



UCL

Reflecting on my International Experience as a Laidlaw Scholar

Aishani Sinha

Introduction

If someone had told me when I first joined UCL that I would travel to the United States not once, but twice in the same year, I would have never believed them. Yet the opportunities opened through the Laidlaw Scholarship turned a distant dream into a reality, and for that I am immensely grateful. My international journey first took me to New York City for the Annual North American Laidlaw Scholars Conference in November 2024, and in the following summer to Chicago to complete my Leadership in Action project with the non-profit organisation, Urban Rivers. Both experiences challenged, inspired, and helped me grow in ways I never expected.

New York: North American Laidlaw Scholars Conference

When I received the email informing me that my name had been drawn from the hat to represent UCL at the North American Laidlaw Scholars conference in New York, I was beyond elated. Having attended the European conference in Leeds just weeks prior, I knew I could look forward to insightful discussions, inspiring ideas, and exceptional company.

After a nine-hour flight, I finally arrived in a city I had always dreamt of visiting, even if I did manage to get lost within moments of getting off the subway from the airport. Travelling across the pond completely on my own was unlike anything I had ever done before. Even when I first moved out for university, I had the comfort of knowing home was just a train ride away, but this time it was different. Though a little nervous at first, my worries quickly subsided when I unexpectedly bumped into another scholar on my way to the hotel – who, as it turned out, was on the advisory board for the Laidlaw Foundation. Not long after, I was warmly welcomed by scholars from Tufts University, with whom I would stay with during my time in New York. Much like our own cohort at UCL, they were an incredibly inclusive group, and from the very beginning, they made me feel a part of their community.

The days that ensued were nothing short of exceptional. I immersed myself in enriching conversations with scholars from across the globe, particularly during the Poster Symposium, which, like in Leeds, gave me the opportunity to hear about the research others had worked hard on during the summer. It was powerful hearing people speak with such passion about their projects, and I was amazed by the diversity of subjects – there was something for everyone. The Gala dinner that followed was another highlight, and not just because of the food. My table brought together people from different backgrounds, yet conversations flowed effortlessly.



Laidlaw Scholars Conference in New York

Beyond the conference, I had the opportunity to explore the city, both independently and alongside other scholars. From seeing the Statue of Liberty on a ferry to Staten Island to roaming Times Square at night after the Gala, I tried to embrace every chance I had to immerse myself in this new environment I was so fortunate to be in. Even the less glamorous moments, like hauling my suitcase around stations or taking the occasional wrong turn, became opportunities to grow more resilient and adaptable.

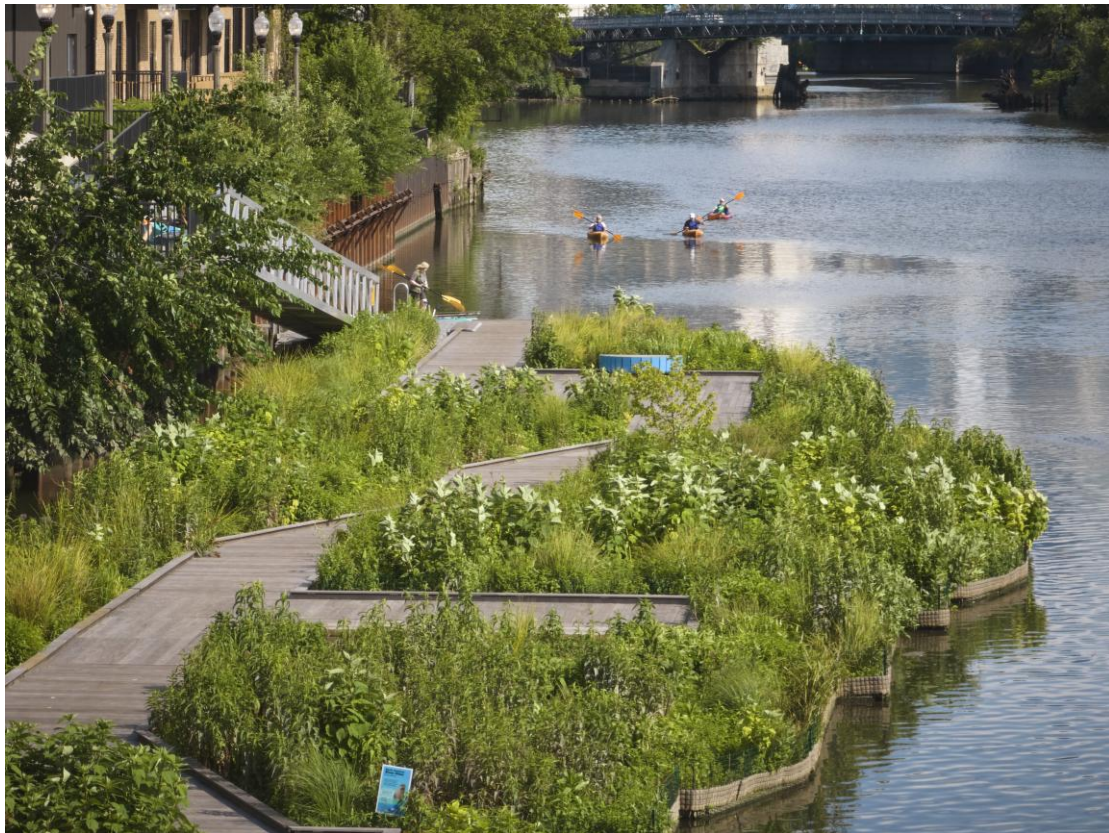
My experience at the New York Conference taught me a lot about leadership. Beyond the four walls of the conference halls at Columbia University, where I engaged in sessions directly focused on leadership, I appreciated the opportunities to apply these lessons in practice, through stepping out of my comfort zone and trying new things. Whether navigating a vast city alone, forming connections with strangers, or adapting to unexpected challenges, I discovered that leadership grows out of adaptability, confidence, and an openness to embracing the unknown.

Chicago: Leadership in Action with Urban Rivers

Little did I know during my trip to New York was that I would soon be returning to the United States for my Leadership in Action project at Urban Rivers – a non-profit organisation in Chicago dedicated to transforming formerly industrialised waterways into wildlife sanctuaries and vibrant community spaces. I first learned about their work through a fellow Laidlaw Scholar who had completed their project at Urban Rivers the previous year, and I was immediately drawn to joining an organisation with such an impactful mission

at its core. With immense gratitude to Urban Rivers for welcoming me so warmly, I found myself on a flight to Chicago in June just weeks after my exams, ready to embark on an exciting six-week challenge.

I spent most of my time at the Wild Mile, Urban Rivers' flagship project that is also the world's first floating eco-park of its kind. Conveniently situated next to the main office, the Wild Mile is home to hundreds of native species, from Blue Vervain to Beavers, and serves as a place where the community can connect with nature and each other. Urban Rivers also manages other sites around the city, namely River Park on the North Branch, and Bubbly Creek on the South Branch, both just a pontoon boat ride away and each with its own unique character and community.



The Wild Mile

At the heart of Urban Rivers' work is its dedicated community of volunteers, known as River Rangers, who support everything from gardening on the floating islands to kayaking clean-ups and running educational outreach for local schools. During my time there, I primarily worked within the research department alongside staff, interns, and River Rangers, though thanks to the generosity of the team, I was able to try a bit of everything. For more details on my activities, please see my poster linked at the bottom of this article [1].

Whilst I would love to go into the details of the exciting activities I was involved in, I would like to take the time here to reflect on what stood out to me the most at Urban Rivers: the overwhelming sense of community. From my very first day, I felt incredibly welcome. The homely office, the unfailingly

kind staff, and the supportive interns created a space where I immediately felt at ease and part of the team.

The way that Urban Rivers interweaves community spirit with purpose-driven stewardship was inspiring to see. At Bubbly Creek, for example, the community turnout was so strong that work planned for several hours was completed in what felt like under an hour. The kayaking clean-ups especially struck me as a novel way of combining fun with meaningful action at no cost, an idea I wish existed closer to home.

One of my personal highlights was helping at Urban Rivers' largest event of the year – the annual Block Party right next to Wild Mile. A quintessential part of Chicagoan culture, it drew a record turnout of over 1000 people from across the city. The day started early, with bagels for breakfast with the team, followed by placing barricades to shut off the road by the Wild Mile, preparing coolers, and propping up tables for local conservation-focused organisations to engage with the community. For staff, interns and volunteers, it was an incredibly exciting and rewarding day.

What stood out to me the most was how seamlessly we all worked together, stepping into different roles and supporting one another through the rush and intense heat. I later learned it was the first Block Party in years to enjoy a rain-free forecast, which made the occasion even more special. I really enjoyed carrying that collective spirit into our team meeting afterwards, where we reflected on our successes and discussed potential improvements. To me, it was leadership at its purest, combining collaboration, inclusivity, and a deep grounding in community.



Team photo after the Block Party

As I reflect on my time at Urban Rivers, I realise that what it taught me most is that leadership is, at its core, built on community and kindness. I saw this in the River Rangers who gave up their weekends to care for their city's rivers and in the interns and staff who so generously welcomed me in. I even felt it in the simple, everyday moments, like an intern taking me to Trader Joe's for the first time or sitting outside with my accommodation neighbors to watch a rainbow over the skyline. My perspective has broadened in countless ways, and I could not be more grateful for all that I have learned.

Much like in New York, I also had plenty of opportunities to explore the city and experience American culture. From catching a 4th of July fireworks display by the roadside, to trying the famous Portillo's cake-shake, and visiting the Bean more times than I'd care to admit, I tried to embrace every chance to immerse myself in this wonderful opportunity.

Even now, as the wonderful people at Urban Rivers have so kindly reminded me, I will always have a place to return to in Chicago, and for that, I could not be more thankful.



View from my accommodation

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Urban Rivers for the incredible time I had, and for everything I learned during my stay. I am also grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation for giving me such a meaningful way to conclude my time as a scholar, and to Christopher Cullen for his support, guidance and encouragement throughout my journey. I feel very fortunate to have had these opportunities, and I know that they have shaped me in ways I will carry forward throughout my life.

[1] <https://laidlawscholars.network/documents/reflecting-on-my-lia-at-urban-rivers-in-chicago>