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Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme 2019-2020

Reflective Report

My reasons for undertaking the Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme are multiple. Before participating in the Programme, I sometimes struggled to understand the intersection between research and leadership within the arts and humanities. A lack of prior exposure to the academic sphere and a concurrent ignorance about the role of higher education institutions in leading social change meant that I naively believed that academic research and impactful leadership are mutually exclusive concepts. Although I had previously occupied a variety of leadership roles external to the educational environment, I sought to apply the skills I had learned in these positions to the academic sphere, and to build upon my academic strengths and interests. An early factor which thus motivated my decision to apply to the Laidlaw Programme was the desire to step into a space where I could gain the knowledge necessary to produce socially impactful research and become an undergraduate leader within my field of study. Similarly, I was excited by the opportunities the Programme offered to assume overall responsibility for an independent research project. Although students within the School of English at Trinity College become more academically independent in the Sophister years, I longed in my Senior Fresh year to become a more active participant in my own education. The Laidlaw Programme provided the perfect opportunity to conduct meaningful research in an environment where I could both work independently and collaborate with an experienced academic supervisor.

In the months prior to applying to the Programme, I spent a great deal of time investigating possible research trajectories. I wanted, above all, to formulate a research proposal which I felt would lead to the production of research that was socially significant and focused on an area that fell outside mainstream undergraduate English Literature courses taught in Irish universities. Furthermore I sought to develop a proposal that aligned with contemporary social and political concerns, and which would highlight the role that literature has to play in revealing issues of inequality or injustice. I count myself as lucky to have gained an introduction to Native American literature in the form of a

lecture delivered in November 2018 by Dr Philip Coleman. By drawing attention to issues of American identity in the work of Leslie Marmon Silko, Dr Coleman's teaching led me to become deeply interested in the social and political currents coursing beneath contemporary Native American texts. It is noteworthy also that November 2018 marked the halfway point of Donald Trump's term as President of the United States. Around that time, much political discourse focused on the President's policy of American isolationism, in particular his election pledge to build a wall at the U.S.–Mexican border. Across the water in Europe, the British government of Theresa May was engaged in formal negotiations on the withdrawal of Britain from the European Union. The political ramifications of Brexit for Northern Ireland were at the fore of any attempt to negotiate a withdrawal agreement, and the potential for a 'hard border' – one which could provoke sectarian violence – seemed an urgent possibility. I followed these developments keenly and wondered if there was a way through which I could enact some positive change or attempt to platform an alternative attitude to the binary nationalistic logic that seemed to dominate so much of the political rhetoric in both the United States and the United Kingdom.

Following Dr Coleman's lecture on Leslie Marmon Silko, I felt that I had discovered an author whose work challenges the legitimacy of borders and highlights the negative implications of failing to embrace 'borderland' identities. Alongside its potential to nurture my interest in self-directed learning and to develop my understanding of the intersection between research and leadership, the Laidlaw Programme offered the time, funding, and support necessary for me to explore a literature which I believed spoke directly to the tensions and complexities of the modern political moment. By examining borders and boundaries in the work of Silko, my goal was to platform the social importance of Native American literature and to affirm the necessity of paying careful attention to indigenous voices. I was aware also that the Programme would provide a platform for collaboration and networking with other students from across a wide range of disciplines. It was my hope that opportunities to discuss my work with fellow Laidlaw Scholars, both in Ireland and abroad, would

allow me to gain a more critical perspective of my own research topic and begin to see the interdisciplinary nature of a project which, although focused primarily on literature, intersected with a diverse range of fields in the humanities.

The Laidlaw Programme has provided me with an array of opportunities and insights, many of which surpassed my initial expectations. At the beginning of the Programme, the process of managing my own ten-week research project was one which I felt both enthused and intimidated by. I had never before been afforded the chance to play such an active and independent role within the academic sphere and, although I had an incredibly supportive supervisor, I wondered at times whether I was underqualified for the task of conducting self-directed research. Despite the low level of belief I had in my academic abilities at the Programme outset, I have come to its conclusion with a far greater confidence in my ideas and opinions. Much of this stems from the mentorship I have received under Dr Philip Coleman, whose advice and guidance led me to slowly recognise my strengths and skillset. By working under the supervision of an academic whose work and teaching I greatly admire – and who never failed to remind me of the significance of my research – I came to feel a much stronger sense of security within both myself and my academic potential. Trinity's Dean of Research, Professor Linda Doyle, played an additionally important role in imbuing me with the confidence and courage to champion my work. A workshop delivered by Professor Doyle in November 2019 drew attention to issues of imposter syndrome and self-doubt within academia, while also highlighting the ways in which research should be tailored toward social impact and positive change. In the aftermath of this, I gradually developed a greater confidence in the social significance of my project and began to explore avenues through which I could platform and communicate my research more publicly.

The Laidlaw Programme not only nurtured my esteem, but it also provided opportunities to confront some of my weaknesses and develop strategies for self-management and care. Prior to my

participation in the Programme, I prided myself on my strong organisational skills and ability to plan meticulously. Over the course of the two summer research periods, however, I learnt how to navigate the uncertainty and ambivalence inherent in conducting research, and to become more flexible in my work approach. Despite my efforts to rigidly plan – I crafted an extensive reading list and rigorous daily schedules – the first summer research period affirmed to me that research necessitates a degree of ‘not knowing’ and a willingness to adapt to change. I failed to read everything I had intended, I sometimes could not stick to my daily schedule, and I eventually had to conclude that I could not micro-manage every aspect of my research. Reflecting on one’s progress is a cornerstone of the Laidlaw Programme, however, and by the end of the first summer’s research, in September 2019, I took time to seriously reflect on how I could be more flexible, adaptable, and realistic going forward. My subsequent willingness to strategize less rigorously enabled me to approach my academic work with greater fluidity and freedom. I gave myself permission to broaden my research topic beyond geographical borders in Native American literature, and began to examine more abstract concepts of ‘borders and boundaries’ – the borders between literary and oral narratives, the boundaries between different sexual and gender identities, the borderland experiences of mixed-race characters, and the boundaries that exist between humans and technology. When the second research period rolled round, and my plans to visit the Silko archive at Yale were scuppered by the Coronavirus pandemic, I felt far more capable than I ever have before to accept precarity and adapt quickly to a different plan of work. As the Programme now draws to a close, I can confidently say that I have come to understand the manner in which self-questioning, uncertainty, and trepidation are characteristic of any research journey. Research often fails to follow a coherent and clearly defined trajectory. Rather than viewing this as frightening or disruptive, I now realise that a willingness to embrace alternative trajectories can open the door to more focused and meaningful research outcomes.

Although I have always believed that I possess a certain degree of resilience and determination, the Laidlaw Programme played a fundamental role in sharpening these aspects of my personality. The leadership sessions undertaken throughout the Programme equipped me with the tools necessary to become more a more adaptable, empathetic, and open-minded leader. At the Laidlaw international conference in October 2019, I found Professor Jim Berry's talk on 'leadership under uncertainty' especially thought-provoking. Berry drew attention to the limitations of certainty, catalysing me to realise that the most effective leaders are those who possess an openness to change, embrace a growth mindset, and remain constantly curious. Similarly, a workshop delivered in November 2019 by Niamh Hannan on the topic of building resilience led me to understand the necessity of implementing basic self-care routines in order to persevere in the face of challenging situations. Over the course of the past seven months, as I have adjusted to a new, restricted way of life, I believe that the leadership development aspect of the Laidlaw Programme has provided me with a toolkit of resources to ensure my long-term wellbeing and maintain a strong sense of optimism in the face of a deeply unsettling public health crisis. Alongside the guidance offered by Berry and Hannan, I have found myself returning repeatedly to the advice of Gerry Hussey, who ran a two-day workshop at the 2020 Laidlaw residential retreat. Hussey's emphasis on the necessity of committing to a 'constant state of evolution', and choosing to respond carefully to difficult situations – rather than attempting to impose order on events beyond one's control – has taken on a deep resonance in the height of an unpredictable and uncontrollable global pandemic.

In my future personal, academic, and professional development, I feel that the Laidlaw Programme will benefit me immensely. After eighteen months in the Programme, I have come to its conclusion with a much more robust understanding of how I can effectively enact positive social change, communicate my beliefs assertively and assuredly, and demonstrate constructive leadership amongst my peers. As a student of English Literature, I had never before spent much time with students outside of my own discipline and thus lacked exposure to the interdisciplinary connections

which can, and should, be forged between students from across a range of subject areas. Receiving the opportunity to have meaningful and stimulating conversations with Laidlaw Scholars engaged in research in medicine, mathematics, physics, law, political science, psychology etc., opened my eyes to the power of interdisciplinary collaboration and networking. From my interactions with scholars engaged in scientific research, I learnt how to set more focused goals and to approach my research – which often seemed intangible and difficult to define – in a more methodical and strategic manner. Similarly, my fellow arts and humanities scholars provoked me to consider my topic as one which transgressed the boundaries of literary studies and could be incorporated into disciplines such as sociology, political science, and law. I thus found myself beginning to think in a less binary manner and, much like the border-crossing nature of the literature I had elected to study, realised that connection and collaboration are vital to producing research that is impactful. Going forward, this knowledge of interdisciplinarity has pervaded my Senior Sophister capstone dissertation – an eco-critical analysis of Native American writing – and led me to consider texts which surpass literary analysis to draw on issues of biopolitics, environmental justice, and indigenous ecologies. I strongly believe that the Laidlaw Programme forced me to see the thematic links which exist within different disciplines, to look beyond the scope of my degree course, and to begin to view literature in a more critical and engaged manner. It is my hope that this willingness to embrace different perspectives and remain open to unlikely connections will play an important role in any future research I conduct, as well as enabling me to develop into a more empathetic leader.

The ability to consider different perspectives and remain open to ideas which diverge from one's own is a key takeaway from the Laidlaw Programme. Concurrently, however, the Programme's emphasis on critical thinking and interdisciplinary collaboration allowed for the refinement of my communication and networking skills. Under the Programme, I had the opportunity to reach out to scholars of Native American literature, and build meaningful connections with researchers whose work I admire and respect. In particular, Dr Padraig Kirwan, an academic based in Goldsmiths,

University of London, provided a large degree of professional support. By engaging in a long Skype call on the topic of my research and inviting me to join the Native Studies Research Network UK, Dr Kirwan opened up multiple avenues through which I could further promote and develop my research. Over the course of our call he dealt with my questions in a thoughtful and constructive manner, while also pushing me to consider themes within my research that I had previously taken for granted or alternative viewpoints which I had paid little attention to. Prior to my participation in the Laidlaw Programme, I would not have had the confidence to engage robustly with a renowned scholar on a topic which I feel deeply passionate about. Both my conversation with Dr Kirwan and my membership of the Native Studies Research Network have exposed me to current debates within the field of Native American studies and led me to reconsider some of the basic assumptions with which I had initially approached my project. I have learnt how to present my ideas assuredly, to overcome feelings of imposter syndrome, and to be unafraid of reaching out to people whose interests and activities align with my professional aspirations. As I enter the final year of my degree and prepare to enter the world of postgraduate study, these skills in effective communication and positive relationship-building will undoubtedly stand me in good stead.

Critical reflection is central to the Laidlaw Programme, especially the willingness to implement strategies which will help one to overcome weaknesses and work in a more focused and strategic manner. At the Programme outset I initially scorned this emphasis on reflection, believing that it was a handover from the corporate world and one cloaked in vague promises of 'personal development' or 'actualising potential'. Emerging from the Programme eighteen months later, however, I have realised the immense importance of taking time to regularly reflect on my aspirations, goals, and motivations. Before becoming a Laidlaw Scholar, I often attempted to map a definitive career path for myself. The thought of an uncertain and unknowable future filled me with fear, and so I constantly sought to commit to activities or events which I believed would place me on a narrow, but reassuringly stable, career trajectory. At the first leadership session of the Programme, I was

introduced to the concept of a 'VUCA' world – the idea that the modern work environment is inherently volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous. Learning how to take time to regularly reflect – to sit down and chart my progress, to identify when I needed to deviate from 'the plan', to adjust my goals and expectations – has been an invaluable part of my Laidlaw journey. I have realised that critical reflection is fundamental to coping with change, and that it is impossible to plan far in advance without allowing for readjustment or deviation. The opportunity to attend a one-to-one career coaching session with Cliona Hillery was especially significant in enabling me to move past my fear of career uncertainty. Cliona gave me the tools necessary to tap into my internal value system and think carefully about the ways in which I can create a future that aligns with my strengths and values. Following the session, I felt a great sense of possibility, and, for the first time ever, permitted myself to feel fully secure in my future potential. In both my personal and professional life, I am now far more equipped to live according to my core values and to realise when I should change path.

Although I have found the Laidlaw Programme to be a highly valuable experience, it is worth acknowledging that no programme is ever perfect and, naturally, there are some small aspects which could be improved upon. I greatly benefitted from the opportunity to mentor students in the Trinity Access Programme, and, indeed, the experience was one which led me to feel that I was truly making a positive social difference. The Laidlaw-TAP partnership was disorganised, however, and it was often difficult to arrange meetings with the students or engage fully with them. In the future, this could be rectified by ensuring better coordination between the Employability Officer and the director of TAP. Furthermore, I believe that the relationship between TAP and the Laidlaw Programme could expand to incorporate many exciting possibilities – direct mentorship between Laidlaw Scholars and TAP participants, Laidlaw-run workshops for TAP students on topics such as presentation and public speaking skills, and opportunities for Laidlaw Scholars to offer guidance on specific subject areas. The students I mentored were incredibly enthusiastic and I believe there is

wonderful potential for Laidlaw Scholars and TAP participants to come together for the mutual benefit of each programme. Despite that one minor critique, however, I found the overall Laidlaw Programme to be very well structured. I always felt like an active participant in the Programme, rather than a person who was passively involved in an eighteen-month scholarship scheme. Each aspect of the Programme was carefully prepared, and I appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback and constructive criticism at several points throughout.

On a final note, I would like to thank the Trinity Careers Service and the Laidlaw Foundation for providing me with a myriad of fantastic opportunities over the course of the past eighteen months. Financial support for undergraduate research in the arts is often sorely lacking and I can think of no other initiative which would have enabled me to undertake a self-directed research project on a topic that I am deeply passionate about. As the Programme draws to a close, I possess a far greater confidence in my ideas and opinions, and a concurrent knowledge of how best to become a more reflective and adaptable leader. Going forward, I would be delighted to remain involved in the Programme in any capacity. Receiving an invitation to speak to prospective Laidlaw applicants in November 2019 was one which I gladly accepted, and I would be happy to deliver a similar talk again in the future. I am particularly interested in encouraging students within the arts and humanities to become involved in the Laidlaw application process, and am willing to meet with potential applicants or Heads of School within the AHSS Faculty in order to raise awareness of the value of the Programme. Equally, I am enthused by the possibilities inherent in the international Laidlaw network, and would like to play a role in ensuring its continued growth and success. Partaking in the Laidlaw Programme has been a great privilege. My hope is that the Programme will gain greater visibility within Trinity, so that students from a diverse range of subject areas and backgrounds feel capable and confident of applying to it.