

Participation in the WISE Living and Learning Village

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Type of Experience (select from assignment description)	<i>Active participation in a Living and Learning Village</i>
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For a moment, imagine yourself as a young woman fresh out of high school. Everyone is congratulating you on your admission to a prestigious engineering university, and you're excited beyond belief to attend. You're also absolutely, gut-churningly, heart-racingly terrified. What if you don't find your place? What if you get lost on the first day of classes? What if you don't make any friends or have any meaningful relationships? As these thoughts race through your head and you're looking for ways to calm them, you find your home for the next year and a half: the Women in Science and Engineering living learning village.

I filled out the application for the living and learning village with the expectation of finding a community with like-minded people. I wanted to live with other women in STEM fields and create a network of people who were also inserting themselves into traditionally male-dominated fields. I found that and so much more: mentorship, support, impactful experiences, and opportunities presented themselves throughout my WISE experience. With each event I attended, I learned a little more about how to be a successful woman in STEM. With each new friend I made just a few doors down the hall, I learned a little more about the importance of community. With each mentorship meeting, I learned a little more about the importance of communication and building a support network. And with each day in WISE, I learned a lot about myself and how I fit into the campus and the world.

Ironically, the most impactful thing I learned about myself in WISE - the women's living and learning village - is that I'm not a woman. I'm still questioning my gender, but I am confident that it is not female. For me, it's terrifying to question and challenge such a fundamental part of my identity. Heck, I came into WISE wanting to find solidarity in my female gender identity! It was never something I was given the space to explore. However, the women of WISE created an environment where I was able to feel comfortable questioning myself. They

created an environment where I was safe to examine myself, and I knew they'd support me no matter what I learned. My mentor and I discussed my gender questioning, and she pointed me to on-campus resources to help me as best as possible. My roommate and I spent nights discussing gender, sex, and STEM careers and how they related to me. This is a giant step for me, and I appreciate the WISE community for opening the doors required to live as my most authentic self.

The most memorable aspect of living in WISE was my freshman year move-in. I didn't know what to expect, and I was simultaneously nervous and excited. But when I walked into Lee Hall for the first time, I was surrounded by people just like me: women who were into nerdy things like torque and compression and differential equations. Not everyone in the WISE program looks or sounds exactly alike, but we all have the same passion for learning. I'd felt alone in my passion for understanding the world, but the women of WISE made me feel seen. My suitemates all talked about our majors with a glint in our eyes on that first day, and our mentor was so excited about her computer science major during our first meeting. The community that I was worried that I wasn't going to find was right in front of me, and I could not have asked for a better first week.

The experience of living in WISE also challenged my preconceived notions of traditional femininity and STEM. As someone from a small conservative town, women were mostly expected to be feminine and become a housewife or a nurse. If you were a woman going into STEM, you needed to be masculine - "one of the boys". But my WISE mentor, Chloe, is a very feminine woman who is also incredibly skilled in and passionate about computer science. She would come in with nails painted, hair dyed and set, and cute stickers on her laptop, and be talking about game development, graphics and computing specs, and code languages that I could

not even begin to comprehend. Within my first few weeks at college, I realized that I housed these biases: ideas that femininity and science careers were mutually exclusive. Through my experience in WISE, I was able to challenge them effectively. I was surrounded by women who liked skirts, flowers, and pink and were also absolutely dominating in their respective science and engineering fields. It isn't always easy to challenge ideas that were ingrained in you in your childhood, but WISE was able to provide space for me to reflect and change my mindset, and I am eternally grateful for that. (Note – I realize pink isn't inherently feminine and very masculine men also like flowers. For this text, I am talking about traditionally feminine traits.)

Within any engineering and science field, working together and communicating effectively are of paramount importance. One way in which WISE prepared me for this was through peer and mentor-based tutoring. The first week I went to WISE tutoring, it was packed. Calculus had everyone scratching their heads, and the WISE tutors were struggling to help everyone. So, while we waited on them, we also helped each other. I distinctly remember sitting and explaining the ideas of 3-dimensional shapes and vectors to another Calc III student, then she explained the foundations of integrals to me. In the end, we all left with the help we needed, but we didn't necessarily get it from where we thought we would. I realized that with this academic success resource, we were also learning effective communication and teamwork skills. Maybe one brain couldn't figure out that tricky physics problem, but all our brains working together and bouncing ideas off each other can. In this and many other ways, my time in WISE prepared me for a science and engineering career and working in teams.

I'm leaving WISE at the end of this semester. For starters, as I have realized I do not identify as a woman, I think it is more appropriate to find alternative housing. Additionally, while I have absolutely loved being a part of a close-knit community within my suite, I am ready

to share a shower with less than seven other people. While my time in this community is ending, it has left an incredible mark on me. I went into this community as a timid freshman and through the guidance of the WISE community, I have morphed into a strong person who can challenge the ideas of themselves and others, communicate efficiently, work as a team, and be confident in my nerdiness as a STEM major. WISE has laid the foundation for boundless growth in my personal and professional lives, and I could not be more grateful.