

Laidlaw Leadership Development Essay

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9th September 2024

Introduction

As a Laidlaw Research and Leadership scholar at the University of St Andrews, I was selected to join a small cohort of students passionate about becoming the next generation of leaders within their field. I developed my own leadership skills through the Laidlaw programme by taking advantage of its many offerings to scholars which included leadership trainings and a residential in Scotland, self-proposed research in South Africa, a North America Conference and trainings in Canada, and a voluntary leadership project in the Dominican Republic. Through these different and unique experiences, I was able to demonstrate skills that I was already comfortable and competent in, while developing and furthering weaker/new elements of successful leadership.

Leadership Trainings & Conference

A key element of the Laidlaw programming that I partook in while in St Andrews and Toronto was the leadership training which took place over set days and one weekend residential to a Scottish castle. I was interested from the outset to see what methodologies and content would be used to support leadership development.

At the residential at Hospitalfield, one of the Laidlaw coordinators noted that all scholars were already understood to be, to varying extents, experienced and capable in leadership settings. For that reason, it was understood by the staff that each of us already had our own strengths and had made our own mark in different fields. Across the cohort this varied from demonstrated academic and research excellence, to musical talent, to business acumen. All the scholars had their own unique abilities and desire to demonstrate leadership in their fields that the Laidlaw team were intending to develop, rather than to mould anew.

Equally importantly, each of us had our own weaknesses or areas for improvement. Some were self-aware of these, and others less so. For example, my interest and exposure to the world of politics meant that prior to Hospitalfield, I had already taken opportunities to speak publicly dozens of times, to large and small audiences. As a small business owner engaging with tens of clients every week, my ability to listen carefully and intelligently, selectively noting key pieces of information to help me make the sale, meant that my listening skills were good too. However, at Hospitalfield I was able to gain an insight into an area I had not developed significantly: an understanding (based around the DiSC assessment) of how to engage optimally with different types of people. In the world of politics my audience typically fell into three non-exclusive categories: those I was seeking to inform, those I was seeking to persuade, and those I was seeking to entertain. In business, my goal regardless of the client was to listen to their story, and

then tell my own story, focussing on the things that would sound most appealing to them. In both spheres, I was the one leading conversations, and always had an end goal I was leading them towards. The DiSC analysis helped me to understand that in some situations, the way that I conversed/engaged with other people should vary significantly depending on their personality type. It also helped me to understand biases/tendencies resulting from my own personality type. While not perfect, the DiSC analysis was highly useful in preparing me for engagement with a wider variety of people, with a wide variety of characteristics.

While the St Andrews trainings followed this theme of effective leadership training, I was disappointed by the completely different interpretation of leadership training at the University of Toronto. While staff were just as well-intentioned, and the cohort was just as strong and varied as in St Andrews, every U of T Laidlaw training was centred on workplace DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion). While there is certainly some value in ensuring that future leaders understand the challenges faced by different groups and recognise their own position and how this can produce biases, the environment created was monotone and repetitive. Each session was based on understanding and tackling unconscious bias, with a troubling lack of diverse voices and ideological positions represented. It was disappointing to see that the Laidlaw Foundation does not more comprehensively regulate the content of leadership sessions taking place in its name.

More positively and productively, I was invited to partake in the North American Laidlaw Conference being held at the University of Toronto, and addressed the full conference briefly, outlining my research project and introducing the keynote speaker. The opportunity to network with Laidlaw scholars from across North America, and compare the different ways that each scholar had chosen to showcase their project findings (in their posters) was fascinating. I developed skills in active listening by choosing to speak to scholars whose research was well outside of my scope of interest or understanding. This also helped me to notice the subtle nuances in the way that two different scholars might present their STEM project to an Arts student, and I realised that some were able to more effectively engage me. I will seek to emulate the more effective approaches if I am in a similar situation, presenting my work to an audience from outside the field.

Research Summer

My research project was self-proposed, under the supervision of Dr Kristen Harkness from the St Andrews Department of International Relations. As well as meetings prior to my ethical approval, Dr Harkness was available to answer questions throughout the project. I valued that my supervisor was willing to allow me complete autonomy on how closely I needed to be supervised. While I always felt comfortable reaching out to Dr Harkness, she did not micromanage the project, and permitted me total academic freedom.

The form of research I selected, elite interviews, gave me access to high profile individuals in South African Apartheid and post-Apartheid politics. Interviewing people who had suffered significantly, whether due to alienation by their community due to an anti-segregation stance or physical imprisonment and torture of oneself and entire family, the challenges that my interviewees had overcome, and had chosen to put themselves through to fight for something so important as a democratic South Africa, were humbling. This helped me to gain a different understanding of the strength of the

human character, and reinforced the active attempt to show empathy and compassion that Laidlaw trainings had promoted.

South Africa also challenged me in unique ways that developed my competences as a leader and individual. When in Johannesburg, I was faced with security and safety threats of a kind I had never before experienced. Prior planning and preparation in the form of consultation with hotels and tour guides, and my own research when filling out the risk assessment had alerted me to the high risk of violence through robbery or kidnap. This meant that the entirety of downtown Johannesburg was to be avoided completely, except when escorted 1:1 by a trained professional. Additionally, electricity shortages were commonplace, meaning that when in Cape Town (without a hotel with a generator and in the middle of winter) I had to wrap up warm, use a torch, and remember to charge my phone when the power was on. Being exposed to these multifaceted challenges, and discovering my ability to overcome them and endure with the three-week project, was not only personally motivating but also prepared me for the different but equally uncomfortable challenges that I would face during my LiA.

LiA Summer

In the Dominican Republic where I worked with the NGO Aldeas de Paz, I supported the NGO in their efforts to support children with disabilities to access education. In the Dominican Republic, disabled children are often socially excluded from mainstream school environments and parents cannot always afford alternative educational options. The NGO I worked with developed the Disabled Children's Programme which offered a combination of classroom education with support from a therapist. I helped to draft a list of questions that the NGO would ask parents on home visits to assess how effective they were finding the programme to be, and used my experience of completing an ethical research approval to ensure that the parents were being interviewed with ethical considerations in mind. Furthermore, I assisted with a funding application to the regional government for the Disabled Children's Programme, reviewing evidence of the programme's success so far and using that to build a case for further funding.

In the NGO's marine project, which educated farmers on not overfishing in the peninsula's waters, and established a coral nursery, I was also able to help in several ways. As well as chairing meetings of volunteers who were focussed solely on marine conservation, and delegating tasks accordingly, I was taken out on a boat to see the affected areas of water and snorkelled to see the state of the coral reef. This was outside of my own comfort zone. At times, other than the boat and it's captain, I couldn't see anything but open ocean and the distant coast as I swam and snorkelled in the deep water. The experience was confidence-building and showed me an aspect of leadership that requires self-motivation, as well as motivating others.

I faced difficult circumstances that included a significant language barrier, water and electricity outages, and consequent heat-related discomfort. While South Africa had challenged me while working, I was able to come back to the relative comfort of a hotel

each day. In the Dominican Republic my apartment was often without running water for multiple days on end, and power cuts meant that the fans would stop functioning. More so than the NGO work, which was itself fulfilling in that I was able to support the charity with its disabled children and marine programme, my ability to endure the totally alien living situation proved fulfilling and rewarding, more so in hindsight than while abroad.

Overall, my international experiences through Laidlaw in the form of research in South Africa and an LiA in the Dominican Republic offered me the chance to demonstrate resilience and show that I can successfully thrive in adverse environments. This will be immeasurably helpful to my future career prospects, as I seek to apply for roles in foreign countries, as I can illustrate to prospective employers my ability to quickly settle and adapt to novel circumstances and unanticipated situations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Laidlaw has been a very rewarding experience for me, and has helped me to develop my abilities to persevere, lead, and do so ethically and competently. I have had on-the-ground exposure to conducting research in a manner that far exceeds a typical undergraduate experience. I have been able to network with a variety of different types of people from fellow students at universities across the world, to respected national figures in South Africa. I have been given the chance to speak publicly and address large and small audiences about my research.

Overall, this experience has been immensely beneficial to my leadership development, and I would recommend it to any student in my position considering applying to Laidlaw. I'd also like to thank the Laidlaw staff at both St Andrews and Toronto Universities, as well as Dr Kristen Harkness, my research supervisor. I also thank Lord Laidlaw for his endowment to the Laidlaw Foundation that has made my Laidlaw journey possible.