



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme **End-of-Programme Reflection**

Reflections on Two Years as a Laidlaw Scholar

Viktoria Springer

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Introduction

When I applied to the Laidlaw Scholars Programme, I thought I was applying for a generously funded research opportunity. I didn't yet understand that I was applying for 18 months that would restructure how I think about and approach leadership, resilience, and what I actually want to do with my life and vocation to science.

Summer 1: Experiences Unanticipated

My first Laidlaw summer was a complete immersion in neuroimmunology. I spent it conducting my research at Krembil Brain Institute studying peripheral immune dysregulation in Parkinson's disease, analyzing transcriptomic data from human blood samples, and then validating the observations and trends in our preclinical mouse model through immunofluorescence staining of gut and spleen tissue. It was technical, exacting work dealing with unpredictable data, rigorous lab protocols, and results that didn't always tell a clear story. The six week time frame for this intensive project only amplified these hurdles, as I endeavoured to make my research as impactful and meaningful as possible in only a month and a half.

What I didn't expect was that I'd be doing that work while cycling through hospital visits for my own health, and while grieving the sudden loss of my best friend partway through the research period. I remember feeling frustrated with myself on the days I physically couldn't be in the lab, as though my inconsistent physical attendance made me less of a scientist, or less committed to the project. It took me most of the summer to understand that the opposite was true. I grappled with learning to plan around what I couldn't control, to make the most of the days I did have in the lab, and to extend myself the same grace I'd extend to anyone else going through something invisible, even though I hold myself to a high standard. I learned to break enormous open-ended research questions into small, achievable daily wins, and that ultimately led to tangible progress in my project milestones throughout the summer and beyond, even when the bigger picture of the research still felt unclear.

That project became something I am still so proud of. Presenting it at the North America Laidlaw Annual Conference at Brown University remains one of the most memorable moments of the entire programme for me, not just for the audience or the presentation of the poster, but because it eventually led to the DOI and citation for my work through Taylor & Francis' F1000 research portal. I wrote, at the time, that my Nonno still asks me if I've found a cure for his Parkinson's yet. I hadn't; but I had in a small capacity contributed to the understanding of PD, and I will forever be grateful to the programme for allowing me the space and resources to achieve that. The whole experience has shifted my perspective, because even contributing to the slow work of understanding disease mechanisms has stayed with me as a more sustainable way to think about research impact in my future endeavours.

Summer 2: I'm In Policy Now?

My second summer harnessed the discipline I'd built in the lab, and asked me to apply it in a space I had no formal training in at all. At the European Brain Council (EBC) in Brussels, I conceived, designed, and led the HEREDITARY Advocacy Workshop, which was an international event bridging researchers, EU policymakers, industry, and patients around brain

health advocacy. I had six weeks to craft this entire event from scratch, and the lack of a policy background was one of the biggest challenges when entering this project, but this was intentional. Growth is not fostered in comfort.

What carried me through the experience, both living alone abroad and managing this project, were some of the skills I developed the summer before. Break the daunting and overwhelming tasks into daily, achievable action items, stay composed when plans change last minute, and lead yourself first, so you have something left to offer a team. I witnessed a room of influential people – researchers, policymakers, and patient advocates - move from stated positions in neuroethical dilemmas to comprehensive and nuanced understanding, because the structure I built within the workshop had cultivated a space to do so. This leadership wouldn't have been conceivable for me without a summer of learning, sometimes through trial and error, that leadership starts with how you treat yourself under pressure.

The People I Wouldn't Have Met Otherwise

If I'm being completely transparent about my experience, the Oxford Character Project itself didn't fully resonate with me the way it seems to for some scholars; the framework wasn't quite my language. It did, however, give me a reflective space full of scholars from completely different disciplines and countries, which is not something I normally get exposed to. The closeness that came out of those discussions is hard to manufacture, and the programme managed to create an opportunity for us to do so monthly. My closest friends now are people I met through Laidlaw. I think these personal connections are one of the most valuable things Laidlaw has given me, and not something I expected going in.

What I've Actually Become

I don't think I became a different person through this programme. However, I did become a natural leader and I became more empowered in the spaces I entered and in what I can offer any initiative I seek out. The research training and experiences from both summers, anywhere from communicating to lay and scientific audiences to holding myself accountable without oversight, turned out to be the experiential leadership training I didn't recognize as such until I needed it in Brussels. I'm not sure I'd call myself a fully 'wise thinker' yet. But I have a fluency in global systems, in translating expertise across radically different disciplines and audiences, and in staying functional when initial structures collapse, which I can confidently say most people my age haven't had the chance to build yet.

What's Next

My plan is to PhD after I graduate with my BSc, and I'm not yet certain in what discipline, but I am certain I want to do it outside North America. This programme opened doors I didn't know existed and helped me explore where I still have room to grow and work to do. My summer at EBC was beyond rewarding, but it also left me with unfinished business. I want to keep building toward global impact before I come back to North America to apply whatever I've learned to research and innovation at home. The throughline across both summers has been an enduring commitment to advocacy for the things I actually care about, and a willingness to use

whatever tools I am given to get there. Eventually, I hope to also help the next scholar coming up behind me to do the same.

If a younger version of me asked whether this programme was worth it, I'd tell her yes, without hesitation. Although the research, publication, and workshop was a humongous part of it, I believe my answer stems from the influential rooms I was placed in and the connections I made both professionally and personally within the programme's generous support.