



University of
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Leadership Development Essay

Becoming a Researcher and Leader in the Humanities and
Beyond

Ami Sato Melville
Laidlaw Scholar, 2023 Cohort
University of St Andrews School of English

When people ask you what you want to be, they look for one answer. You want to be a doctor, a lawyer, an astronaut, a teacher. They want to understand the kind of person you are and the exact “thing” you want to be in the world. There’s this reply the character Aimee gives in *The Spectacular Now* (2013) when Sutter asks her what her story is. She says, “I’d like to think there’s more to a person than just [one story], one thing.” I believe something similar when it comes to deciding what you will be. It should not be what, but who. Who do you want to be in this world?

When I applied for the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Programme, I was a fresh four months into my time at the University of St Andrews. I had transferred to the University from Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York after falling in love with the UK during a semester abroad in London. Anyone who has transferred schools understands how difficult adjusting to a new environment is. Everything that is new to you is old to everyone else. Everything that is exciting to you is repetitive to everyone else. Everybody knew everyone and I knew no one. I was timid and shy, not making my first real friend until almost two months in through my job in the Union (where I still work today!). I was searching for a community of people who believed in the work they did, specifically in the humanities. It is especially difficult to respond to the “What do you want to be?” question as an English and Art History student when STEM fields are prioritised in a technologically developing world. I felt the need to prove myself and the value of what I was interested in, which was Old and Middle English. My Old English professor, Dr. John Gallagher, was the first person to tell and show me that studying the development of the English language in the British Isles— specifically its Germanic roots and French influence— was an important contribution to our understanding of Modern English. Thus,

this became my Summer Research Project for May-July 2023, entitled “Rhetorical Metamorphosis: The Evolution of Figurative Language from Old to Middle English.”

I spent six weeks researching with Dr. Gallagher, during which I endured periods of simultaneous enlightenment and disillusionment. I was excited to develop as a leader, but first I needed to develop as a learner. During our first leadership event in Hospitalfield in March 2023, we were taught that there are four components to leadership: Understanding how you see yourself, how others see you, how you operate within a team, and leadership beyond the team. I needed to disconnect “what” I wanted to be from what I was in order to accomplish my goals of self growth, discipline, and confidence. I wanted to control my motivation and effectively complete my project under a strict deadline without losing focus. However, this was a consistent struggle during my research project. I made overly ambitious goals that quickly fell out of reach, resulting in my declining belief in my area of research. Coupled with my (still) timid demeanour, I knew that if I didn’t change something— my research or my approach— I would fail. I reached out to my fellow Scholars for guidance and to my relief, we shared similar sentiments during our weekly Action Learning Sets, where we reflected on our first independent research projects. It was comforting to know that people from all disciplines sometimes struggle to believe in their contributions. This doesn’t make them any less important; this just means that we must find ways to make our work exciting again. From other Scholars to Dr. Gallagher to my partner and my parents, I surrounded myself with good people. There is no greater feeling in the world than knowing you are in good hands. On the academic side, Dr. Gallagher assisted me in narrowing my research down to a tiny (but mighty) vein of Old and Middle English. We retitled my project “Voices, Visions and Parallel Worlds: Examining Anthropomorphism in Old and Middle English Dream Poetry” and this feeling of completion, especially of a paid, self-designed research

project, was euphoric. I learned that no impact is worthless in academia. Every step forward, no matter how small, is a step towards broadening our understandings of our world before, during and after us, while paving the way for future scholars. On the personal side, my friends, partner and parents gave me relief from getting lost in my work or second guessing myself. I am eternally grateful for the good people I know, and the equally good people I have met through the Laidlaw program. If it wasn't for the program, I would never have connected with Dr. Gallagher on this level, nor would I have worked as an assistant editor for his revised Old English Heptateuch outside of the program. Furthermore, I might never have become the Editor in Chief of St Andrews' *The Gay Saint* or the Barron Theatre Manager without the bravery and confidence this opportunity has given me. I certainly would not have had the courage to reach out to 826LA, the LA chapter of the US-based nonprofit 826, for my Leadership in Action project.

The self-defined aspect of the Laidlaw program is incredibly unique. The opportunity to centre two projects with tangible impacts around my interests was exactly what I needed to develop first as a learner and self-leader in my Research summer, and second as a leader for others in my Leadership in Action summer. I wanted to develop as a leader in an unfamiliar place while maintaining my passion for literature. Furthermore, I had noticed over many years how inaccessible writing workshops are, especially for young people, as they are typically advertised with high prices in gentrified areas. Wanting to encompass all three of these components, I devised an on-site project where I would present a self-designed creative writing curriculum to a nonprofit organisation that I would teach for free. I wrote workshop blueprints on topics from fantasy world building to playwriting to college application assistance and in my Google searches for an organisation that 1. Believed young people need to write and 2. Writing should be

accessible to everyone, I found 826LA. This organisation is a wealth of good people. You will never find a person who isn't motivated by wanting to help students believe in the words they write. 826LA helps their students be brave through their work. I wanted to be brave, too. I was brave in applying for this program, and I could be brave again in pursuing this new project.

I cannot express enough how enriching, exciting, and fulfilling my Leadership in Action project became. While I spent seven weeks on site in Los Angeles, I worked with Mateo Acosta, 826LA's Associate Director of Community Engagement, and Trevor Crown, 826LA's Senior Manager of Volunteer Innovation, for six months prior in developing the summer curriculum while I was still in Scotland. This taught me a valuable lesson: If you want to do it, find a way. Many Teams chats and emails later, we had written a one-week flash fiction intensive to be taught in 826LA's Echo Park and Mar Vista sites. Trevor and I taught this curriculum in 3-4 hour sessions at both sites, where we got to learn our students' tastes for writing. For example, one student loved writing one sentence horror while another student preferred writing about superheroes. I was honoured that they shared their literary preferences with us, as I felt even more connected to the 826LA community through something I was deeply passionate about. While the six-week curriculum I had originally written could not be fully implemented, I was able to draw elements from all of my workshops, such as short stories I had planned to talk about. I spent the other five weeks assisting with teaching their summer camps, making graphics and presentations, writing newsletters, and finding every opportunity to engage with students. I was especially delighted to assist high school seniors with their college applications.

I would like to dedicate this time to talking about the staff at 826LA and at the other 826 chapters. They welcomed me with open arms and, like Dr. Gallagher and my fellow Laidlaw Scholars, made me feel like my interests had a place in this world. They understand the value of

writing in a time where people are increasingly shortcutting their words using AI. They work individually with young people of all ages and all backgrounds while analysing their outreach so that they grow their community of students every year. They attract volunteers from humanities professions, such as publishing, acting and painting, to make students inspired to pursue their individual interests. Most of all, they love Los Angeles with all their hearts and show this love through their dedication to making the city a safer place for young voices.

While I entered this project more confidently than I did my research summer, I made new goals to keep during my time in Los Angeles. I wanted to teach but also to learn from 826LA leaders. I had the pleasure of attending their Staff Development Conference, where 826 teachers from all over the US presented the growth and accomplishments of their chapters. It was inspiring to see how the different chapters developed to suit what their students needed most in those locations. I wanted to show students how valuable their writing is and that no one can take away their voices. I wanted to create a safe and comfortable environment for students to be vulnerable with each other in. I wanted to make friends, to smile, to laugh. I wanted to lead with my heart. I wanted to be and do so many things that none of this could possibly fit into the “What do you want to be?” question. Yes, I want to be a writer. I *am* a writer. I am now a teacher. I am a researcher. I am a leader. But I want to be so much more than this. I want to be kind. I want to be empathetic. I want to be considerate. I want to be confident. I want to be open-minded. Most of all, I want to be brave. I wanted to be brave enough to believe in myself from the moment I applied for the Laidlaw programme and now I can say that I am brave enough to have spent seven weeks across the globe teaching students about writing in a world that can be unkind to human creativity. This program has helped me discover *who* I want to be, and I am

some of those things now. There will always be more, and that is okay. Growth is infinite and I look forward to who I can develop into next.

I would like to offer my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. John Gallagher, for his everlasting encouragement and his incredible passion for Old English. Thanks to his and several other English teachers' support, I am excited to pursue a postgraduate degree in English Literature. I am equally grateful for the University of St Andrews Laidlaw Team, especially Celina O'Connor, Maddy Haywood and Cassice Last. Thank you for guiding us on every step of our journeys and for taking the time to know us. Thank you to the 826LA Team, especially Mateo Acosta and Trevor Crown, for your unwavering enthusiasm for writing and your love for your students. I hope to work with you again next summer. To my fellow Laidlaw Scholars: you are all superheroes. Thank you for being the most incredible group. To my partner, Megan: you are my favourite person. Thank you for believing in me, even when I didn't. To my parents, Rika and James: I love you and miss you so much.

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