

Leadership as Community:

Laidlaw Scholars Leadership Development Reflective Essay



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Moments of realization often seem to happen, for me, sat on the floor. Or after my third cup of tea. Or, perhaps, it has nothing to do with the floor or the breakfast blend, but rather that I was sat with members of my community, or making tea with and for my community. My Laidlaw experience has been marked by these moments and upon reflection, and disregarding the concerns of excessive caffeine consumption, I have come to learn that leadership, for me, is not about myself in isolation but about how a community can immeasurably impact individuals and causes.

My first major experience as a Laidlaw scholar was an initiation into many cups of tea (it may be useful to note that I attend University of St Andrews, in Scotland) and many floor-sitting activities. The fresh cohort of 2023 Laidlaw scholars and myself were shuttled out to a weekend of leadership-building activities, set in the truly beautiful Hospitalfield. Most of us did not know each other well, if at all, but leadership training challenged our status as strangers. Whether we were huddled on the floor around posters, large markers in hand, or attempting to arrange giant sequential images, we were placed into scenarios in which we needed to act as a community—whether we felt like one yet or not. Over the next few days, a common room used for breaks between learning about leadership types, undertaking group challenges, and articulating our hopes for the research projects that would follow, became the place in which our comfort with one another was increasingly improved. As much as the formal activities and discussion were beneficial, it was the quieter moments around the hot water dispenser (“Is it bad it’s my third cup of tea? It’s only 11 am...” or “Should I be drinking tea this late?”) and crammed into the corners, couches, and yes, sometimes floors, to chat about ourselves and get to know each other which deepened our sense of togetherness. In this space, vulnerable admissions of imposter syndrome and surprise at our acceptance to the program were aired. Something that once felt so isolating, the idea that everyone else around me was far more intelligent, capable, or naturally inclined towards leadership, began to fade. As our connections grew over shared hobbies or academic interests I found myself in awe, instead of intimidation, of my fellow Scholars, each so unique in their backgrounds and plans for research. The bus ride back from Hospitalfield was now much more lively: with a group chat established and memories made, we began to feel like a community.

Still, the importance of community to leadership and to success was not quite clear to me until I needed my community during the first Laidlaw summer of research. Each scholar had a vastly different research project which required everything from historical explorations to investigations on important issues to late night forays to the lab. Situated in the first camp myself, my own topic on children’s experiences of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was quite different even from the few other historians in the cohort. As challenging as the research was, especially due to the sparse historical materials I had to work with, what truly supported me in carrying out my research was not archives or databases but my community of scholars. During this summer we were required to participate in Action Learning Sets: a small-group style of problem-solving, support, and reflection. Admittedly I was apprehensive, thinking it may just amount to another thing to do in my busy day; yet, sat on the grass in one of our beautiful quads under the shade of trees, I saw what leadership could be. The format of these groups required each participant to present an issue they were facing, followed by clarifying questions from the rest and then a discussion about solutions. The research summer, for many including myself, was not always smooth. I remember in particular one cohort member discussing an issue they faced with their supervisor; to see our fellow group members critically discuss solutions, but perhaps, more importantly, provide empowerment, reminded me that leadership, change, and discovery

cannot happen alone. Leadership outside of community meant operating on your own ideas and assumptions alone. When confronting challenges, such as we did in the research summer, hitting a wall over and over again with only your own perspective meant you would end up stuck. Together, we could confront challenges with more tools at our disposal. Once again, it was not only these more formal structures provided by the Foundation that allowed us to thrive in community. My lunches in our library's café with one fellow scholar kept me steady on days when research became emotionally taxing or my inquiry frustratingly hit a dead end. A bonfire on the beach one chilly evening was a place for us to take a second to step back and recognize how amazing the research we were doing was. And a Fourth of July celebration held at my flat, sparking much cross-cultural reflection, made me realize that only a half a year ago we were strangers to one another. Now, my work would have been incomplete and shaky without the nurtured confidence that this community provided me. Leadership was no individual endeavor—it was the work of a community. Whether in creating research that tangibly benefits the world, or leading a team in a more traditional leadership sense, community provides an important backbone.

The Laidlaw conference held at Trinity College Dublin later that year expanded this sentiment within me. Here again, the long conference days were supplemented by many cups of tea and (though there was ample seating in the facilities) the occasion sit on the ground, for a shared meal our first night or during subsequent breaks. Over the course of the few days in Dublin, leadership became trusting in community—even when I did not have the extensive time to get to know my scholars from other universities. That trust was tested in discussions of difficult and at times controversial topics or in venturing to network; in both spaces, the group commitment to respect, honesty, and acceptance was itself the leadership. The active creation of a space in which new ideas and ways of doing things could arise, preconceptions could be challenged, and lasting networks of support established arose through community-centric focus. I hold no hesitation now to reach out to fellow scholars (and indeed have) if I have a question, am looking for a reliable alumni network, or want to share an opportunity.

My Leadership-in-Action project in my second summer of the Laidlaw program brought this understanding of community as leadership to a crux—and into action. I undertook my Leadership-in-Action project with the non-profit organization Survivors of Human Trafficking in Scotland (SOHTIS) in Glasgow. Even with a title to my project, Social Action through Participatory Art Initiatives: Raising Awareness of Human Trafficking In Scotland, and objectives written out I truly did not know what to expect working as an intern for the organization. I found myself sat on the ground, again. This time, I was attempting to haphazardly construct a chair from an IKEA manual and a handful of screws. Had I exactly envisioned this task as a formative part of my Leadership-in-Action project beforehand? Not quite. But, as each day taught me, non-profit work is just as much about putting together IKEA furniture as it is about big campaigns, documentable impacts, and changing the world. Despite what any initial description may suggest, no, this task had not been “handled off to the intern”—the CEO, Joy, was sat alongside me, fighting to put together a couch. Gill, the Development & Partnership Manager, was also present, helping Joy and hauling all the furniture in her van. The chairs, the couch, and the other bits and bobs of an IKEA shop were being built to fill SOHTIS's new Freedom Hub, a place where survivors of human trafficking could come for art therapy, group activities, support, and to engage in SOHTIS's social enterprises. By the end of the day, the Freedom Hub, previously looking fairly sparse, now began to feel more comfortable and inviting, reflecting the services and support it held in its walls.

Joy and Gill's leadership throughout my project was a model that I aspire to. While both held important positions within the organization, neither relied on hierarchical understandings to interact with colleagues. To them, the entire team and the survivors we were supporting were all in community. Aside from the surprise that a CEO could help with such a menial task as furniture-building, it was the more minute and daily occurrences in which members of SOHTIS lead with community. Of course, one was through tea. While certainly reflective of British culture too, the offering between everyone in the office to put the kettle on for colleagues and prepare them tea each day was a small reminder that leadership requires respect and support. Gill and Joy always emphasized how SOHTIS's mission of respect was not just about how survivors were treated by staff, but how staff treated one another and ourselves. Community empowers and flattens barriers that hierarchy and rigid methods create. In SOHTIS, though I had never before worked on an arts-based project or within the human trafficking sector, I was encouraged at every step to voice my ideas, use my creativity, and even provide constructive criticism without hesitation. My Leadership-in-Action project centered community and tied together the importance of community to leadership. Community allows leadership to be successful as it opens up the potential for everyone to contribute, no matter their role, in equally important ways and to be recognized as essential; it fosters respect and openness that allows new approaches to be taken or routes to be suggested.

I am deeply grateful for my time with SOHTIS—fittingly, it encapsulated what I had been silently recognizing throughout my time as a Laidlaw scholar. Good leadership is based in community. Going forward, I will hold onto this lesson; whether it be in teams I am a part of, workplaces I am present, or interactions in academia. Communities, strong and supportive ones, not only make change and growth possible but as fruitful as it can be. Between cups of tea, you can realize you are not so alone in your doubts, or that you can rely on those around you to support endeavors. Sat in a circle on the ground, you can confront challenges with the skills and perspectives of all those present. In any and all moments where community manifests, leadership thrives.

Given how important my Laidlaw cohort and the scholars network have been to my own personal growth, I plan to remain as an active alumni. Being an open point of contact for present and future scholars I hope to bring any guidance and empowerment I can; not in the belief that my isolated leadership is helpful, but rather in the understanding that in conversations together, members of my community can have the support and tools to take risks, try novel approaches, and dare to lead with goodness.

Finally, I would like to take a moment to express my gratitude. Thank you to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for their support and funding, neither my research nor leadership projects would have been possible without them. And of course to my community members. Foremost thank you to my Laidlaw cohort and the St Andrews Laidlaw team, who made my experience as a scholar truly amazing. I am also very grateful to Dr Andrew Edwards, who provided immeasurable encouragement and intellectual community as my supervisor. Finally, to Gill, Joy, and all the staff at SOHTIS for being true displays of leadership; I am forever indebted to their kindness as role models.