

Laidlaw Leadership Essay

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I sometimes find that as you are living through something, you don't realize the scale of the impact it has on your life. I believe this to be the case with my experience in the Laidlaw scholarship. I have grown as a leader in numerous ways, going from someone who, although she knew she enjoyed being a leader, was unsure of herself and her abilities. Someone who did not believe she had what it took to lead in "real world" scenarios. Now, however, I see the strength and resilience I have as a leader and as a person, and the skills taught to me by Laidlaw have enabled me to gain confidence in my abilities.

I applied to Laidlaw at a very strange time in all of our lives. It was the beginning of 2021, when the pandemic we once thought was subsiding grew even bigger. I was very scared and upset at the prospect that this glooming period in time would hinder the opportunities I needed to have during my time at university in order to be shaped into the best professional I could be. So, when I got the email that I had been accepted into the scholarship, I was more excited than I had been in a very long time. Yet, very quickly, that excitement was overshadowed by a looming sense of fear as I realized the reality of what I would be doing in the coming two years and the level of independence these projects would require. During the first leadership weekends I immediately became aware of the time of leader I was. Through many personality tests I was able to learn my strengths of being optimistic and enthusiastic, and my weakness of being indecisive and tending to avoid change. Although I was never shocked by these realizations, I was intrigued to learn the ways that I could connect with others around me to highlight my strengths and improve my limitations. I believe having this knowledge prior to embarking on my first summer was crucial in giving me the confidence to know that characteristics I once believed to be purely personal were indeed relevant to my experiences as a leader.

During my first summer I was forced into the realization that no matter how meticulous you are, sometimes things simply don't go to plan. As I waited weeks and weeks for the ethics committee to approve my project, all I could do was sit still and work on my seemingly never-ending literature review. I was constantly stressed that my project was never going to get approved and wished more than anything that I had someone to tell me what to do. I wanted so badly to get started on this project that I cared so much about, and thought was so needed given

the circumstances we were in at the time. Although in the moment this was all extremely frustrating, looking back I see that it taught me that I can indeed handle things on my own when I need to. That I can be a leader and don't need anyone to tell me what to do. Yet, as soon as this hurdle was done, and I was able to start collecting data, I realized that there was something wrong with my survey and some participants were unable to respond to some questions. Thankfully, I realized this very early on and was able to work quickly to fix it. This showed me I can adapt quickly and not get too overwhelmed when issues come up, which is something I never thought I could do. Overall, my first year in the scholarship was crucial in growing my confidence and showing me that I can indeed be a leader who knows how to deal with difficult circumstances.

The second year of the scholarship, then, was useful in growing the skills I needed to be a good leader. We learned about the importance of feedback and group work during the leadership weekends, and many of the activities we did taught me extremely valuable life lessons. I have always been an active avoider of group projects as I believed that there was no way to ever make them go smoothly. Yet, as we learned about the different roles people can have in a group, and how some people naturally gravitate towards one or the other, I began to realize that there are ways to work efficiently in teams, you just have to know the people that make up your group and play to their strengths. I believe this to be the most crucial thing any leader can ever realize. As, in any sort of situation human beings will be themselves, and no matter how hard you tell them to, they will never do something they are not keen on doing. Thus, learning to listen to team members and acknowledge what they are good at is a skill I will take with me for the entirety of my career.

My skills and confidence were truly put to a test in my leadership in action project in the second summer of the scholarship. I went to Fiji to work on the Think Pacific health promotion project, and to say that that was a difficult experience would be an extreme understatement. Aside from having to deal with the drastically different way of life found in a Fijian village, the project itself did not start off very well. We were not told anything about what would be expected of us day to day in relation to the project until the day before we were sent into the village. Here, we found out that workshops would be run by partner organizations, yet our role on these workshops was still unclear until the moment we walked into the village community hall that first Monday morning. It was immediately obvious that the partners did not expect us to contribute much, and that our role would be simply to encourage the villagers to participate in group discussions when needed. This made me and most other scholars extremely frustrated, as we felt that we had no opportunity to be leaders in our so-called

leadership project. I often felt wrong being in the village, as not having a role in the projects made our whole experience seem like a convoluted voluntourism excursion, which I personally do not believe in and would never want to be a part of. This is where my newly discovered confidence came into play, and the other scholars and I began to speak up and ask for more of an active role in the project. Unfortunately, due to other extremely difficult and stressful unforeseen circumstances we were unable to actually implement any of our wishes until the second half of the project when the second partner organization came in. They were extremely accommodating to our wishes and allowed us to help them run the workshops. It was extremely important to us for them to take the lead as we did not want to be culturally insensitive or portray any form of a saviour complex to the locals. Aside from helping more in the workshops we also decided to take the lead in coming up with evening workshops on topics we believed to be important. I helped run two of them and was extremely pleased with the feedback we received from the villagers. This whole experience, although often frustrating, showed me that I can speak up for things that I believe in and get the roles I believe I deserve, which I think will be extremely useful to me in my career. Further, the scholars I met taught me a lot about leadership and group work, which I will forever be thankful for. Lastly, being in Fiji showed how resilient I can be in extremely new and unknown situations.

As of right now I am working on deciding where I want to go in the future. Laidlaw gave me the skills and confidence to realize that I can try out many different things, and that even if they are extremely difficult, I will probably still be able to make the best out of them. Further, although my experience in the scholarship furthered my love for research and academia, my time in Fiji also reminded me of a side of myself that I had forgotten - that I love being around people and seeing the impact that my work has first-hand. Hearing the Fijians tell me how much they valued us and our work mattered more to me than any academic award probably ever could. This gave me the confidence to apply to clinical psychology jobs, something that I never thought I could handle or would enjoy. I haven't yet decided if I will take any of them, but I am thankful for the reminder that this is something I once dreamed of and had forgotten about.

It goes without saying that none of this would have been possible without Laidlaw and the team at St Andrews. I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Lord Laidlaw as well for giving me these opportunities. Although I am still not sure about where I will be in the future, I know that I will carry the tools that Laidlaw taught me in whatever path I chose, and for that I could never be more grateful. I cannot wait to see where my fellow scholars end up in the future, and I hope to be an active part of the Laidlaw family for as long as I can.