that I chose to attend was the Environmental Studies Institute at Washington University in St. Louis. Last year, I attended the Algebra 2.5 program at AwesomeMath, and while I did enjoy the program, I wanted something in-person this time where I could create more meaningful relationships. And so, when I was looking through programs from other GFF students, I saw that two students had attended WashU programs, and that caught my eye: it wasn't too far from home, and it was a college I had some interest in, and so I thought about giving it a shot. I thought the environmental science program looked intriguing because I want to do something science-related in the future, and unfortunately I didn't have space in my schedule to fit an environmental science-based class to see if it was something I might like to do. I also wanted to see how something like chemistry would relate to the topic. As a result, the decision came easily.

The biggest problem I felt I would face would be making friends and simply communicating with people. I would naturally consider myself more on the reserved end, and although I wanted to talk to people and build relationships, it wasn't easy to put in the effort by any means. Luckily, I had three awesome roommates. Looking back, I don't think I would trade them for anybody else. Every day, we would eat together at least once, and they made my time there feel a lot less lonely. With this new level of familiarity came an easing of nerves, and I began to feel more accustomed and relaxed by the day. Eventually I learned everyone's names, and soon enough it began to feel like it was just another day at my high school.

Moving on to the class itself, it was like what I think an AP Environmental Science class would be like, but much more fun. Of course, I had never taken an environmental science class before, so I had to constantly circle back to what I learned in bio while trying to absorb all the new information I was gathering from the lectures. The first day, for example, we talked about how matter is conserved and energy patterns across a food web, a lot of which I knew about already, but then we got into these phenomena like convection currents and Hadley cells that consider the relationship between air and moisture, which I thought was fascinating stuff, but it seemed pretty complicated at first. Each day was like this, where I had some background in the information I was being presented with, but also something new that was always neat.

The homework, meanwhile, generally wasn't too bad, but there was a lot of it, and most of the time it was research-related; this included critically analyzing an environmental science news article, investigating adaptations of organisms to climates around the world, and researching both the mechanisms behind how renewable energy is created and how efficient it is. These projects took us a few days to complete, which doesn't sound like the worst thing, but when you factor in all the activities we did each night added on to the homework assigned from high school, there was often a full plate we had to balance. I remember that many nights I would

stay up past midnight trying to get everything done, but it was worth it, all things considered. Luckily, in some of the projects, I had the help of my roommates, and it was really fun working together and hearing their ideas.

I've talked so much about the curriculum and the people, but the dorms and the campus were just as cool. I've had to live alone multiple times already, primarily due to travel, and so things like waking up on time by myself, getting my own food, et cetera were not much of a challenge at all. Of course, I did miss my family, but I always reminded myself that I wasn't too far away, and I texted my parents frequently, too. Living with three other people that you had only just met was a lot simpler and less problematic than you might think; we never bothered each other (well, maybe not never), we had shower schedules, and we had our own rooms so that we could always have our alone time if need be. When we would leave the dorm, it would be about a 20-minute walk to class, and let me say that the campus was absolutely breathtaking. There was this large, green space that all the buildings surrounded, and often people would be running or walking a dog. There was also a library right in the center that I often went to study at. I could talk so much more about the campus, but off-campus was also really nice. One day my roommates and I went to check out the Delmar Loop, which has all these restaurants and shops, and on the way there we walked through this really nice neighborhood that we thought some students may have stayed in. One beneficial thing about the program is that off-campus hours last for five hours on weekdays and twelve on weekends; I only went once, but I can see how a student could really enjoy exploring some more of the city during their time here. Nonetheless, the whole area, as far as I could tell, was the right mix of peaceful and lively that anyone would like.

I want to briefly show some gratitude to the entire administration and staff for making my experience here memorable. Firstly, I just want to say that I had an awesome professor. It seemed that she really cared about not only the content, but our opinions; she asked plenty of open-ended questions (including one personal preference question at the beginning of each lecture), and that helped me get out of my comfort zone a little. Some days, I would stay after class and ask her questions about the content or a project, and she would be happy to listen and just talk. So thank you, Dr. Hanes. Secondly, I want to thank the dorm staff for being so helpful. Whether it be taking pictures of me and my friends, figuring out laundry, or navigating the nearby area, they were nice to have nearby.

Now that the program has come to a close and I've gotten a taste of what environmental science is like, I can truthfully say that I've enjoyed it far more than I thought I would. It really feels truly special, too, that I got the chance to delve deeper into a topic whose extent of knowledge we have can dictate the future of many, many species, including our own. Although I don't believe that I will strictly pursue environmental science on its own in the future, I feel that the topic needs many more avid researchers and minds, but also believers. Climate change is real, people, and it begins with us.

Finally, for future GFF students, this program, and quite honestly any program here, will teach you how to succeed in college in the span of only a few weeks. For me, I learned to form relationships with people I had only just met, collaborated with people who also find a passion in the sciences, and navigated a campus I only managed to get lost one time in. If there's any advice I can give that can ease the nerves or make your time here or at any college program even a little bit more manageable and enjoyable, it's to just have fun with it. This might be the only time you will ever see these people or even study this particular subject. Go out and make it worthwhile.

One last time, thank you GFF for making this adventure possible!