

Sam Johnson '20 Senior Story

Headline: Finding and Furthering a Supportive Campus Community



I've had a jam-packed four years at Whittier College," says Sam Johnson '20. "I'm proud of the fact that I've had my hands and my feet dipped into a little bit of everything." Soccer player, Associated Students of Whittier College Senate male student athlete representative, admission ambassador—the ability to get involved on campus in these ways and more while staying true to himself was a key factor in Johnson's choice to come to Whittier.

Born and raised in a suburb just outside of Seattle, WA, Johnson attended Catholic schools for most of his early education. He was a star soccer player, which drew the attention of recruiters from various colleges. Johnson knew he wanted to attend a small liberal arts school, so he was excited when Whittier expressed interest in recruiting him.

"I was used to a smaller educational environment where I had good, close relationships with my teachers and community," said Johnson. "As I was looking at colleges, including Whittier, I knew I wanted to keep that same environment—where I would be a face, and not just a number."

At Whittier, Johnson was able to explore his interest in biology and a career in health-care, take on various leadership roles on campus, and pursue his passion for soccer. Of all his activities, the highlight of Johnson's college career was serving on the search committee for a new assistant dean of students. Doing so gave him the opportunity to help shape the future of the College and to see behind the scenes of how important decisions are made.

“Looking back at everything I’ve been able to do, I think it all revolves around this central theme that Whittier is a place where you can do the things that are meaningful to you,” said Johnson. “It’s been a great experience for me, and I think I’ve come out really well-rounded and confident.”

Johnson also found a space at Whittier to be accepted for who he is and to feel more confident about his identity as a gay man. He remembers visiting campus for an admission event and speaking with one of the ambassadors who was openly gay. Johnson asked the ambassador if he would fit in at Whittier. The ambassador reassured Johnson that everything would be fine; the Whittier community had welcomed him and would welcome Johnson too.

“That might have been the moment I made my decision to commit to Whittier,” said Johnson. “I thought to myself, ‘Everything is going to be okay.’”

Johnson was able to fully reveal his identity at Whittier. While it was intimidating to tell his team, he found that everyone was very supportive. When he was to be featured in a publication about out soccer players, Johnson felt compelled to tell Head Men’s Soccer Coach Shea Harwell. Harwell said there was no problem and reaffirmed his and the coaching staff’s support of Johnson.

The acceptance Johnson found at Whittier allowed him to advocate for the LGBTQ+ community on campus. For example, Johnson, who serves as a Northwest & California Regional board member speaking on behalf of the You Can Play Project, a campaign dedicated to fighting homophobia in sports, coordinated a panel of speakers from You Can Play to speak to members of Whittier’s Athletics Department in 2017.

Johnson also makes a point to wear a rainbow pin on his shirt when he gives campus tours as an ambassador. For him, the pin signals to prospective students that Whittier is a welcoming place where everyone can simply be who they are.

“I wear the pin because if I had seen that as a prospective student when I was touring, I would have that was cool,” Johnson explained. “I have the ability to speak for others as an ambassador, so I try to be a voice for our community members and to let our prospective students know they can find a home at Whittier.”

He also has the ability to walk backwards through campus, Johnson added jokingly.

Now, with his degree in hand and a wealth of experiences behind him, Johnson is ready to start a new chapter: a career in nursing. His plan is to start working at a hospital in Seattle as a simulation technology specialist before applying to nursing programs. Essentially, Johnson will be directing the simulation programs that the hospital uses to train its nurses and other clinicians. The work will give him a short break while helping to prepare him for the next step in his schooling.

It's clear that Johnson wants to go into healthcare because he's compassionate about people. He values his education and his time at Whittier because it gave him perspective, allowing him to step outside himself and appreciate the part everyone plays in a community.

"What's important to me right now is the unique worth every person has," Johnson said. "I just want to help people, no questions asked."