

A.J. Hessburg, MO – 2019

I first learned about the United States Senate Youth Program during my junior year. I excitedly emailed my state program director asking how to apply. I was unfortunately told that the application period for 2018 had already closed. I told myself I would be ready for next year and after going through the application process, I was ecstatic to have been selected. As excited as I was when I first found the program, I could have never anticipated how life-changing of an experience the United States Senate Youth Program would be.

One of the experiences that really stuck out to me was the day at the State Department. I have always wanted to be a diplomat, so the experience of going through a mock diplomatic negotiation with my fellow delegates helped shine a light on the hectic duties of my future career. Being able to hear from Secretary Pompeo as well as other members of the foreign service put into perspective the work that goes into maintaining U.S. influence abroad and how complicated yet fascinating the world of international relations can be.

Over Washington Week, I experienced a Republican Congress, Republican Cabinet and government agencies, and a Republican White House. As a Democrat, while this wasn't my first choice of administration, it was an opportunity. Seeing the inner workings of a Republican administration gave me a perspective that I would not have otherwise gotten. I work for Democrats, and when you surround yourself completely with people who share your political beliefs, it can quickly become an echo chamber. To truly be confident of your ideas and beliefs, you need to experience the views of others. The world is a complicated place. Every conflict, ideology, religion, custom, value, and idea has layers and layers of depth to it. The world is not as hard and objective as it can appear. Everything is connected in this beautifully intricate web we call society. Looking at the world from the opposite perspective is the only way to get to the heart of your own values.

More than any high-profile speaker or interesting place we visited, the part of Washington Week that truly made it an experience that I will remember and cherish for the rest of my life was my fellow delegates. When every time you turn on the TV the anchor is talking about the latest terror attack or school shooting, it is easy to become cynical. However, being surrounded by such brilliance, drive, and passion gives me hope for the future of this country. To all my fellow delegates, I hope we all end up as coworkers in the real Senate someday. To anyone considering applying for this program, I know that every summer program claims to be life-changing. I had that attitude when I first arrived. But I can truthfully and wholeheartedly tell you that the United States Senate Youth Program will change your perspective on the world.