

My Laidlaw Experience: A Serendipitous Journey

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Introduction

If I had to describe my Laidlaw Scholarship experience in one word, it would be serendipitous. Like other science major scholars I have met in this scholarship program, we were drawn into the program by the first research summer. I was, in fact, peer-pressured by my classmates to apply to this scholarship program after having found a supervisor to work with during the same summer. I thought I had a clear idea of what leadership and a “leader” is from my fair share of experiences in the past. After all, I have engaged in a reasonable amount of leadership positions throughout school and university. From my experiences in the past, I already had the realisation that I personally preferred to be a follower in a team as I sometimes found it challenging to maintain a conversation with others and that by following, I can complete any tasks on my own terms. I thought to myself that there was nothing else I could learn within the classroom and that I would take the Leadership in Action summer as another challenge for myself to go out and explore the world and apply my past experience to the challenges to come.

However, through the various sessions, the Laidlaw program taught me that there is more to leadership than what is commonly portrayed in our society. In fact, I was taught that many of the experiences I have can be put into words and classified. Surprisingly for myself, many of these have been taught to me when working with other scholars and, most importantly, on my Leadership in Action summer. Being put outside of my comfort zone throughout the program made me realise that the skills and insight I have learned are more potent and will stick with me much more, making me a better leader and, more importantly, a better person.

Gains from the overall programme

This scholarship program allowed me to explore many areas. The first summer research allowed me to glimpse what it is like within the academic community and work. The generous funding allowed me to extend the duration of my research until completion, where I can see my

supervisor and his team use the results I have worked on in the research project phase. Being part of an entire research process, as opposed to just being a summer student, gave me a better insight into what this field of work will be like in the future and allowed me to make a more concrete decision to continue on this career path. On an equally important footing, this scholarship program allowed me to meet people I would not have thought I would meet before. Especially and, most importantly, the fellow scholars in this program. The scholars' diverse backgrounds, academically and socially, allowed for rich discussions on a wide array of academic topics, social issues, politics, and much more. Being a part of these conversations allows me to become a better communicator and feel more comfortable speaking with people. These conversations expand my knowledge and view of the world. In a society where emotions are used instead of reasoning, it is very refreshing to be able to sit down with fellow scholars to discuss opposing views with respect and integrity on both sides.

On a more personal level, the work and expectations of this scholarship program helped strengthen my determination and aspiration. The research work I conducted last summer was not easy, and it was riddled with challenges along the way. Despite that, I was able to complete it with enthusiasm and excitement. This undoubtedly showed me that I am happy to continue working in this field. To be absolutely honest, I never saw myself as someone who would achieve such a scholarship, or any scholarship in fact; the continuous events and output meant that I had to manage my time properly and require dedication to complete, which is proof to myself that I can achieve such tasks.

Gains from the leadership training

Prior to joining the Laidlaw Scholarship program, I had a fair share of leadership experience through school, the army, and university, all three with their unique applications of leadership. As such, I thought I understood leadership well and that this program would allow me to practice and refine those skills. Now, this was true to a certain extent. Still, the various sessions on leadership did introduce me to new concepts and put into words things that I have experienced in the past in my leadership roles. This cumulated in the Leadership in Action summer, where I could put my knowledge to the test. I could list out everything I worked on, but

the most essential part, and the one worth mentioning, is the idea of balance. A team's productivity depends on the individual, and the productivity of an individual depends on how they balance their lives. You can have a team of extremely hard-working individuals, but if everyone is burned out, then you can only bring your team so far. Whether it is in life or work, balance is a key component to success.

Networking and international experience

Unlike other prestigious scholarships, the Laidlaw scholarship program is not limited to St Andrews. Despite the program's relatively young age, the scholarship has amassed numerous students into the program from such diverse backgrounds, as I've previously mentioned. Undoubtedly, one of the most valuable aspects of the Laidlaw Scholarship program has been its networking opportunities and international exposure. Through the welcoming events, conferences, and my LIA project, I was able to meet various scholars from different institutions around the world. Having interacted and spent time with the St Andrews scholars, I was better prepared to meet with scholars from other institutions and exchange meaningful viewpoints during our time together. I feel incredibly fortunate to have attended all the events offered by the Laidlaw Foundation. It truly felt that each event I attended prepared me for the next event. I have become close with many of my fellow scholars and staff during my research summer in St Andrews; as someone who finds it challenging to have a conversation with people, this is truly a fantastic experience that has already allowed me to fit in more and feel more belonged in other areas outside of the social circle I already am a part of. The Laidlaw conference at LSE allowed me to meet with like-minded students from all over the UK. Again, the students that I am meeting are from a wide range of backgrounds, unlike other academic conferences I have attended. Yet, the Laidlaw experience was something that not only brought us together but something we can all relate to. This all culminated in my Leadership in Action summer in Boston, working with the Timothy Smith Network.

Outside of the Laidlaw community, during my research summer, I was also fortunate enough to attend the annual National Astronomy Meeting at the University of Warwick, the largest Astronomy conference in the UK. During the conference, I met many of my idols in

Astrophysics and people who developed and worked on software I used during my research progress. Additionally, I met with postgraduate students from around the country and heard about their experiences working and studying in this field. I also met with other Thai national postgraduate students and exchanged our experiences studying in the UK. My highlight, however, was meeting Dr. James Keegan. When I first met him, he was a PhD student in the Newton's Fund program teaching Astronomy and Coding in Thailand. He played a significant role in building my foundation in astronomy and coding. It was a nice moment for us to cross paths again and see each other achieve what we both set off to do.

Additionally, I got to spend a significant amount of time with the PhD students within the department here in St Andrews, as well as other undergraduate summer students who were also working on their independent projects. Being a 'Covid Fresher' myself, i.e., being under lockdown in my first couple years of university, this was significant for me as I got to meet with more like-minded people in my community and work with them. Unsurprisingly, I remain in touch with the majority of them and regularly meet and work together when possible.

Laidlaw scholarship's impact on my future

Being a Laidlaw Scholar will undoubtedly play a pivotal role in shaping my future career and decisions. The scholarship program has equipped me with a wide variety of leadership skills that extend beyond the confines of academia. As I transition into the professional world, I am confident in my ability to lead with integrity, empathy, and adaptability. The program's emphasis on ethical leadership plays a vital role in producing high-quality individuals who will go out into the world and hopefully bring balance to the system, which will improve the lives of not just the people they work with but also everyone they lead.

Having access to the Laidlaw Scholars Network will allow me and an extensive network of Laidlaw Scholars to remain in touch. The Scholars Network will serve as an invaluable resource for myself and others, allowing for future collaborations. The collective expertise of this Network, spanning diverse fields and backgrounds, will remind me to tackle issues from different perspectives and be able to call for help when needed from fellow scholars.

Giving back to the programme

The Laidlaw program is truly a unique experience, unlike anything I have ever experienced before. Even as a current scholar of the program, I frequently found myself advocating the program to my peers and younger students alike. The key difference now is that I fully recognise the importance and key aspect of the program: leadership training. Regardless of what field you intend on entering, it is necessary that there are good leaders in those fields, and the high-quality scholars that the Laidlaw program produces and will continue to produce will be precisely what our society needs to move forward.

Looking ahead, I am keen to share my experience with future cohorts and students, whether it is about the various difficulties I have experienced during my research or the challenges I have faced teaching coding and microcontrollers to students in two weeks. All of these findings and experiences can be shared with others so that they can be more equipped and prepared for their journey in the Laidlaw program.

In terms of my future career, my doors are always open. I intend to follow through with my aspiration to continue my studies in Astrophysics and work in academia. However, nothing is set in stone, and I will be more than willing to collaborate with past, present, and future Laidlaw scholars. As the CEO of the Timothy Smith Network, Milton Irving, would say to us and students, “We are a village,” and this village that is the Laidlaw scholars will keep growing in number, spreading ourselves around the world.

Conclusion

To say the very least, my experience on the Laidlaw Scholarship programme has been extraordinary. The well-rounded nature of the programme allowed me to work on many aspects of myself, ultimately making me a more confident person. I plan to take everything I have learned and apply it to any future challenges. Without a doubt, the high-quality people this

program has produced will go on to do many wonderful things in the world. For myself, I am simply glad I succumbed to peer pressure and applied to this program.

Acknowledgement

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