



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Experience Abroad Reflection

Eat, Pray, Love: Impact Turned Inwards

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LiA Supervisor: Prof. Sabina Nuti

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To be a citizen of the world is to exist as you are, passively interacting with the people, places, and things around you, drifting along with the many other citizens of the world. But to be a global citizen requires you to step beyond your flow and actively engage with your surroundings in the hopes of changing them for the better.

My Laidlaw experience cemented this notion for me, reframing what it means to be a changemaker in the global, macro context. In my path as an aspiring physician-policymaker, it can be hard to separate knowledge from understanding. While knowledge is studying global health from a classroom/research setting, understanding is entering another healthcare system and experiencing its context firsthand. The marriage of these two, however, is the secret to true, productive impact for those who need it most.

Summer I of my time in Laidlaw consisted of an independent study, titled “Analyzing the Effect of Healthcare System Type and Socioeconomic Status on Healthcare Access and Results During COVID-19: A Cross-Country Review.” In this analysis, I had the opportunity to explore three prevalent healthcare system typologies through specific observation of socioeconomic status in the United States, Canada, and Switzerland in the context of COVID-19. This initial explorative project laid the groundwork for the Leadership-in-Action (LiA) that framed Summer II, working in Pisa, Italy. I spent six weeks working with Proximity Care, a group that operationalizes access to care in rural settings, engaging constituents, physicians, community health teams, and municipal leaders to collaborate on screenings, networks, and technological innovations.

The bridge between these two initiatives, however, was the Laidlaw Scholars Annual Student Conference, the pinnacle of interdisciplinary engagement within the entire program. Different backgrounds led to different questions, different disciplines to different definitions of

impact, and listening to these perspectives challenged my assumptions. Opening my view up to such differences assured me that the next generation of global leaders is more than ready to step up to the plate as culturally competent, humble, and passionate individuals.

From the very beginning of my Laidlaw journey, I aimed to take on a comparative perspective, recognizing that healthcare systems differed across countries. Between the U.S., Canada, and Switzerland, equity and policy measures differed, and such differences manifested themselves in how socioeconomic disparities impacted COVID-19 care. But I could only go so far with this primarily academic understanding of global health—I had not yet fully appreciated how deeply those differences are shaped by culture, institutions, geography, and lived experience.

The opportunity to present my research findings at the Laidlaw Scholars Annual Student Conference at Brown University was a step towards understanding these differences. Hearing other students' presentations and their questions about my own illuminated points of exploration within and surrounding my own work, which only made me more curious and eager to uncover such pressing public health challenges. Each inquiry came from a unique line of thinking, inspiring me to engage with multiple perspectives in a transdisciplinary space. While everyone had different interests and scopes of work, there was an underlying thread of sustainability and forward-thinking; how can we leave the world better than we found it?

These questions were employed as soon as I arrived in Pisa for my LiA, beginning my transition from intellectual globalism to lived global experience. I entered a completely foreign healthcare system that I had an outsider understanding of and was admittedly daunted by the fact that I was aiming to resolve broader health issues with this limited background. I encountered regional governance, rural barriers to access, and local community engagement that manifested

itself in vastly different capacities compared to North America. And I quickly realized that the same broad problem—healthcare access—looks completely different depending on context, and that my North American “bubble” needed to be popped. The opportunity to step inside another system and see how the structures I observed in Summer I translated into practice is an opportunity I will never forget.

My overarching experience enabled my transformation from cultural competence to cultural humility. I realized it is inadequate, as a future leader, to simply “know about” another country’s healthcare system culture, or to prepare myself in fear of making errors in judgement. Rather, cultural humility, and recognizing the limits of my own framework, requires listening, adapting, and allowing local perspectives to change my ways of thinking. One of the most memorable encounters that exemplifies this was during my LiA with a teacher from Barga, a region in rural Tuscany. We shared dinner together, and although our communication was limited, we were still able to exchange gestures, laughter, and a few shared words. It was these interactions, with citizens, patients, coworkers, and the people I met that instilled in me the value of cultural sensitivity.

The takeaway that I truly think about every day since I’ve been back from my LiA, is how marvelous it was to live somewhere completely foreign for six weeks. Not a stop on a trip, not a monument—my place of residence. I figured out the fastest way to walk to work in the mornings, what time to stop at my local coffee shop for uno cappuccino con latte de avena, what snacks to buy at my local supermarket on the weekends, and even found a lovely hair stylist (shoutout Julinda!). The more dinners I had with peers in classes, or long drives with coworkers to rural villages, I slowly went from a complete outsider to more of a community member; I was a fish out of water, for sure, but maybe I just had to get used to the Mediterranean Sea after years

in the Atlantic. I had my fair share of miscommunications and wrong product purchases, sure, but I embraced them as part of the learning process. Most of the time, I felt incredibly self-conscious about speaking Italian, whether it be my subpar accent or limited vocabulary. But the effort, the willingness to try, and desire to soak up every aspect of Italian culture that I could, superseded any embarrassment I felt. And, by the end of my trip, I started getting the hang of it (and am even taking an Italian course next year!). Today, there is a hole in my heart where Pisa lives, my appreciation for Italy overflowing and simply begs for more time with the beautiful people I met in the most beautiful country in the world.

My Laidlaw Experience was, honestly, perfect. My research asked how structural differences affect health equity, and my time in Pisa allowed me to explore how we design interventions within such structures. I was able to create a flowing narrative that took my questions and made them realizable, allowing me to understand that global health isn't simply about finding the best healthcare model. It's about applying these concepts to investigate specific placements: what works here, for whom, under what institutional conditions, who gets to define success, and how intervention can be adapted without losing its purpose. With Summer I blending analytical rigor and comparative thinking, the annual conference promoting intellectual diversity and the global scholarly community, and Summer II cementing cultural humility, contextual understanding, and lived experience, my calling at the intersection of medicine, public health, and policy is as clear as ever. I am even more inspired to solve problems where solutions must cross institutional, disciplinary, and geographic boundaries.

This drive to resolve such problems was present in myself before I even became a Laidlaw scholar. In fact, I even wrote in my initial Laidlaw application, "my intellectual curiosity has always been boundless," and that sentence continues to ring true. The key to my

growth within this program, this expansion of an already unbounded curiosity, is defining curiosity as not just wanting to know more, but comfortably saying “I don’t know” and actively seeking perspectives that challenge me. Being in rooms where I am not the expert is still daunting, but much of that fear transformed into resolve and a strength, not a weakness.

That strength was also amplified by enriching myself not only in a diverse network of cultures, social structures, and populations, but through small, everyday interactions. I will never forget the people I spoke to, the places I saw, the errands I ran, the routines I established—all so meaningful within a short period of time. Any cultural assumptions I had were quickly thrown out the window when I realized how wonderful it felt to just live in the present, within the community rather than resisting it. Ultimately the cultural competencies I most set out to strengthen throughout my time in this program (self-knowledge and awareness and social and cultural intelligence and awareness) were the ones I relied the most on.

When I began Laidlaw, I thought being globally minded meant understanding how different countries approached the same problems. I conclude my tenure in the 2025 cohort understanding that global leadership requires something more difficult: being willing to question whether my own understanding of the problem is complete in the first place. My research taught me to compare systems; the Laidlaw community taught me to value perspectives beyond my own; and my experience in Pisa taught me to listen to those perspectives in practice. Together, these experiences have made me more curious, more adaptable, and more conscious of the responsibility of trying to create change in communities and systems that are not my own.

To my peers, coworkers, supervisors, family (by some convoluted thread), hosts, and now friends, you made my experience abroad *that* much better. My journey in Italy is only just beginning. Grazie di tutto, Pisa. Non è un addio, ma un arrivederci.