

Reflection on Leadership Placement with Future Advocacy

Summer II Leadership-in-Action Report

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Leadership-in-Action Reflection

In my second summer as a Laidlaw scholar, I undertook a Leadership-in-Action placement with Future Advocacy, spending four weeks in Brussels, Belgium and two weeks in London, England. During this placement, I honed communications, research, and campaigning skills to support various non-profit campaigns and social movements. As I look back now at the close of my Laidlaw journey, there are two key leadership themes which defined my experience.

Diving Into Areas of Inexpertise

The feeling of leaving home, crossing an ocean, and taking up temporary residence in a foreign environment is chilling—all the more so when you are completely alone. I first grappled with this feeling when arriving in Paris in July 2023, as I completed the international portion of my Summer I research project. I experienced it with even greater intensity on May 4, 2024, when I landed in a city to which I never before travelled in order to work with an organization with whom I was only scarcely familiar. As I left my comfort zone 6000km behind in Toronto, I took my first dive into an area of inexpertise: Brussels. As it turns out, the theme of inexpertise would come to define the following six weeks.

I entered the Laidlaw program, in many ways, thanks to my previous work in environmentalism. For six years, I have been impassioned by environmental issues and pursued them in my undergraduate degree, my internships, and my research proclivities. While I will always hold a deep passion for the field, I came to realize that I had siloed myself into one discipline. My Leadership-in-Action placement pierced through this silo.

Future Advocacy does not work on any one issue of social concern. Rather, it endeavours to work on all of them. In my placement, I was thrown into disciplines in which I had little to no background. I developed a training module for the use of Artificial Intelligence content creation

tools despite knowing very little about Artificial Intelligence or content creation. I contributed legal research and logistical support to a European Union campaign on child sexual abuse, despite knowing very little about European Union institutions or children's rights. In so doing, I shifted my priority not to pursuing the areas in which I held expertise but the areas in which I lacked it. Future Advocacy provided me with a powerful lesson that my skills and talents can make a difference wherever they are applied.

The Complexity of Ethical Leadership

Before entering the Laidlaw program, I had scarcely considered what it means to be an ethical leader. It seemed to me that leadership, in and of itself, was a virtuous or at least fruitful endeavour—and by extension, was ethically positive. As I prepared for and completed my Leadership-in-Action experience, I came to realize that the ethics of leadership were far more complicated than I anticipated.

I struggled for many months in the lead-up to Summer II to find a Leadership-in-Action placement. I was confident that I wanted to pursue the independent leadership option but I was also frequently promoted by the Laidlaw Programme to pursue one of the centrally-offered leadership projects. Initially, these projects sparked my curiosity. As I continued to learn more, however, I began to question the frame through which they presented these leadership experiences and the implication of my involvement. I worried about placing myself at the nexus of voluntourism and white saviorism. For many decades, privileged youth from the Global North have engaged in voluntourism trips to *help* communities they perceive to be disadvantaged. This help is often rather shallow, offering band-aid solutions to structural problems or failing to heed the needs and wants of the local communities. In the end, the project may do more to further the

personal goals of the *helper* than it serves the community to be *helped*. In selecting my leadership placement, I aspired to avoid this type of activity.

As I moved through my Leadership placement with Future Advocacy, I gained confidence that I was not falling into this harmful mold. I valued, in particular, the approach of Future Advocacy to answer calls for support rather than choose projects to undertake. I learned a valuable lesson in leadership that, in aiming to work with underserved communities, it is imperative that you use your privilege and resources to respond to what those communities identify as threats or challenges.

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