

Unlocking Opportunity: Reflections on Leadership in Action

When I began my Leadership in Action project, I knew the challenge would be significant. I set out to examine how investment tools could expand eldercare access in a small rural town in Georgia, a community with growing needs and very few resources to meet them. What I did not fully anticipate was just how difficult it would be to carry out meaningful analysis in only six weeks. My original hope of underwriting a business quickly ran into the reality that private enterprises do not readily open their books, and that the data I needed simply was not available.

The first weeks were about grounding myself in the community. I used data tools to build a profile of the town and saw clearly how poverty, limited infrastructure, and an aging population were pressing on local systems. Visiting in person brought those statistics to life. My stepdad is from Lincolnton, so I carried a personal connection as I walked the streets, observed the pace of daily life, and noticed how few facilities exist to support older residents. That visit reminded me that behind every number is a story, and behind every story are people navigating difficult realities with resilience.

As I moved into the middle weeks, I tried to pull the pieces together into working drafts and memos. This was harder than I expected. I learned that synthesizing partial information is both an art and a test of patience. I often felt like I was failing because I could not produce the complete picture I had envisioned. Yet I discovered that leadership is not about perfection. It is

about structuring what you do have, naming the gaps honestly, and offering a framework that can guide future work. Even a partial draft can create momentum and shape the questions that matter.

The most difficult part came when I attempted financial modeling. Without access to company information, the models could only be illustrative. It was frustrating to build frameworks that were thin and incomplete, but that process taught me an important lesson. Leadership requires honesty about what is missing. Pretending to deliver certainty where none exists is not true leadership. Instead, I chose to write memos that spelled out the barriers: the lack of disclosure, the absence of reliable financial records, and the constraints of working in a resource limited environment. Admitting that reality felt more valuable than dressing up estimates as facts.

By the final week, it was clear that I would not be pitching this project. There was no polished product to present. What I did have was a set of reflections, a collection of drafts, and a deeper understanding of both the challenge and myself. At first this felt like failure. Over time, I came to see it as growth. I learned that resilience means continuing to work even when the results are incomplete. I learned that patience and persistence matter more than quick wins. Most importantly, I learned that leadership without authority depends on clarity, presence, and respect for boundaries.

The Laidlaw values shaped this journey in ways I did not anticipate. Curiosity kept me digging through data when the answers were not obvious. Courage carried me into community conversations where I had little prior standing. Determination pushed me to write when I felt stuck. Integrity reminded me to be transparent about the limits of my work. And ambition pushed me to take on a project that was never going to be easy.

This experience has reminded me that growth and failure are not opposites. They are often intertwined. I leave this project without a final model or a pitch deck, but with a stronger sense of how to lead within constraints and how to stay grounded when outcomes are uncertain. That lesson is more lasting than any spreadsheet.

I am grateful to the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation, to my advisor Colleen Dougherty, to Lafayette Square for providing access to Potomac (place-based investment tool), and to the Georgetown Laidlaw Scholars Programme for supporting this work. This was not the ending I expected, but it is the one I needed, and it has left me better prepared to face challenges with honesty, patience, and resilience.