by Amy Thompson

I was actually planning to study Italian Renaissance Art when I stumbled upon the contemporary art scene in China during my sophomore year, including young burgeoning artist Chen Man. For me, Chen’s work does what art is meant to do: art is not limited to outdated claims and lofty critiques, but continues to be a very human means of expression that we can find relevant and genuinely touched by.

Contemporary Asian art in museums is noticeably sparse, especially in the Midwest. I desire to draw more attention to such a neglected, yet rapidly accelerating category of art. The Mellon Mays Fellowship Program has not only provided me with the independence to conduct research in a supportive community, but also encouragement to make a career out of studying something I am genuinely interested in, while engaging with people who view me as a scholar and a professional, rather than what I was assigned. I was able to craft my own research question and plan. My project allows me to bring together my interests in disadvantaged communities, gender issues and sexual health. I see how often Liberia is left out of the academic conversation on these topics, and as a Liberian-American and MMUF fellow, I have the opportunity to change this. My undergraduate experience would not be the same without the MMUF program. I have learned what it truly means to be an academic, and the possibility of entering the academy after graduation no longer seems impossible or daunting.

Project Development

Converging Interests

by Davida Farhat

Entering Washington University, my goal was to become a medical doctor, and I had no interest in research. I wanted to graduate with the skills necessary for a career in helping people, but I had a narrow idea of what that meant. Through my anthropology and public health classes, I learned that “research” does not have to mean squinting at a microscope in a lab and “health” is not limited to the doctor-patient relationship.

When my mentor, Dr. Shanti Parikh, introduced me to the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program, I was excited about the opportunity to study what I wanted, not limited to what I was assigned. I was able to craft my own research question and plan. My project allows me to bring together my interests in disadvantaged communities, gender issues and sexual health. I see how often Liberia is left out of the academic conversation on these topics, and as a Liberian-American and MMUF fellow, I have the opportunity to change this. My undergraduate experience would not be the same without the MMUF program. I have learned what it truly means to be an academic, and the possibility of entering the academy after graduation no longer seems impossible or daunting.

Evolving Projects

by Danielle Wu

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In summer 2011, the year of the Arab Spring, I went to Amman, Jordan with questions about its political situation. However, I soon realized that local people, although aware of regional political events, were focused more on their daily lives and concerns: school, work, family, and friends. I returned to Jordan the next year for a semester of study abroad, and to conduct fieldwork during the summer. I was still unsure about my project, but I soon became interested in an area of Amman called Rainbow Street. Regardless of economic and political instability, the street remained a bustling center where Ammanis gathered every day. The occupants of Rainbow Street were involved in a different kind of social movement. I found an apartment near Rainbow Street and decided to conduct fieldwork there over the summer. Fieldwork taught me how to be flexible, since I could never predict how people would respond. The same set of questions would work well with one person and unsuccessfully with the next individual. Once, a café owner told the employees that they were no longer allowed to speak to me, even though we had been good acquaintances for weeks. Many of the activities I participated in when I wasn’t doing “fieldwork” informed my project. The most important lesson was to move beyond the fixed categories of “research” and “fieldwork” since every encounter and experience reflects larger trends that are occurring around Amman.

Fieldwork

by Jessica Page

The Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program provides frequent opportunities to foster an academic community outside of the classroom. This fall, we went to see No Child, a one-woman show that chronicles the story of a visiting teaching artist at a Chicago public school. Patrese McClain played multiple roles, impressively alternating between sixteen characters and retelling the story of a classroom of students coming together to perform a play, while commenting on a great deal of issues that were happening around Amman. This fall, we went to see No Child, a one-woman show that chronicles the story of a visiting teaching artist at a Chicago public school. Patrese McClain played multiple roles, impressively alternating between sixteen characters and retelling the story of a classroom of students coming together to perform a play, while commenting on a great deal of issues that were happening around Amman.

“Every man and woman is born into the world to do something unique and something distinctive.”

— Benjamin E. Mays

by Vinita Chaudhry

My project is centered on the Haitian community in St. Louis and studying how the intricate relationships within it reflect greater tensions surrounding immigrant rights in America. My project also addresses the challenges faced by black immigrants during the Jim Crow Era and how the memory of political persecution plays out in the diaspora. This current rendition of my project spawned from not only my interest in the unfair treatment of immigrants in America, but also my Mellon cohort, which encouraged me to ground my general interest in immigration in a community that I personally identify with. As a Haitian-American myself, I often experience firsthand the feeling of being at odds with identifying as both American and an ethnic minority. My MMUF project has afforded me the opportunity to intellectually engage with a part of my identity that implicitly and sometimes explicitly affects my daily interactions. Besides that, my project has led me to spend time connected to working with Haitian populations...
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The Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program at Washington University

For information about our program, including how to apply, please contact or visit us:

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by Danielle Wu & Zachary Hernandez

Named after Benjamin E. Mays, a mentor to the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program is an opportunity for young scholars in the humanities and social sciences to conduct research. Fellows are selected at the end of their sophomore year based on their high potential for cultivating their own unique research project exploring identity, social justice, and diversity.

Once selected, Mellon Mays fellows pair with a faculty mentor and are guided on how to evolve their own projects. Throughout the year, fellows are led by Professor Shanti Parikh and teaching assistant Amy Thompson in a weekly seminar to refine research projects for publication and presentation. Fellows are able to experience many ways of communicating their ideas: whether it is presenting it to a general audience or discussing it with scholars within their discipline.

This newsletter is a chance for us to explain how our projects are more personally connected to us than we might otherwise have a chance to reveal; this is a closer look at our process, progress, and perceptions, in our individual voices, as we cultivate an academic community.

by Amy Thompson


In my first semester as teaching assistant for the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship seminar, I have been continually impressed and inspired by the program and the fellows. I have seen their projects develop immensely as they push themselves and each other to think critically about the subjects and issues they each care about so deeply. The seminar meets weekly much like a graduate seminar would, and provides a forum in which the fellows can discuss their research and workshop their papers and presentations. We help guide the fellows through their own research on their journey toward graduate school, academia, and professional life beyond Washington University.

Academia is all too often cloistered, and the interdisciplinary nature of the seminar and the group of fellows provides a huge advantage for each of them, as it trains them to think beyond the constraints of any single field’s conventions and prepares them to be part of an interdisciplinary global community.