

Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Summer Research Reflection

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From the first time I heard of the Laidlaw Scholars Programme as an incoming first-year, to entering my third year, and final year of the program, I am filled with so much gratitude at the half-way point. When drafting my materials to apply in second year, I had one Google Doc and a dream. This dream was to return to a place I lacked familiarity with but knew that I had a connection to. This place was Albania, a land that featured both vast mountains and valleys, with rivers cutting land in half, and the most serene beaches. Best of all, a beautiful culture built upon hospitality and community solidarity. Looking at Hofstede's IDV Index, we see that Albania's sense of individualism is scored at 0.20. When compared to Canada (where I was born and raised), the nation is scored at 0.80. I realized that this sense of collectivity was tangible even down to the numbers.

What initially drew me into confronting Albanian politics, society, and history through research was not so much asking where I could squeeze in a good inquiry in the vast amount of literature, but where my research inquiry could help fill the gaps in institutions that have been in transition since the fall of a merciless totalitarian regime. I was identifying issues, but not only to bring those issues to light, to potentially find avenues to bring them to a close. For this, I drew on my existing passions: state-building, transitional justice, and the law.

To look for an inquiry, to imagine an improved social condition, forced me to confront the very real reasons why my parents left. Political turbulence, fluctuating state capacity, and authoritatively sanctioned violence from the government against the people. This made me think about what people used as resistance to generations of occupation and general political disorder: customary law, perhaps, the Kanun of Leke Dukagjini. How did the Kanun interact with the state? How did the Kanun *conflict* with the state? How did the practice of the blood-feuds symbolize a survival of Kanuni values?

My first ever independent research project taught me more than I anticipated. It taught me how to navigate unexpected difficulties and spend time celebrating the small wins along the way.

Naturally, after nearly five-decades of authoritative totality, I was confronting a large void of information. As someone who spent a lot of time in the social sciences, finishing up a semester with two research methodology classes under my belt, I became so quantitatively hard-wired – where numbers seemed to be *all* I thought about in thinking about what a rigorous research design might look like. But what if those numbers ceased to exist? Either through epistemicide, or they were impossible to capture with certainty to begin with? When I stared into this void, it only seemed to stare back – as if to challenge my dependency on the enumerative. This data-void marked the first difficulty. Now, my research had to be more inferential while remaining grounded in a historical canon.

The second difficulty was the struggle to find expert interviews, with my inquiry being pretty “niche,” and generally understanding that the blood-feuds may not be the easiest aspect of Albanian culture – whether alive or not – to confront. Many organizations told me that they either did not suit my research inquiry, or they did not respond altogether. I had to pivot my methodology towards using interviews to triangulate, instead of having the interviews be substantiated with document and literature support. A good leader will have the instinct to adapt and change things around even when it initially made sense to do it the original way.

In those difficulties, there were also ‘wins’ happening simultaneously. Keeping yourself grounded in being able to see where you did well alongside where you need to tweak and improve aspects of your research is imperative. My first success was the development of crucial language skills throughout my six weeks in Albania, which aided tremendously in being able to

navigate the archives. Archives are written in all kinds of handwriting, may not be in the best conditions, and were all in Albanian (not to point out the obvious here, but at 8am, for some reason, I'd forgotten when I visited one of the many archives during my trip). A good leader will want to learn to communicate and will develop the skills to attempt to do it competently.

Another win worth commemorating was working with an uncertain schedule. I had arranged a day-by-day schedule to adhere to when I was applying to the program, but when the research period actually started it practically vanished. This is because of uncertainties with interviews and the archive appointments filling up fast. I had to adjust my schedule on a whim to reflect the changes that were out of my control. In doing this, I learned how to manage my time while also practicing how to be flexible in the face of uncertainty. A good leader knows when to pivot and change course so as to spend time as productively as possible.

Even in aspects of research that may seem superficial, the competencies of being flexible, resilient, and willing to learn a different method of communication, makes for good leaders. One practice that I would emphasize, one that I should have improved on, was learning when to ask for help. Being a good leader also means knowing when to offload ones' sense of responsibility, lean into the collective, and hear from their insights. Beyond the lessons I've learned on this trip, I relish the privilege of being able to learn in the first place. Learning is a quintessential aspect of being a leader, as this kind of person must resist growing comfortable in assuming their ways are infallible. The world is constantly changing, and a good leader must learn to move with the everchanging and unforgiving tides.

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