

McKenzie Hightower
Graduation Year: Senior
College: Arts & Letters
Major(s): English and Film
Minors(s): None
Scholar Group Membership: No

Did you received other funding for this project?: No
Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding? No
More details on CUSE funding assistance?

Project Title: Conference Attendance: Association of Writers and Writing Programs
Project Location: Los Angeles, California
ND Faculty Mentor: Valerie Sayers
Project Type: Conference - Attendance

Why did you undertake this project/experience? Deepen your knowledge of a topic or issue, Prepare for graduate school (MA or PhD), Career discernment and/or preparation

Did your funded experience help you:
[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]: Very Much
[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]: Very Much
[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]: Very Much
[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]: Very Much
[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]: Very Much

Tell us about your experience.

My day consisted up waking up around 8AM and walking around the bookfair until the first lecture started at 9:30 or noon. After the lectures I would network with future MFA programs I hope to apply too and then go to readings and meet-and-greets with editors, agents, and writers from all over the country.

Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.

Every experience that CUSE has allowed me to undertake with their generous funding has been impactful for me, but this conference was honestly such a milestone for me. I want to be a writer. I want to teach writing. I want to immerse myself in a writing community. This conference allowed me to do all those things and more. It was honestly a little overwhelming, because there was every major writing program, literary magazine, and famous writer you could think of at the conference. I got in line to get coffee one day and Cornelius Eady, a famous American poet was standing right next to me. I even managed to strike up a conversation through my awe. I discovered new outlets and venues for my creative work and I have even already submitted some short stories to them. Additionally, this conference attendance grant allowed me the opportunity to meet up with writers I had developed a relationship with thanks to my previous

CUSE grant to Martha's Vineyard. This experience really made my Notre Dame career come full circle, reaffirming what I want to do with my life and reinvigorating me to keep reading, writing, and pursuing my goals.

Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.

Overall, besides the large amount of excitement I derived from just being in an environment filled with writers, the main benefit of this conference was discovering where I want to apply to graduate school for my MFA. I discovered USC has a phenomenal PhD program in Creative Writing and explored possibly obtaining my MFA in the UK. Personally talking with program heads and discussing aspects of their programs that were important to me, like community outreach, also allowed me to narrow down the rather large list I had started with going into the conference.

What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?

To me, conference attendance is vital in any field, because the events have two main benefits. First, it allows you to enter a space where everyone has the same interests as you. This was very unique for me, especially coming from a friend group of business and pre-med students, and it allowed for diverse and exciting conversation about writing. Second, and most important, whether it is writing or scientific discovery, every field is constantly changing and it is easy to lose touch with new innovations or contemporary thought. Conferences allow students to put their finger on the pulse of their field and perhaps gain a peek at where it is going in the future so they do not miss out on an opportunity to let new ideas infuse and enliven their research or creative work.
