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Leadership in Action Essay: Recognizing *Nuestras Grietas*

Walking across the streets of my hometown, to class in upstate New York, or in Quito's city center, through countless paths, the cracks on the pavement hardly ever cross my mind. They're a symbol of consistency, resilience, challenge, perhaps a visual representation of Earth fighting against concrete, or a reminder. Leadership, for me, lies in creating the conditions under which others can be seen. As a Comparative Literature student pursuing a future in law or public policy, my understanding of leadership has been shaped by ethical responsibility to listen across difference, preserve cultural visibility, and act in the service of communities. My leadership values were significantly clarified through my LiA experience in Ecuador, where language barriers and deeply rooted communal structures challenged my assumptions about productivity and communication. Through this experience, I came to understand leadership as an ethical, reciprocal practice. In this essay I hope to articulate my leadership strengths and personal leadership method, reflect on critical moments from my LiA experience with the Pachaysana Foundation in Ecuador, examine ethical leadership as a guiding framework, analyze the leadership of Angelica Salas of CHIRLA as a case study, and conclude with my vision of myself as a global change leader committed to public service and cultural preservation. Together, these reflections represent not a "developed" identity as a leader, but rather an ongoing commitment to ethical engagement.

My leadership development is grounded in three core strengths: empathy, communication, and adaptability. According to Strengths-Based Leadership, effective leadership emerges when individuals lead from their natural capacities rather than attempting to conform to a singular model of authority. Empathy allows me to approach leadership relationally, prioritizing understanding before action. Communication enables me to facilitate dialogue, particularly in group-based or roundtable settings where shared participation is essential. Adaptability, meanwhile, has become central to my leadership identity, especially when navigating unfamiliar cultural or institutional environments. During my LiA experience, these strengths were both tested and reshaped. Communication, which is one of my strongest leadership tools, became a site of vulnerability when I arrived in Ecuador and was unable to communicate with one of my host mothers, who spoke Quichua. This moment compelled me to confront the limitations of verbal leadership and to recognize listening and observation as equally powerful forms of communication. Adaptability emerged not as a passive trait, but as an active ethical choice: adjusting expectations, releasing control, and allowing leadership to emerge collectively rather than from the individual.

I am most comfortable acting in the capacity of a peer leader, leading alongside others rather than above them. As a conscious ethical choice, peer leadership is rooted in my belief that leadership should resist unnecessary hierarchy and instead foster a mutual reciprocity. In group settings, I tend to gravitate toward roundtable discussions, ensuring that each person has the opportunity to speak and contribute their thoughts. Decision-making, in this sense, becomes a shared process rather than a unilateral act. This approach in leadership is strongly influenced by my cultural upbringing, which emphasized family-oriented responsibility while also encouraging

independence. Navigating these dual influences has shaped my sensitivity to how leadership traits are perceived across cultures. For example, behaviors often rewarded in Western leadership contexts, like as assertiveness or vocal dominance, can be interpreted negatively or even be harmful in other communities. Recognizing this has required ongoing self-reflection and the willingness to unlearn culturally specific assumptions. Ethical leadership provides the framework through which I make sense of these tensions. It prioritizes accountability and relational responsibility to our communities. Rather than asking how to lead effectively, ethical leadership asks who leadership serves and at what cost. This framework has helped me align my leadership actions with my values of public service and cultural preservation.

My LiA experience was a cohort-based program with the Pachaysana Foundation, working closely with the Mushullakta and Pintag communities in Ecuador. The program involved leadership workshops, reflective exercises, and collaborative activities with community members, specifically engagement with the Escuela del Bosque. These experiences were designed not only to serve the community but also to challenge participants to reflect on their positionality, assumptions, and responsibilities. My critical moment dialogue, which profoundly shaped my leadership understanding, came following a reflective exercise centered on the concept of “grietas,” or cracks, spaces where internal conflict, identity tension, or uncertainty emerge. For me, this exercise illuminated how larger social structures shape personal identity, particularly in relation to language, visibility, and power. Being unable to communicate fluently with my host mother initially made me acutely aware of how language access determines who is seen as competent or authoritative. This experience reinforced my commitment to leadership that amplifies marginalized voices rather than assuming “sameness”. Another significant challenge

involved reconciling Western notions of productivity against community-centered life. In Mushullakta, our daily routines, including waking up at three or four in the morning for the community tea ceremony, prioritized relational connection over “efficiency”. Over time, this reshaped my understanding of meaningful work. I came to define meaningful work as an activity that brings people together, prompts reflection, and encourages shared understanding, rather than simply producing measurable outcomes. Living with a host family required constant flexibility, but this experience reaffirmed my belief that people and communities share a mutual responsibility to one another. Relating was one of the leadership skills that I strengthened the most throughout my LiA experience. By recognizing the connections across cultures, such as shared family values and care for the natural world around us, I was able to build close bonds despite linguistic and cultural differences. Flexibility also emerged as a significant outcome of my LiA experience. Adjusting to new routines and cultural norms required an openness to being changed. These internal shifts allowed me to develop more effective communication and collaboration skills.

Angelica Salas, the Executive Director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA) in Los Angeles, exemplifies the ethical, community-centered leadership I aspire to emulate. Through her work, Salas demonstrates how leadership rooted in empathy can produce tangible structural change. Her approach combines advocacy, policy engagement, and grassroots organizing, ensuring that immigrant communities are not only represented but actively involved in shaping outcomes. For me, what distinguishes Salas’s leadership is the tangibility of her actions. She prioritizes hands-on, project-based leadership responding directly to community needs. Her work reflects a deep ethical commitment to dignity, justice, and collective

empowerment. Studying her leadership has reinforced my belief that effective leadership in law or policy must remain grounded in lived experience and community accountability.

As a developing leader, I envision my work aligning closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). These goals resonate with my commitment to public service and cultural visibility, as they emphasize not only institutional reform but also the protection of human dignity and community agency. I aspire to contribute to policy frameworks that recognize cultural differences as a strength rather than an obstacle, particularly for immigrant and marginalized communities. My LiA experience allowed me to take a concrete step toward this vision. It offered me practical engagement and sustained reflection in Ecuador. Challenging me to practice leadership through an ethical framework that requires accountability and long-term commitment. I hope to pursue legal or policy training that allows me to advocate for communities through culturally representative approaches. Holding myself accountable means continuing community-based work, recognizing that ethical leadership depends on collective success rather than individual recognition. My LiA experience in Ecuador compelled me to unlearn assumptions about authority and productivity to confront the vulnerability in cross-cultural engagement. Through empathy and communication, I will continue to develop a leadership identity that is grounded in public service and a collective responsibility.

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