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The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) is something I had my heart set on for many years. Going into high school I wanted to outline the goals I had for the next four years of my life, and after finding USSYP online I knew it would be on the top of my list. Junior year I applied to the program and reached the final round of interviews with the top six finalists from across the state. Shortly after my counselor called me into her office and told me I had won. I was ecstatic to win this award as a junior, but two days later I was called back in and was given the disappointing news that my counselor had misread the email and I had not been selected as a delegate. I was devastated, but immediately set my sights on next year's competition. I pushed myself in ways that would not have been possible if I had not found this inner drive to reach my goal of attending the program. I became even more involved in the political process, leadership roles, and pushed myself harder academically. Finally, after nearly 4 years of hard work my dream to be selected to this program finally came true. Looking back now I realize that USSYP had changed my life even before I made it to Washington Week and I was thrilled to see what was to come.

Coming into Washington Week I was very nervous. I knew from reading so many student essays and first-hand accounts that I was about to have the best week of my life, but I wanted to make the most out of it. I wanted to meet as many people as possible and engage in as many thought-provoking and constructive conversations as possible. The first day of USSYP for me was definitely the most hectic and overwhelming day, but the people skills I learned in engaging with some of the most talented youth from across the country are something that no teacher or speaker would ever be able to convey. Coming into the program I believe I was so excited to get the agenda that I skipped over one of the most educational and beneficial parts of the program which was the career fair and the chance to talk with so many alumni. To future delegates I suggest you make the most of this experience because everyone in that room had a story and I believe we each have something to learn from each other, no matter how big or small.

One of the most unique things about the many speakers and leaders we have the privilege of interacting with throughout the week is that every delegate takes away something different. With over one hundred of the most talented students from across the country hanging on to every word the speaker utters, the takeaways are seemingly endless. Coming into the week I found myself looking forward to the big-name speakers the most (I mean who doesn't get excited about the opportunity to meet the president of the United States?) but reflecting back on my experience I learned the most from the people who I expected the least. From getting to ask the Senate parliamentarian about recent attempts to change Senate rules, to talking with the librarian of Congress about her efforts to extend library access to disadvantaged communities, I learned more from the people who I really could not explain their job coming into the week. I learned to listen to every speaker as closely as possible because they were there for a reason, and the best way to stay engaged was to ask questions.

Finally, the best part of my week hands down was the lifelong friendships I was able to form. Washington Week sort of felt like a week-long adventure and the 103 other delegates, Military Mentors, and USSYP staff were right there every turn of the way improving my experience and making sure I navigated the treacherous waters of Washington, D.C. correctly. I was able to form bonds with people from across the world and it is pretty cool to think that I have two friends in every state who I will always share this special journey with. Putting an ending on my reflections on USSYP is a bittersweet thing to do, but the memories I created that week will live with me forever!