

A Scholar's Story: A Reflective Essay



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I still remember watching the confetti fall across my computer screen as I read, “Congratulations!” To my amazement, I had been accepted into the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Program. At the time, I couldn’t recognize how Laidlaw would shape my personal, educational, and professional development, but having completed my time as a scholar, I am filled with immense gratitude for this incredible experience. The Laidlaw Scholarship has been transformative, allowing me to gain invaluable insights that will cultivate my leadership skills in future studies and professional careers.

The Most Significant Experience: My Leadership in Action Project

The most influential part of my Laidlaw journey was the practical leadership experience I gained during my Leadership in Action Project. My project involved my work with a Greek humanitarian aid organization called Eurorelief. Eurorelief collaborates closely with the Greek government to provide aid for residents within their refugee camps. I was stationed in Zervou Camp on the island of Samos off the coast of Turkey. During this time, I had the incredible opportunity to join Eurorelief’s administrative team, which allowed me to cultivate my leadership skills within a challenging environment.

My overall position within the camp was to ensure the safety of volunteers. However, I was kindly given the freedom and ability to use my position to foster relationships among the other organizations and the residents. The relationships I developed with the NGOs and governmental agencies in the camp allowed me to create a collaborative community focused on benefiting residents' needs. From supporting residents' search for jobs, housing, legal counsel, and education, I quietly unraveled the bureaucratic web that ‘held’ our environment together.

While working with Eurorelief, I gained immense knowledge of the humanitarian disasters plaguing Africa and the Middle East. Developing personal relationships with asylum seekers, I had the unique opportunity to understand residents' struggles and impediments when seeking asylum. Quickly identifying how multiple policies and procedures prolong refugees' hardships, I began to question policymakers' ethical decision-making, wondering if they even consider the ramifications of their decisions. At the same time, I remained determined to keep a holistic perspective - which was very difficult to do within a camp that resembled a prison. My ambitions for social work flourished, and I became known as someone who would help or at least someone who would try. Unfortunately, the more comfortable and confident I grew in my role, the closer I came to leaving. While it would be unlikely that I ever see any of these individuals again, I will never forget them.

My Leadership in Action project gave me a direction. As I slowly faded into the last year of my undergrad with a generic business degree that gave no specific trajectory, I questioned who or what I wanted to become. While I knew I had the ability and experience to become a strong leader, I remained disassociated from any pursuit. Thankfully, Laidlaw and Eurorelief gave me the freedom and opportunity to see that my only desire is to create authentic and effective change that will help shape the lives of others.

The Importance of Leadership Development:

Honestly, I had a variety of concerns when I discovered how heavily the Laidlaw Scholarship involved theoretical leadership lessons. Having taken a few leadership development classes in high school, I questioned how many TED Talks I might have to endure throughout this program. (I have nothing against TED Talks, but I firmly believe that serious discussions and practical applications are more beneficial.) Thankfully, now that my time as a scholar has ended, I can confidently say that I was delightfully surprised by the effectiveness and significance of these trainings.

While many trainings focused on ethical leadership development—which closely identifies with the management principles of CSR (corporate social responsibility)—I had already developed these theoretical principles throughout my business studies and attributed their significance to multiple national and industrial leaders. So, while I enjoyed the intellectual discussion on morals, I personally found the self-reflective trainings to be the most impactful. Having to methodically question my strengths and weaknesses while examining my leadership skills with those in my cohort, I gained a greater self-awareness. By intentionally understanding the areas that I needed to develop and fostering my strengths, I have grown immensely as a leader. Thankfully, the Laidlaw Scholarship afforded me the ability to practically apply the development of these skills within the challenge and foreign context of our Leadership in Action Project. Since reflecting upon my experience within Eurorelief, I have seen immense personal growth - gaining a considerable amount of confidence in my decision-making capabilities.

Unfortunately, while I have enjoyed the leadership training sessions; I wish they had incorporated the chance for us to listen and learn from industry leaders and academic scholars. We were able to meet and discuss with a few post-graduate students during our Laidlaw Research so we could question their research methods and analysis. I would also be afforded the chance to speak to various leaders within professional and academic contexts to explore how they have overcome obstacles and where they have viewed their own personal growth.

Creating a Global Perspective through Networking:

Participating in the Laidlaw Scholarship Program has allowed me to enhance the invaluable benefits of networking. As a Laidlaw Scholar, I have been given the unique opportunity to collaborate and engage with passionate individuals seeking to become ethical leaders. From these discussions, I have explored multiple projects that have given me knowledge on various global issues. I have also had the unique opportunity to further discussions within the realm of humanities. However, I have often found myself gravitating to the technological and scientific advancements within the worlds of engineering, biology, chemistry, and physics. While I do not have any previous knowledge or background in these areas, I thoroughly enjoy listening to the passions and objectives of others.

Though I praise the supportive environment fostered within the Laidlaw Scholars Network, I admire the Program's opportunity for academic and professional guidance. Having developed a valuable relationship with my Laidlaw research advisor, Dr. Shruti Narayanswamy, I am offered a valuable perspective within my academic and professional decisions.

Nonetheless, some of the most meaningful relationships I have created within my Laidlaw experience are those made within my Laidlaw Leadership in Action Project. Having the extraordinary opportunity to professionally explore a foreign environment while constantly engaging in diverse conversations has widely broadened my perspective on global issues. These international relationships will remain invaluable as I approach and address complex issues surrounding social justice. Through professionally and academically working with a diverse group of people, I have developed strong cross-cultural communication skills that will significantly contribute to the success of my future endeavors.

The Creation of New Opportunities: The Advantages of Alumni

Looking ahead can become daunting as I approach the end of my undergraduate studies. Nevertheless, I take pride in completing my time as a Laidlaw Scholar and remain faithful to uphold every attribute a scholar should convey: ambition, bravery, curiosity, and determination.

I remain confident in the person I have developed into during my time as a Laidlaw Scholar, especially as I explore every future possibility that interests me. Understanding that I have responsibly taken every opportunity to strengthen my capabilities as an ethical leader and student, I remain confident that I will remain resilient towards any obstacles I encounter. Through being intentional with my time as a Laidlaw scholar, I have fostered a supportive international network, strengthened my leadership skills, adopted my weaknesses as strengths, and challenged myself to explore complex and foreign opportunities. So, I remain confident that whatever avenue I pursue - professional or academic - I can contribute their success to my development within the Laidlaw Leadership Program.

Nonetheless, I hope to remain curious by possibly continuing my newfound knowledge of immigration policy and social reforms with a master's degree in diplomacy and foreign relations. I would proudly attribute my Laidlaw Research to allowing me to analyze social issues and my Laidlaw Project for allowing me to build my framework on international policies and reforms. Meanwhile, I am also considering professionally advancing into a consultancy, which would characteristically suit the skills and experiences I have gained as a Laidlaw Scholar.

Nonetheless, I am very excited to see what the future holds and will remain zealous in my endeavor to effectively create real change as I carry the honor of becoming a Laidlaw alumni.

Future Contributions:

While I am unsure what my future holds, I plan to remain active within the Laidlaw Scholarship network. My continued participation and activity will hopefully contribute to the

ongoing success of future scholars and aid the overall mission of the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Program.

There are various ways to repay my gratitude to the program. A simple contribution I can currently make to the program would be continually exploring the Laidlaw Scholars network and remaining up-to-date on the ongoing publications of researchers and professionals. Possibly, through my participation, I will be able to facilitate connecting current and previous scholars or maybe someday even introducing scholars to professional communities. Meanwhile, I can serve my immediate Laidlaw community through volunteering at future Laidlaw leadership trainings, acknowledging that I met multiple alumni through their participation in my cohorts' Laidlaw gatherings and workshops, which I used as a chance to listen and learn about their own Laidlaw journey actively, and understand how the significance of Laidlaw affected their future endeavors.

However, the most outstanding contribution any scholar can make to the Laidlaw Program is through actively advocating for the participation of prospectus scholars. Participating in the promotion of the Laidlaw Scholarship will significantly contribute to the encouragement and motivation of future ethical leaders since you could both share your stories with prospectus scholars or encourage professional and academic organizations to learn about how they would be able to contribute towards the program - possibly financial or physically.

Currently, I am discussing with previous student mentors about promoting the Laidlaw Scholarship within their leadership classes. Since a majority of their students will apply to high-ranking institutions that offer the Laidlaw Program, I suggested that it would be crucial for them to become acquainted with the various future opportunities available to them. However, I am still determining if this endeavor will be successful. My goal is to motivate young leaders to explore all of the opportunities afforded through the Laidlaw Scholarship and encourage them to apply. Nevertheless, I am positive that I can share my own experience throughout the University of St Andrews. Having gained a platform as the president of the Management Society, I have already discussed the promotion of the Laidlaw Scholarship with the St Andrews Laidlaw Committee.

Final Remarks: Advice to Future Scholars

The Laidlaw Scholarship Program is invaluable, creating countless experiences for personal development and academic growth. The foundation grants students the chance to become a part of a supportive and collaborative community that will create new opportunities for future success. Through various trainings and challenges, every individual is entitled to the opportunity to become a confident and ethical leader. However, the effectiveness of this scholarship relies solely upon the scholar. While every scholar is entitled to the same opportunities, the outcome is entirely of their own volition. So, I suggest that no scholar be submissive towards the possibilities that are presented during their time as a scholar.

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