

**Francois Odenthal-Cruz**

Tennessee, Student Representative

***“[Prior to the Academy] I was content being a supporting character, like just being in the background. Now I'm still a supporting character but I'm like part of the main cast, you know, I'm someone important, that's just really cool for me.”***

I guess how I feel about being here, is it's just surreal after being in this context just for so long and being part of this cohort. Just starting just from that first conversation that Miss Tara had with me in class, “Like, hey do you want to be a part of this thing?”, to now being here and after giving a presentation, it's almost unbelievable because like last year as a senior in high school I would have never done this at all. I was content being a supporting character, like just being in the background. Now I'm still a supporting character but I'm like part of the main cast you know, I'm someone important. That's just really cool for me, doing all this and having these conversations that are so thought-provoking and being able to go back to my own community and take what I'm learning here and implementing that into the work that I have been given and having the tools to do so.