

Laidlaw Leadership and Research Programme

Regularization Pathways for Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru.

Reflection

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The Laidlaw Research and Leadership Programme allowed me to serve as a Principal Investigator (PI) for the first time in my academic journey. As an undergraduate student halfway through his bachelor's degree, conducting research as a PI was a challenging yet rewarding experience. Before proceeding to my reflection on my summer experience doing research, I would like to express my gratitude to the Laidlaw Foundation for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I would also like to express my appreciation to the program coordinators, Shraddha Prasad and Flo Zheng, as well as my supervisor, Dr. Claudia Díaz Ríos, for their mentorship throughout the research process.

Drafting and Re-Drafting a Research Proposal

Developing a robust research proposal was the most challenging aspect of my experience as a PI. It was my first time applying for a research grant and my first time conducting research at the undergraduate level. For instance, I struggled to formulate a sufficiently specific yet appealing research question. Similarly, I struggled to design a practical methodology. The most valuable lesson I took from this process was to seek help. While I ended up drafting and re-drafting my research proposal at least five times, I made sure friends, professors, and ultimately my supervisor could offer me feedback as I improved my research question and methodology. Looking back, asking for help from the very beginning of my research journey set me up for success. It helped me realize and internalize that one does not need to have all the answers and that it is perfectly okay to be confused, lost or even frustrated.

Pitching a Research Proposal

Given that this was my first time applying for a research grant, I was introduced to the practice of pitching a research proposal. The need to constantly communicate my interest in my chosen topic, the research question, the methodology, and the expected outcome of the investigation significantly improved my communication skills. As a result of this almost constant pitching and quick explanation of my research, I learned to be more precise, concise, and persuasive. I am sure this valuable learning will accompany me for the rest of my academic and professional journey. I am grateful that I had the chance to develop this vital skill during my summer research.

Conducting Research and Leading the Way

Conducting research—in my case an extensive document review—was another challenging aspect this summer. Given that I was very passionate about my research topic, I often felt the urge to read every single source I found interesting, even if it was not necessarily related to my research question or relevant to the specifics of the investigation. Unfortunately, I ended up devoting too much time to documents that, while interesting, were not relevant to my investigation; this eventually forced me to rush through the writing process as several submission deadlines quickly approached. The main lesson I discussed with my supervisor is that it is fundamental to avoid ‘rabbit holes’ when researching to avoid wasting time on unnecessary tasks. Reading more documents than what was necessary also led me to write a first draft that was three times the maximum allowed length. As such, I spent a significant amount of time cutting down words. I overcame this subsequent challenge by better organizing my time and sharpening my editing skills to ensure no information was repeated and that more content could be covered in fewer words.

Conducting the document review was also an opportunity to put my leadership into action. As the principal investigator, I was responsible for setting deadlines, managing my time, creating criteria to select documents, and drafting a rhetorical précis to summarize and analyze each source. While I discussed every action and step along the way with my supervisor, I was mainly paving the way. I learned to take the initiative frequently, troubleshoot effectively, and strategically plan days, weeks, and months.

Writing and Editing the Final Paper

My supervisor was of great help in the writing process. She introduced me to the concept of rhetorical précis and how these analytical summaries of sources could save me time constructing arguments and detailing facts in my final paper. To my surprise, the investigation’s writing process was the easiest part. Having read nearly 50 documents on the regularization of Venezuelan immigrants, facts, arguments, and figures seemed to flow easily. My main takeaway from the writing and editing process was the usefulness of immediately analyzing each consulted document to speed up the writing stage.

Time Management

My research coincided with an internship at the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington D.C. Carrying out academic and professional commitments required excellent time management skills. While I considered myself good at time management, this summer became a masterclass in the matter. I am grateful to the Laidlaw coordinators at the University of Toronto, as well as to my supervisor, for being flexible and accommodating. I am also proud to have been able to submit all drafts and required documentation by the initially agreed upon deadlines and, in several instances, even weeks before the deadlines.

Conclusion

To conclude, my Laidlaw research experience was full of challenges and learnings for which I am incredibly grateful. Thanks to this experience, I feel more prepared to undertake further research and become a principal investigator. I also feel more ready to practice my leadership skills in academic contexts. I look forward to presenting my research both at Tufts University in October and at the University of Toronto in November.