

Ryan McNichols
John Neumann High School
Governors Institute of Vermont 2016

Waking up at three thirty early on a Wednesday morning has never been my favorite of all activities, but I have never been happier to do it. It was not just any other day, it was the Wednesday I was looking forward to for months: I was on my way to Vermont. With bags packed and goodbyes said, I met the fellow awardees in the airport and soon we were in the air. Within the morning we were thirteen hundred miles north, in a land foreign to all of us. When we landed, we were greeted by a beautiful campus and inviting staff. After checking into our rooms, we went on a hike and breathed in the crisp Vermont air. The adventure we were looking forward to had arrived.

Initially, all students became cohesive. Starting with our roommates (personally, I was paired with students from both Vermont and Ireland), we started talking and growing closer, highlighting our similarities and discovering our differences. The mornings started off earlier than required for most students, as runs through the hills and surrounding properties allowed students both from Vermont and abroad to not only to discover the nature, but to bond with their newfound friends. During the course of the program, I bonded closely with students from Spain, Bosnia, Ireland, Germany, as well as those closer to home in Chicago, New York, and all over Vermont.

Educationally, this experience was surpassed by none. Run by World Learning, The Governor's Institute on Current Issues and Youth Activism put a major emphasis on cultural and interpersonal understanding, acceptance, and thoughtfulness. Our schedule was filled with multiple small classes, one longer "issue group" class, and then an activity period of some sort. For my issue group, I selected Politics out of a selection of Social Identity, Religion, Leadership, and many others. Instructed by Michael Krasner, a university professor from Queen's College, New York, the Politics issue group focused on the American political system, brief economic theories, and the upcoming election. In the shorter courses, topics such as immigration and refugees were discussed. Drones in Pakistan, sexual orientation and identity, terrorism and Islam, and revolutions were also thoroughly discussed.

The most memorable part of the Governor's institute for me was the relationship formed between such a diverse group of students, not only geographically, but morally, religiously, identifiably, and socially. Within ten days, I felt closer to some of the students at this program than those I have known for years. Relationships formed through intellectual exchange, soccer and volleyball games, and sleepless nights in the dorms filled with laughter and stories from both home and the day. It was remarkable how swiftly differences were set aside and friendships were instituted. The barn dance, the hand drumming session,

and the manhunt game (an idea that replaced the rained out bonfire), all united the students through international signs of unity: dance, song, and game. The times where nothing was being taught was perhaps where we in fact learned the most about current issues and activism, because it showed us how we all desire the same things, regardless of ideological differences.

Without hesitation, I can openly say that the Governor's Institute of Vermont changed how I view other cultures, and those who share different sociopolitical values. I have become more understanding those who view situations differently, and myself have changed my view on problems facing America today. This aided me in my development as a person because it rounded out both my arguments for my already cemented views, and it allowed me to stabilize some of my more feeble thoughts about the election and American politics. Overall, CIYA was one of the best experiences of my life, and I would highly recommend it to anyone, regardless of future interests.