

I began my Leadership in Action experience thinking I understood what it meant to do useful research. By that point, I had spent a lot of time doing academic research, and I was comfortable with datasets, empirical questions, literature reviews, regressions, and the process of trying to build an argument that could survive scrutiny. My first Laidlaw summer had pushed me especially far in that direction. I had studied the Disturbed Areas Act in Gujarat, asking how a law regulating certain property transactions could shape property markets, segregation, and mobility. I liked that kind of work because it gave me structure. There was a question, an empirical strategy, a result, and then an argument about what that result meant. When I started my LiA at CUF, I expected to take those same skills and apply them to urban policy in New York. Instead, the experience changed what I thought research was for. The biggest shift was that I stopped seeing research as a finished product and started seeing it as one part of a much larger process. At a university, the research itself often feels like the center of the work. At CUF, research mattered because of what came after it. Someone had to decide which finding was actually important, explain it clearly, connect it to a broader policy question, organize the meeting where it would be discussed, prepare the background materials, coordinate the people who needed to be there, follow up afterward, and eventually turn all of that into something useful.

That sounds obvious now, but it was not obvious to me at the beginning of the summer. I had spent years training myself to value the intellectual part of a problem. I liked being the person who could figure something out. I was less used to thinking about all the work required to make that knowledge useful. There were days when I was working through housing data or reading reports on neighborhood inequality, but there were also days when the most important thing I could do was organize information properly, update a contact list, prepare a briefing note, follow up with someone, fix a scheduling issue, or make sure the right materials reached the right person before a meeting. At first, I separated these things in my mind. There was the “real” research work, and then there was the logistical work around it. Over time, that distinction started to disappear. I began to understand that execution was not separate from impact. It was what made impact possible.

One of the clearest examples of this came through helping with CUF’s public-facing work. Preparing for a conference or policy discussion involved much more than having an interesting topic. There were speakers to coordinate, backgrounds to research, briefing materials to prepare, schedules to update, outreach to track, and dozens of small details that could easily become problems if no one noticed them early enough. None of these tasks were particularly dramatic on their own, but together they determined whether the final event actually worked. That changed how I thought about leadership. Before this summer, I think I had a fairly visible definition of leadership. I thought about the person presenting, making the final decision, leading the meeting, or being responsible for the big idea. At CUF, I started noticing another kind of leadership. It was the person who anticipated that something would become a problem before it did, the person who followed up without being asked, the person who made sure everyone else had what they needed, and the person who could take ten different moving pieces and quietly

make them work together. That kind of leadership is less visible, but I became convinced that it is just as important.

I also realized how much I still had to learn about working on a team. In academic research, I could often control my own workflow. If I wanted to spend several hours going down one analytical rabbit hole, I could. In a small organization, my work existed inside everyone else's work. A delay from me could delay someone else. A poorly organized note could make another person's job harder. A vague update could create unnecessary back-and-forth. I became much more conscious of what it meant to be reliable. That meant keeping track of details, communicating when something changed, and learning when to ask a question versus when to figure something out independently. It also meant recognizing that doing something well was not always the same as doing it perfectly. I have a tendency to want to understand everything before I move forward, and in research that can be useful. In a fast-moving work environment, it can also become inefficient. There were moments when I had to stop myself from spending another hour making something marginally better when what the team actually needed was a clear, accurate version now. I learned to ask myself a much more practical question: what level of depth does this task actually require? Some work needed careful analysis and multiple rounds of checking. Other work needed a five-sentence summary that someone could read in two minutes. Some questions needed more research. Others needed a decision. Learning to distinguish between those situations made me much more efficient, but it also made me a better communicator.

I became especially interested in the idea of translation. A lot of policy work is translation between different forms of knowledge. A dataset has to become a finding, a finding has to become an argument, an argument has to become a recommendation, and a recommendation has to make sense to someone who may not have spent weeks thinking about the underlying evidence. Each step creates the possibility of losing something. If you simplify too aggressively, you can make the evidence sound stronger than it is. If you include every caveat, you can make the conclusion impossible to use. If you focus only on quantitative evidence, you can miss context that changes the interpretation entirely. That tension came up repeatedly in my own work. I entered the summer very comfortable with quantitative evidence. Numbers felt reassuring because they created the appearance of precision. If one neighborhood had a higher rent burden than another, or if one group had a lower homeownership rate, there was something concrete to compare. But over time, I became more careful about treating a statistic as an explanation. A number could tell me that two neighborhoods were different. It could not always tell me why. Community reports, practitioner perspectives, institutional histories, and the details of how a policy actually operated often changed how I interpreted the same data.

This pushed me to rethink my earlier research in Gujarat as well. When I first studied the Disturbed Areas Act, I was fascinated by the ability to estimate an effect. If I could show that notification under the law was associated with changes in property markets, that felt meaningful, and it still does. But my LiA made me ask the next layer of questions more seriously. What did a change in a property price actually mean for the person trying to sell? What did restrictions around a transaction mean for someone trying to move? How did those effects interact with wealth, access to jobs, social networks, or the ability to live in a neighborhood of one's

choosing? The law was not simply changing a market outcome. It was operating inside people's lives. Thinking about New York made that much more obvious to me. Housing initially sounded like one policy category among many, but over the summer, I started seeing how difficult it was to separate it from almost anything else. Where someone lives shapes how long it takes to get to work, which schools are nearby, how much income is left after rent, whether someone can build wealth through homeownership, and whether a family can stay connected to the same community over time. Once I started thinking that way, my original question about housing and segregation became a much larger question about access to opportunity.

That was probably the biggest intellectual change of the summer. My first instinct had been to compare Gujarat and New York directly. Eventually, I became much less interested in whether the two places were directly comparable, because they are not. Their political histories, institutions, housing systems, and forms of inequality are very different. Trying to construct a neat one-to-one comparison would have made the project easier to explain, but it also would have flattened the differences that mattered. Instead, I became interested in the questions that could travel between contexts. How do rules governing land and housing shape people's choices? When does a policy that appears neutral have very unequal consequences? How long can earlier institutional decisions remain visible in the geography of a city? And when a city becomes more prosperous, who is actually able to participate in that prosperity? I do not think my LiA gave me definitive answers to those questions. It gave me better ways to ask them.

Another thing I learned this summer was how uncomfortable good research can sometimes be. There were moments when I wanted the evidence to resolve a question cleanly and it did not. Different sources pointed in different directions. A pattern that initially looked straightforward became more complicated after adding context. A recommendation that sounded compelling became much less convincing when I tried to identify who might be excluded from it. Earlier in my research experience, I think I sometimes treated uncertainty as something to eliminate. Now I think part of being a responsible researcher is learning how to describe uncertainty without becoming paralyzed by it. That requires judgment. You have to be able to say: this is what the evidence strongly supports, this is what it suggests but does not prove, this is what we still do not know, and despite those limitations, this is what might still be worth doing. That type of judgment is difficult because it cannot be automated by a regression or resolved by adding another source. It is also where I think leadership and research started to overlap for me. Leadership, at least the kind I observed and practiced during my LiA, was not about pretending to have complete certainty. It was about being able to move responsibly when complete certainty was impossible.

I also became much less interested in whether every contribution could be traced back to me. Some of the work I was proudest of was invisible by design. If information was organized properly, someone else could find it immediately. If a briefing document was clear, another person could walk into a meeting better prepared. If outreach was tracked carefully, someone did not have to waste time figuring out whether a follow-up had already happened. That might sound minor compared with producing an original piece of research, but the experience made me appreciate forms of contribution that I had previously undervalued. Impact does not always look like having your name attached to the final output. Sometimes impact is reducing friction for

everyone around you. I think that realization changed me because I am naturally ambitious, and I do care about producing work that is intellectually interesting. The summer did not change that. What it changed was my understanding of what makes ambitious work actually useful. It requires people who can think deeply, but also people who can execute. It requires people who can work independently, but also people who notice when someone else needs support. It requires having strong opinions, but also being willing to change those opinions when the evidence becomes inconvenient.

By the end of the summer, I felt much more comfortable moving between different levels of a problem and different kinds of work. I could spend part of a day thinking analytically about housing inequality and another part solving a completely logistical problem. Instead of seeing the second task as less important, I started asking how both contributed to the same outcome. That is probably the most concrete way I grew during my LiA. I became more adaptable, more organized, and much better at writing for people who did not have the same context I did. I became more comfortable taking ownership of small problems before they became bigger ones. I also became much less attached to the idea that meaningful work always has to look intellectually impressive from the outside. My first Laidlaw summer taught me that research could reveal how institutions shape people's lives. My Leadership in Action experience taught me that revealing a problem is only the beginning. Evidence has to travel somewhere. Someone has to make it understandable, put it in front of the right people, translate it into a conversation or recommendation, and do the less visible work that allows all of that to happen. I came into CUF wanting to become a better researcher. I left wanting to become someone who could do more than produce a strong analysis. I wanted to become someone who could take a complicated problem, understand it carefully, organize the people and information around it, communicate it clearly, and help move it one step closer to action.