

Experience Abroad Reflection

Summer II Leadership-in-Action Report

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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. This experience followed my first Laidlaw global experience in Summer I, during which I spent three weeks completing independent research in Paris, France. As I look back now at these experiences abroad, there are two key themes which defined my experience.

Embracing An International Context

I have always been quite fortunate, growing up in Toronto, to constantly find myself in an international city. Nevertheless, I have always been tethered to the familiar sites and faces that make the city my hometown. Embarking upon my Leadership-in-Action placement, I wound up embracing a novel international context.

I spent four of six weeks in Brussels, Belgium. The city is, in many ways, the heart of Europe. Housed within an officially trilingual country, Brussels is fascinatingly multilingual. It is majority French-speaking, though it is surrounded by the Flemish-speaking region of the country and nearly a third of the residents are proficient in English. As someone who has devoted now over a decade to learning French, I found in Brussels many nerve-wracking opportunities to practice the language, to pick up on new vocabulary, and to immerse myself in a distinct Francophone culture. The city also benefits from an international geography which places it at the crossroads of European travel. I benefited from day and weekend trips within the country (such as to Bruges and Ghent) and across the continent (such as to Paris, Lyon, The Hague, and Utrecht). It was a privilege not only to cross destinations off my bucket list, but to bear witness to the beautiful cultural flairs—the museums, churches, public squares, and festivities—of these many cities. Finally, as the official seat of the European Commission and European Council,

Brussels welcomes diplomats and executives from around the globe. Because of this European Union seat, I had the opportunity not just to walk through the European Parliament but to network with European Union representatives.

The international spirit of Brussels is unmatched. While there were many moments where I struggled with homesickness and feeling out of place, I will forever cherish the insights gained from embracing a new culture. My Leadership-in-Action placement was, furthermore, the perfect stepping stone to my upcoming semester abroad in Paris and my ambitions for an international career.

Building on Challenge

While my global experience in Brussels was highly rewarding and fulfilling, it was burdened by past challenges. As I navigated my time in Brussels, I remained very conscious of the difficulties I previously encountered and could very well encounter again.

During my Summer I research placement in Paris, I dealt with unexpected medical issues that left me feeling quite vulnerable and isolated in a foreign country. I was forced, quite unexpectedly, to navigate systems with which I had no familiarity: French pharmacies, medical clinics, and hospitals. In those moments, I wished for nothing more than to be back in the comfort of my home country.

Yet, I feel quite proud of the resilience and self-advocacy capabilities that I called upon in those moments of hardship. In combating personal struggle during a leadership experience, I realized that an integral function of a leader is to lead themselves. I had to listen to my needs, fall back on the relationships that fuel me, and be firm with my limits. The understanding, compassion, and encouragement that I would expect a leader to extend to a colleague is exactly

what I extended to myself. These lessons will stick with me far longer than the pain or discomfort of the medical incident.

When I arrived in Brussels, I confronted a wave of emotions that threw me back to Paris 2023. I found great comfort and strength, however, in knowing that I devoted the preceding year to building on the challenges I faced and the skills they gave me.

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