

# A Journey in Leadership: My Laidlaw Experience

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“I would like to thank you all for choosing to be here; for choosing to be brave”. Those were the words that opened my summer 2024 Leadership-in-Action (LiA) experience in Boston, Massachusetts. They were spoken by Milton Irving, the Executive Director of the Timothy Smith Network (also known as TSN), a man whom I will always hold in extremely high regard. At that time, I didn’t feel particularly brave at all – I certainly felt nervous, and excited for the programme to start, but brave? What was it that marked a Laidlaw Scholar out as being brave? With my LiA now complete, I reflect upon my experience in Boston, my 16 months of the programme prior, and their impact on my life and leadership development.

I can honestly say that the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Programme has been one of the most influential and important experiences of my life. I remember all the way back to the interview process: I applied for many opportunities that summer and, with my most recent interview beforehand being unsuccessful, I had no expectations whatsoever to be accepted. I will freely admit that my previous ‘failure’ had knocked my confidence, causing me to question whether I had the ability or interview skills to grasp these opportunities. The Laidlaw team at St Andrews believed in me even when I didn’t have full belief in myself, something that I will always be thankful for.

Like many other science students whom I’ve shared this experience with, my main reason for applying was the lure of a research project. I chose to study astrophysics because I love it, and a six-week research project in that field gave me the perfect platform to explore in more detail. However, if you asked me now what the main highlight of this programme has been, the answer is unquestionably the people. Having 24 fellow Scholars around during the research summer made all of the difficulties feel that little bit less difficult, whilst having 10 Scholars around during the LiA provided the support that allowed such an enriching and inspiring experience.

That’s the first thing I’ve gained from the programme: wonderful friends and connections with fellow Scholars that will last a lifetime. This support network is what makes Laidlaw special compared with other opportunities, planting you within a community of like-minded, ambitious young adults. In my experience, this not only increased one’s productivity and creativity, but also greatly reduced the stresses across the course of the programme. The Scholarship is designed to be challenging, and some of these challenges are made achievable only through the help of the incredible people around you.

There were also many skills that I gained through different elements of the programme. During the initial summer of research, I had my first experience of the 9 to 5 job, and of working within an astrophysics research group. This provided a glimpse into a new realm,



with lasting takeaways as I consider options for my future career. As difficult as the research project was, I think many of us found it refreshing to have a more fixed boundary on both the start and end of the working day, allowing us to build a daily routine which unquestionably fuelled greater productivity.

My research project was also made more difficult by unforeseen and unavoidable supervisor absences, which often left me alone for large chunks of time. This required a large degree of individual drive and responsibility, which combined to fuel greater personal development than I could possibly have anticipated. The contrast between going into that project feeling hugely out of my depth, and emerging (despite challenges) having learnt so much was an incredible feeling. Some of the skills acquired during research proved useful in the following academic year, with code that I had written being directly applicable to a related astrophysics module. Others are transferable to all walks of life: resilience and perseverance, curiosity and problem solving, and the need to find creative solutions.

Through my LiA, I was exposed to similar challenges, but this time from across the Atlantic! Taking place over the longest consecutive period of time I had been away from home, and in heat that no Scottish person should ever be subjected to, even the location proved difficult. But, quicker than I'd anticipated – due to the truly amazing people I was with – I slowly but surely adjusted. This time, almost all of the challenges were faced as a team (in my case, the incredible team at TSN) in contrast to the more individualised challenges of the research summer. Following my experience of teaching high-school students for 6 weeks, I feel that I now have a greater sense of perseverance and patience than ever, as well as much-improved communication and teamwork abilities. Communicating with a team of fellow Scholars is one thing; communicating effectively to teach coding and microelectronics to a group of teenagers is quite another!

Whilst I have gained invaluable skills from the programme as a whole, the leadership training components have also proved uniquely useful. I had been involved in past roles as a leader, most notably in sport and music teams, but none had required the breadth of skills that were needed for my LiA. This was new territory, and yet still built on so many of the skills that were relevant in my earlier experiences: being respectful, listening to others, good communication, the importance of teamwork, and so on. In this sense, the leadership trainings helped to take prior skills and refine them; moulding them into the more complete set of tools used throughout the programme.

One particular leadership training event that stands out involved a workshop with discussion of morals and philosophical viewpoints – a discussion which I was experiencing properly for the first time. Run by a Laidlaw philosophy student and friend, we were encouraged to analyse difficult moral situations and distil them, not only a skill proving a real asset for later parts of the programme, but also exemplifying a crucial trait in a good leader. This was directly relevant not only to my LiA, where the first day involved discussing morals with students, but also tied in with the Oxford Character Project. This programme,

a series of interactive sessions aiming to celebrate ethical leadership and navigate the pitfalls of bad ethics, was another opportunity that we were all lucky enough to experience through the Scholarship.

The skills acquired through these leadership trainings, as well as through the Scholarship as a whole, have filtered into my own development as a leader. In advance of our initial Laidlaw weekend, we each completed a behavioural DISC profile to provide an indication of where our strengths and weaknesses in leadership may lie. Whilst it is fair to say that several of us St Andrews Scholars did not agree with all aspects of our profiles, there were also aspects that were visibly true throughout both summers! I think one area of my leadership which has markedly changed is a greater willingness to take responsibility, and not shy away from tasks – not so much in a procrastination sense, but with regards to difficult situations and conversations. Whilst teaching, it was inevitable that moments would arise that caused our students to dislike their teachers (such as when we confronted their mobile phone usage), but these conversations were often necessary to ensure a safe and effective learning environment for all parties.

A further skill development can be found in the encouragement that us Scholars had, at every stage, to take time to reflect. This is something which I had not done enough of in past experiences and is, in my opinion, one of the most valuable areas of the programme. It allows one to learn from past mistakes and also identify strengths, allowing development of greater self-awareness as a person and leader. Writing this essay, I am under no illusion that this is the end of the road for my development – just the beginning – and I hope to continue putting some of the key practices of the Scholarship into future use in my everyday life, long after becoming an alum.

As I mentioned earlier on, my Laidlaw experience was made by the people that I met. In addition to my friends on the programme, my LiA gave me an incredible opportunity to meet and network within the US. TSN did an incredible job of organising presentations from an array of exciting people throughout the six weeks, including from former and current employees of NASA, innovators and educators, and the Assistant Secretary of Defence for Science and Technology in the US government. This variety not only kept us and our students engaged, but also sparked intellectual conversations, and it was particularly delightful to see the high-school students chatting away to these inspirational figures. The sense of being part of a wider network and community was encapsulated in our farewell dinner, where many of our speakers, the sponsors and staff at TSN, and all of the Scholars gathered together. Joined by Susanna Kempe, the Laidlaw Foundation CEO, it really was a ‘wow’ moment, in which the full scale of the operation, and connections made, finally sunk in.

As a boy from a comparatively small city in Edinburgh, living in Boston also provided invaluable international experience of a very different part of the world. It changed some prior perceptions that I’d had of the States, making me question why those were my prior perceptions at all. This also cast my mind back to the bias workshop we had during our



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leadership training – yet another example of a small but key component of the programme, causing one to think more about themselves and why they may believe certain things.

As outlined above, the Laidlaw Scholarship has helped me immensely to date. But one of the many things that distinguishes this programme from other scholarships and internships is the range of future endeavours in which it will be useful. The large number of technical skills picked up over the course of the two summers will likely be relevant in any of my future careers, and serves as evidence of the adaptability and quick thinking of a Laidlaw Scholar. And, of course, there is an endless list of transferable skills directly applicable to any walk of life; whether in the office, on the sporting field, or in the orchestra. Teamwork, communication, perseverance, practice... they are all so useful. However, perhaps the most important way that being a Laidlaw Scholar will help in future is the diverse and rich community that we are now all a part of. Access to such an incredible group of people, whether for social or professional purposes; through the Scholars Network or other means; will lead to further personal growth and perhaps even future collaborations.

Despite my time as an active Scholar coming to an end in November, this will be far from marking the end of my association with this incredible programme. I was very grateful to have the opportunity to present my research poster at the Dublin Conference in October 2023, and this love for talking about my Laidlaw work will go on. Much of what I do will be similar to some of what I'm doing now: regularly discussing the Scholarship with people and what it entails. Now armed with a more complete picture, the list of positives that I'd emphasise to future applicants has grown even larger than it once was, and I now feel in a far more able position to advise new and upcoming Laidlaw Scholars. I would just encourage them, as Milton told us TSN Scholars, to choose to be brave, and to make an effort to walk through the limitless number of doors that this Scholarship opens.

The list of negatives? I honestly don't think there is one. Even this essay, 2000 words written by an astrophysicist, has been far from a chore. The Laidlaw Scholarship has been a once-in-a-lifetime experience and, in some ways, that's all that it needs to be: because the memories and takeaways will stay with me for the rest of my life.

*I would like to thank everybody who has made my Laidlaw journey possible. Firstly, my good friend Nikko, whose passionate stories from his experience pushed me to apply. My supervisor, Dr Paula Stella Teixeira, for her guidance during my research summer, and the incredible staff at the Timothy Smith Network for overseeing my LiA. The Laidlaw team at the University of St Andrews, for their invaluable help and support throughout the programme. The Laidlaw Scholars, both in my cohort and others around the world, many of whom I am now lucky enough to call friends. And finally my biggest thanks to the Laidlaw Foundation and Lord Laidlaw for allowing me this incredible opportunity.*