

Marika's Wobbly People Pole: Personal Growth and Leadership Development

Laidlaw Scholars Programme Leadership Essay 2021

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My favourite childhood novel theorizes that we only become the person we are today by standing upon the shoulders of the versions of you that came before. At the end of one's life, we are just a tall wobbly pole of people, with each new, and hopefully improved, version balancing on the one below. I think this is a good metaphor for how we develop as people, and more importantly, as leaders. Growth, in a leadership sense, is rarely linear, often very wobbly indeed- with successes and challenges along the way, and so intrinsically tied to our own personal identities that the two not easily be separated.

The Laidlaw Scholarship Programme has been influential in my journey of personal growth and of course, leadership development. Being selected for the Programme in winter of 2020 and meeting so many wonderful new friends was an experience I will never forget and will hold dear for a very long time. Being abruptly sent home due to the coronavirus pandemic, and having to change gears to accommodate the demands of the programme amidst mask mandates and travel restrictions, was equally unforgettable, albeit a little less wonderful. Still, my time as a Laidlaw Scholar has been a very positive one, and has taught me many a lesson in resilience, flexibility, and of course, the various functionalities of Microsoft Teams.

More seriously though, my experiences with the Laidlaw Scholarship programme as a student at the University of St. Andrews have only helped me add to my people pole. Over the past two years, I have been able to take one of my passions, health policy as it relates to vulnerable populations (including youth and marginalized communities) and through researching specific applications of it, been able to produce research and leadership outputs in the realm of medical science as they apply to public health initiatives regarding vaping and epidemiology. I am lucky in that I know so wholly that medicine is what I want to do with my life, and to have had the support of Laidlaw to allow me to investigate my passions within medicine outside of biological experiments or chemistry laboratories, I am so thankful. Not always do medical students get to research or lead in areas of medicine that are so person centred, including those of public and community health.

To give context, as a high school student, I became passionate about the high rates of e-cigarette use negatively affecting my peers. My determination to address this issue in my school led me to work on a law amendment project to protect youth from the negative health effects of e-cigarettes and vaping. In working on this project, I quickly faced challenges both to my age and expertise in the field, which forced me to question my own capacity to lead and to contribute to the effort.

Since those days, I was driven to understand better the pathophysiological effects of e-cigarettes that I noticed affecting my peers. After receiving the scholarship, which awarded me funding to develop myself as a researcher and leader, I conducted a scoping review on the topic in the summer of 2020. I focused in on my skills and abilities as both a leader and communicator, so the next time I was faced with a challenge to my capacity, I would be more aptly prepared to face it.

Looking back now, on the feelings of self-doubt and imposter syndrome I felt as a high school student working on the initial project, I think my people pole has grown much since then. Through participating in the various components of the scholarship; including group exercises on teamwork, lunchtime presentations from young entrepreneurs, and activities that forced me outside of my comfort zone in terms of communicating, be it my opinions, beliefs or decisions. Through Laidlaw, I learned what type of leader I was, who I worked best with (and who I didn't) and how to build a team that would be successful in achieving the goals we set out to. I learned how important it is for me as a leader to delegate, so that I avoid putting excess stress or pressure on myself and allow the project to realize its fullest potential by ensuring equal and tailored input from all parties involved. I had the opportunity with Laidlaw to practice my communication skills, my ability to represent myself and my ideas concisely and effectively, and how to hone in on my interpersonal skills, all of which have helped to add to the leaders that make up my wobbly people pole today.

Of course, while those feelings of self-doubt crop up from time to time, the Laidlaw programme has equipped me with the skills I need to cope with them, and provided for me a network of other young, driven and intelligent leaders to rely on. Action Learning Sets (ALS) throughout the summers, and leadership weekends (online or in person) highlighted to me just how lucky I am to have a cohort of excellent listeners and even better problem solvers to be a sounding board for my ideas, and source of inspiration for the years to come. Thus, after only the first year, armed with my research on vaping associated lung injury and my newfound leadership skills, I think I would've been much more effective on the original law amendment project that started me down this path.

Moving into the second year of the scholarship, I was able to use research I had completed and the skills I had learned as a lens to find answers to questions I had about inequalities, social stratification, and inequality, especially as they applied to health science. In ALS sessions, in larger group communications stemming from presentations, and even in interactions with my newfound Laidlaw friends on the street, I found myself having these kinds of conversations. What structures in health and medicine, within our university or within our world allow leaders to emerge? How can we make sure that access to leadership is available to all, regardless of their ascribed status? In my own life, I began to think about ways to make my own committees, groups, and teams less stratified, more equal, and in turn, more productive.

Laidlaw taught me how to be an effective leader, of course, but more importantly, it showed me how to recognize ineffective leadership, and allowed me to identify what steps can be taken to correct this. This was cemented by large group meetings and discussions that touched on government systems, anarchy, and important world issues that one day soon, will be tackled. The programme showed me that with good leadership, steps can be taken to amend these problems, and as cliché as it sounds, make the world a better place.

In my own life, I was able to take the skills I had developed in Laidlaw, both the ones that affected me as a leader, and those that changed the way I saw leadership within our society, as I conducted my second summer of the Laidlaw programme. In summer 2021, I volunteered with a clinic for clinical research in my hometown. The goal was to work with broader community organizations (ie churches, NGO's, municipal councils and other groups) to increase the number of people attending vaccination clinics and build a larger database of people enrolling in research studies. As the lead on communications via social media and in various community settings such as farmers markets and fairs, it was my job to come up with ways in which to engage with population subsets who are not interested originally. I used different platforms to convey information about when vaccines are being given, who is eligible for studies, and what the science was behind them.

In the middle of the project, I began developing a tool to measure how satisfied patients felt about their experience in our clinic and the knowledge they had (before, during and after). I identified gaps in the health literacy of the communities we were reaching, which made it difficult to achieve my original purpose. As such, I began creating videos and content that would teach the public, in lay terminology, about the science behind the vaccinations they were receiving or the studies they were participating in. I had to use my brain, and my heart, to find novel ways to reach the apprehensive, nervous or misinformed people in my community. Without the training I had received Laidlaw in working with people I don't always see eye to eye with, I think this task would have been nearly impossible.

Still, we were able to achieve our enrollment goals and made very strong headway with the percentage of vaccinations given in our community. It was difficulty, finding my niche as the leader of the community engagement, as I needed to be able to both delegate to other members of the team, often who were older and more experienced, and still be able to take their direction when it was needed. My ability to work in a team such as this, so skilled and demanding, while delegating away tasks that could be done better by someone else, was something that I don't think I could have done before Laidlaw. Becoming confident in my own abilities, or doing background research myself to complete the task became second nature in my skills as a leader, and really helped me to contribute to the project during the 5 weeks of its duration.

I think this project, especially in the process of reaching other community groups and difficult to reach populations really helped me develop me communication skills and emotional intelligence as well as my patience and determination in staying calm and collected. I think it

was a great opportunity for me to train my leadership skills in terms of health literacy (of which I have little as a medical student) and will help me in the future as I try to understand how patients engage with the health system in the primary care sector. Further, it helped me find my place and hit my stride in a very difficult leadership role, in leading other leaders.

The structure of this essay may seem nearly as wobbly as the people pole I am referencing throughout it, but it reflects my original statement- that personal growth, akin to leadership development, is in fact, a wobbly, non-linear process. Throughout my journey of following my passion for public health, which started years before attending the University of St. Andrews, I have faced different success and challenges along the way. Feeling initial self-doubt with my involvement in the law amendment project, and then being able to up my skills and capacity as a leader was made possible through the Laidlaw Scholars Programme.

Who is currently at the top of the people pole, you might be wondering? While new version upon the shoulders of the last has most definitely changed, improved and developed; I've maintained my identity as someone who strives to give back to her communities, the same way they gave to her. Someone who's leadership style is inclusive, caring and actively ensures her group members feel able to participate regardless of where they came from. Someone who delegates, in order to make sure a project can realize its full potential, and goals can be achieved to support the needs of the people involved. This journey, and the ability to have my people pole grow with me, has been hugely due the contributions of the Laidlaw Scholars Programme and Lord Laidlaw of Rothiemay, for whom I could not be more grateful.