

## Experience Abroad Reflection 2024

Hello there! My name is Gabrielle Dumé, and I spent my Leadership in Action summer in Barbados, an island full of rich culture and vibrant nature. In this reflection on my experience abroad, I will highlight key experiences in my time in Barbados, outside of my project, that allowed me to grow in cultural competence and reflect on the biases in my worldview. I will take you along in a narrative journey, for you to understand my perspective of my trip to Barbados this summer.

### Chapter One: Entering the Island

As I was planning my trip to Barbados, the Laidlaw Foundation explained the importance of developing a detailed itinerary and proposal, for my trip to run smoothly. When I began communicating with my supervisor, she described the general idea of my role. However, she was limited in detailing the minute details of my project. That created stress in me; anxiety.

*If I don't have a detailed itinerary, how will I be able to function? How will I be able to maximize my time in Barbados? Will my project be successful?*

These thoughts frustrated me. I felt the Torontonians Time-Gods peering down at me, tapping their feet, checking their watches. As the trip got closer, I felt their pressure constrict tighter over my chest. The looming presence of a deadline was a sensation something I had grown accustomed to.

Spending ten years raised in the suburbs of this concrete jungle, I was used to this ecosystem. In the back of my mind, I knew something was missing from my own environment. I knew that the perfectly manicured lawns were a little too perfect, that the grey palette of Toronto's skyscrapers was missing saturation, that the night was far too illuminated by the artificial stars, and there were too few authentic stars that shone through their gaze. Somewhere in my heart, I longed for something more.

Every now and then I would return to my homeland, and it would reignite my love for the Caribbean. However, it was during this year's trip to Barbados when I understood how the Caribbean differs from Canada, and why it draws me closer. The realization hit me the first day I moved into my host's apartment.

My air condition cushion that I grew accustomed to in my Canadian summers was replaced with the humid heat of Barbados. I had a cultural shock when I learned that most homes in Barbados lacked the artificial cool breeze that I had grown dependent

on in my first week staying in a hotel. Like a fledging forced out of its nest, I scrambled to get the windows as open as soon as possible, allowing for whatever little whisper of breeze to caress my sticky skin. My metaphorical suffocation in Toronto was replaced with a very literal one.

After a cool shower, I felt my body temperature sink back to a level that was manageable. As soon as I was able to adjust to a manageable temperature, as soon as my senses calmed, I noticed. There it was, the itch in my soul was being scratched. The windows that I opened due to desperation were transformed into a medium that allowed for a new dimension of sensations. There was a symphony outside my window. Cicadas, crickets, roosters, and other creatures of the forest. Each of them played their part, like a well-performed jazz band.

This is when I realized what this island was, a beautiful imperfection. The way that nature forces itself through anthropomorphism, the way the two forces interact on this island. On an island, all of the causes and effects between nature and the man-made world are more prominent. The sargassum that floods the shores directly impacts tourism. A tropical storm can shutter a business overnight. Something that did happen to a grill shack that my Reach Alliance team frequented during our field research trip in 2023. It's more than just the increased biodiversity caused by a tropical climate that creates this symphony.

Driving through Bridgetown, the capital, you can see the remnants of the colonial past with buildings that look like they came straight out of a swashbuckling tale. You see the small wooden homes that pepper the small winding streets. I later learned these homes were based on Chattel Houses, built by freed slaves since they could not own the land, they created homes that were easy to transport to another piece of land.

The consistent inconsistencies were interwoven into the inherent fabric of this island. All things I saw, but never truly *noticed* until that moment alone in my toasty apartment. It was at that moment that I felt the grip of the Time-Gods slacken. I let out the breath that I had been holding for a very long time and breathed in a new one.

Instead of being stressed by unpredictability, I was comforted by it. Like the waves that crashed along the shores, the spontaneity of my time in Barbados soothed me.

While I still have the pressures of academic deadlines, applications, and finances that loom. I now understand the mentality that is prevalent in Barbados. With the "we'll see how it develops" attitude that I encountered, I was able to better understand the context of the island. Trying to force the idealistic standards onto any situation, is like

trying to fit into jeans that you know are too small for you. If it's a fight between your ideals and nature. Nature always wins. If not now, then eventually.

The attitude of adaptability, resilience and patience were cultural traits that I observed through my experience abroad. I hope to continue to adopt these qualities of the island in order to understand more about Bajan culture, my LIA project, and myself.

## **Chapter Two: Entering the Battlefield**

Unbeknownst to me, I was entering into a battlefield. Quiet whispers, under-the-table conversations, and stratagems to keep the enemy at bay. The enemy being hyper-sweet and hyper-salty foods, their agent being junk food industry giants, and my side being the doctors, the health advocates and the not-for-profits that fight for a better tomorrow for the health of their children. Who would have thought that a simple can of cola could cause such a conundrum on an island with a population the size of my suburban hometown in the greater Toronto area?

Once I realized that children were suckling down sickly sweet concoctions multiple times a day, I understood the cause for concern. Once you see it, you really can't un-see it. Everywhere I turned, I spotted a child no taller than my waist with a sugary drink in hand. Every kid had their favourite colour (because let's be honest, those "fruit-flavoured" sodas are as closely related to a natural fruit as a polar bear is to the Caribbean sea) and would debate about which sugary drink reigned supreme in their eyes. When the debate wasn't about their sweet bubble delight, it was about which Caribbean island had the best fried chicken franchise.

Now, I love a good fried chicken, and you can often find me sipping on a soda or another sugar-sweetened beverage when I'm at the movies. There isn't anything wrong with having some junk food every once in a while. Except we're not talking about every once in a while. That every-once-in-a-while has passed the torch to the daily a very long time ago.

I truly experienced the importance of health advocacy when a major junk food franchise in Barbados made its way back into the schools, promoting its ice cream brand. Mind you, this was after the ban on all unhealthy snacks through the school nutrition policy. The Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition, spearheaded by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados, worked diligently over the years to get the policy into action. To see a major food company bring themselves into the schools whilst knowing about the ban, was a setback for the health movement. This moment of my trip allowed me to understand the importance of my contribution to advocacy and education efforts. Ongoing advocacy that leads to policy will also lead to regulation.

Every child that learns about the negative effects of a high sugary, salty, fatty and processed diet, will be able to make wiser decisions, one step closer to reducing the burden of non-communicable diseases on the country. This moment allowed me to understand the importance of having a purpose in order to combat setbacks that often occur when trying to dismantle powerful stakeholders.

### **Chapter three: Experiencing negativity**

This wouldn't be an honest reflection if I didn't include some of the negative experiences from my trip. During my first week, my friend and I decided to take a lunch break at the beach, a pleasure that I have only experienced in Barbados since all of their beaches are accessible to the public. After devouring a pizza and watching the seagulls fight over the crumbs, we lay there peacefully watching the waves gently lap on the sand. We didn't take a dip that day because of the mounds of sargassum, a type of seaweed, that engulfed the shore.

Little did we know that day would be coloured by a more negative experience. In the distance, a man walked up to different persons on the beach, trying to sell various items he had with him. Many of the different parties politely declined, or flat-out ignored him. We noticed that we were the next on his path, and my friend and I shared a knowing glance. *It's time to leave.*

As we packed up our picnic, the man approached us and asked us if we were interested in purchasing one of his trinkets. Politely, but firmly, we declined his offer. The man quickly changed his demeanour into one that was aggressive and disgusted at us. Though his Bajan accent was thick, I easily understood the insults, threats, and vulgarities he hurled at us. We continued to pack our things as his tirade continued. He staggered away but made sure to include hateful comments as he went. We quickly walked straight to the hotel that was aside of the beach to report the man to security. The hotel staff and security were quick to assist us and kindly escorted us back to where we were staying. They were saddened to hear of our experience and explained how that was not representative of all Barbadians.

In my mind, I knew this experience was more than a simple random event. We were the only Black people on the beach that day, and we were the only ones harassed by the Black man. I understood that the reason that we were harassed was because we were Black, and he made that quite clear when he stated that we should "give back to the poorer black people". This man would never have acted this way with the white beach patrons, so why did he feel it necessary to do so to us? While it was shocking to experience blatant racism by a black person in a predominantly black country, I understood that the effects of colonialism still impact many.

While this experience coloured my trip early on, it is safe to say that it did not affect the rest of my time in Barbados. The rest of my trip would be filled with positive experiences with locals. One of my favourite moments was noticing that the students from the first school I visited for a workshop were all black. It put a smile on my face, seeing all of these black students together, with protective hairstyles and haircuts, of all different complexions in one room. It made me reflect on my own upbringing, to think about the countless times I was the only black person in the class, if not the entire school. The moments where I had to explain to my friends why my hair was kinky curly, why my lunches were different, why my accent was foreign. It made me pleased to know that there are places where black children don't have to feel out of place and can gain an education without the upfront concern of race.

I also observed that in all of my meetings with health experts, politicians, and civil society leaders, everyone was Black. It was empowering to be a part of that environment. Being able to witness how persons of colour are able to be in positions of power, scholars, and advocates was inspiring. While it may have been just another day for them, it was a novel experience for me. On my return to Canada, I hope to use this inspiration to embrace ambition for bigger opportunities that can impact my local community.

### **Final Thoughts:**

Having the unique opportunity to work on an immersive project alongside a driven not-for-profit organization in another country was one of my most memorable adventures in university. Over the span of six weeks, I was able to experience countless trials and victories. I can confidently say that the Laidlaw scholar program was able to facilitate my development into a culturally competent leader through my experience abroad. Entering my final year of university, I hope to apply the lessons that I learned over my summer to my academics, my social life, and my future

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