

Reflections on the 2024 Summer Research Internship at Washington University in St. Louis

Department of Mechanical Engineering - Cheng Yi Hsuan

This summer, I had the incredible opportunity to participate in the McKelvey International Student Research Internship Program at Washington University in St. Louis. It was an amazing 10-week program! During the internship, each student worked with a professor in a lab, gaining invaluable insights into the academic culture and research practices. On top of that, the university arranged so many fantastic activities for us to experience American culture. These experiences enriched my time in St. Louis, making the program not only an academic journey but also an unforgettable cultural exchange.



Beautiful campus scenery

Preparation before Departure

Applying for a visa was the most stressful and challenging part before leaving. Since it was my first time applying, I was unfamiliar with many of the procedures and steps. Our group helped each other by reminding each other to double-check documents and details. I recommend that future participants start the process early to avoid running out of time and not getting the visa. Here is my personal timeline for the visa application process:

Date	Task
2/27	Took TOEFL exam
3/5	Purchased plane tickets
4/1	Paid visa fee
4/3	Scheduled visa interview
5/8	Visa interview
6/13	Departure

Research Routine

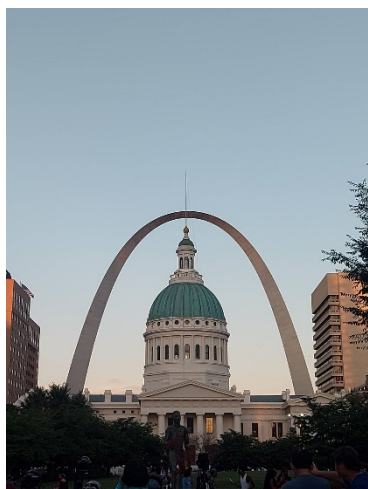
The lab experience varied from lab to lab. In my lab, there was no requirement to work in person, so I was able to choose my preferred workspace. I enjoyed this flexible model because it allowed me to work in the environment that best suited to my mood each day. My lab held weekly meetings where we reported on our progress, received feedback from the professors, and made improvements. Some students had professors they could consult directly when facing challenges, while others worked primarily with senior lab members.

During my meetings with the professor, I noticed that my professor put a lot of emphasis on whether we were really interested in the research field. In my first meeting, the professor carefully asked about my interests. I also observed that when graduate students encountered difficulties, the professor's first concern was whether the student was still interested in the subject, rather than immediately focusing on the setbacks. This approach showed a very different academic culture from Taiwan, one where the professor respected individual perspectives and maintained flexibility when necessary.

Midway through the internship, the university held an event called "Poster Palooza." All students participating in summer internship programs (not just ours, but other programs as well) presented their research findings in posters. Peer evaluations were used to select the best projects. In addition to the posters required for evaluation, many students stopped by to engage in discussions with others on topics they found interesting. This event was a rare opportunity to explore various research fields. Some were related to subjects I had studied, allowing me to quickly grasp key points and recognize the highlights of each project. Others, however, were outside my familiar areas, which broadened my view of the world.

Apart from lab research, the university also organized a Grad School Forum, introducing us to the differences between pursuing a master's degree and a PhD after college. They invited students and professors from different departments to share their daily life as PhD students and discuss the selection criteria professors' use when admitting students. This forum gave me a deeper understanding of PhD programs, showing that a master's degree is not the only option. I also realized that both paths have their pros and cons, and the choice depends on individual preferences.

Daily Life



Gateway Arch on the
Fourth of July

While life in St. Louis wasn't as exciting as in a big city, I met friends from all over the world and learned about different cultures. Through the various university activities, we explored nearby attractions: watching an outdoor performance of *Les Misérables* at sunset, taking a ride up the famous Gateway Arch for a panoramic view of St. Louis, attending a baseball game to support the St. Louis Cardinals, and visiting local attractions such as the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, Anheuser-Busch St. Louis Brewery, Grant's Farm, and Meramec Caverns. Graduate students from the lab also actively participated in these activities, which made me realize that they balance work with leisure and maintain a high quality of life.

In addition to university-sponsored activities, we visited the St. Louis Zoo, the Missouri Botanical Garden, and Armory STL on the weekends. On the Fourth of July, we took a trip downtown to watch an air show and fireworks. We also had a simple party in our dorm, where we ate, drank, and played games like charades, telephone, and the English version of the game *Werewolf*. During the Olympics, we made plans to wake up early, have breakfast together, and watch live broadcasts to support Taiwan. We also went to Six Flags St. Louis, where we screamed our hearts out on thrilling roller coasters. We also organized a road trip to Nashville, where we experienced a completely different lifestyle. It was a lively and relaxed city, with a vibrant atmosphere day and night.



Party Food and Drinks

Every day was incredibly fulfilling. Even though the weekday internships were exhausting, we still made plans to go out on the weekends, knowing that every moment was precious. We wanted to make the most of our time and enjoy every experience without regret. Each experience became a meaningful chapter in this unforgettable journey, and those memories continue to leave a deep, lasting impression on me.

Conclusion

Looking back, I made some very close friends during the program. The professors, the senior lab members, the program coordinator Teresa, and the other students studying there all took great care of us. Every week, my friends and I went grocery shopping and to the gym together. We cooked meals, and after dinner we had desserts and late-night conversations. I really miss that wonderful summer.



Grocery Shopping Every
Week

If you have any questions, please contact me at email b10502082@ntu.edu.tw.