



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Record of Reflection

Chipping Away at It:
Reflections on Research, Leadership, and Returning to Why I Started

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Lesson Learned

When I began my Laidlaw research summer, I knew that it would be challenging. What I did not fully understand was how much the experience would test my discipline, patience, and ability to keep moving even when I did not feel particularly motivated to do so. Throughout the summer, I was balancing my research alongside a full-time internship. There were days when I would finish work already mentally tired, knowing that I still had documents to read, notes to organize, or sections of my research to think through. There were also weekends when research became the thing I knew I needed to do, even when it was the last thing I wanted to do.

Looking back, that difficulty became one of the most important parts of the experience. Before this summer, I often thought about time management as being organized: making schedules, setting deadlines, and knowing what needed to get done. This summer taught me that time management is also about discipline. Sometimes there is no perfect block of time where you feel completely rested, motivated, and ready to work. Sometimes progress is simply opening the document, reading another ten pages, fixing one paragraph, or thinking through one part of the argument. I slowly became comfortable with the idea that I did not need to complete everything at once. I just needed to do slightly better than I had the day before. That became one of the lessons I carried throughout the summer: **chip away at it slowly**.

Hard points

My research examined how Sustainable Development Goal 11, particularly its commitments around housing and sustainable cities, travels through policy and institutions in Toronto and Metro Manila. Conducting this research required me to read and scan through almost 700 pages of government documents, legislation, planning documents, reports, and policy materials. This was not always exciting. In fact, there were many moments when I dreaded it. Research can sometimes be presented through its final product: the polished paper, the presentation, the findings, or the interesting argument. What is less visible are the hours spent reading documents where only a few pages may eventually become directly useful, going back to something you already read because you realize its importance later, or trying to understand how one piece of legislation connects to another policy. The experience made me appreciate that research requires patience with uncertainty. I learned that not every hour of work produces an

immediate result, but that does not mean the hour was wasted. Sometimes you need to understand what does not matter before you can recognize what does.

One of the hardest points of my summer came when I became stuck on the direction of my research. I could see two possible ways of developing the project, and both seemed reasonable. I became so focused on choosing the academically “right” direction that I had difficulty deciding which one actually reflected what I wanted this research to accomplish. During that period, Elena encouraged me to speak with my research supervisor, but she also asked me to think again about why I had chosen this research in the first place. That question brought me back to my parents, my childhood, and my own relationship to housing.

My Why

I was born in Manila before later immigrating to Toronto. Housing was therefore never an entirely abstract policy issue to me. I had seen how where a family lives can shape almost everything around them: access to work, transportation, financial security, stability, opportunity, and a sense of belonging. My interest in housing policy did not begin because I first encountered SDG 11 in an academic article. It began much earlier through the experiences of my family and through questions I did not yet have the language to describe. Returning to that helped me realize what I wanted the research to center: people.

The Sustainable Development Goals begin with an incredibly human ambition. They speak about poverty, dignity, adequate housing, sustainable communities, inequality, and improving people's lives. Yet one of the things my research pushed me to think about is what happens to those commitments as they move through governments and institutions. A global commitment must eventually become legislation, policy, programs, funding decisions, institutional responsibilities, implementation mechanisms, indicators, and reports. Some form of measurement is necessary. Governments need numbers. They need targets and indicators to understand whether progress is being made. But there is also a danger when the people behind those measurements become less visible. A housing target is ultimately about a person having somewhere safe and secure to live. A unit of affordable housing represents a family. A resettlement policy changes where someone lives, how far they travel to work, where their children go to school, and which communities they remain connected to. Numbers allow governments to measure a problem, but they should never replace the people experiencing it.

This became one of the ideas that mattered most to me throughout my research: *policy should always remember who it is for*. That lesson also shaped how I began thinking about leadership.

Research taught me what Leadership is

Laidlaw emphasizes both research and leadership, and at the beginning of the summer I thought about these as somewhat separate parts of the programme. Over time, however, I began seeing how closely connected they are. Leadership is not always standing at the front of a room or being responsible for a team. *A large part of leadership is learning how to lead yourself*. For me, that meant developing the discipline to work when I was tired. It meant recognizing when I was stuck and asking for guidance rather than pretending I had everything figured out. It meant being willing to reconsider decisions when the evidence pointed somewhere different. It also meant remembering the values behind my work instead of becoming so focused on completing the research that I forgot why I had started it. Research taught me humility as well. There were questions that my evidence simply could not answer. There were moments when I had to accept that something was more complicated than I initially thought. Good research required me not to force certainty where there was uncertainty. I began to understand leadership in a similar way. Leadership is not having every answer. Sometimes it is knowing which questions need to be asked, recognizing the limits of your own perspective, and being willing to listen when someone else can help you see the problem differently.

Value in Oranges vs Apples Comparison

The comparative aspect of my research also changed the way I think about knowledge. Toronto and Metro Manila are not traditionally treated as obvious comparisons. Their political institutions, economies, housing systems, governance structures, histories, and urban challenges are different. At first, that difference can appear to be a weakness. It can seem like comparing apples and oranges. But throughout this project, I began to appreciate that sometimes there is value precisely because the cases are different.

An orange does not need to become an apple for comparison to teach us something. Their differences can reveal characteristics that might otherwise remain invisible. Toronto helped me think about how principles related to housing can become embedded in municipal policy even when explicit SDG language becomes less visible. Metro Manila made other relationships more

apparent, including connections between housing, infrastructure, resilience, land, local government, and development. Each case helped me ask different questions of the other. This lesson extends beyond my research. We often compare things because they are similar. I now think there is equal value in asking what we can learn when we intentionally place very different experiences beside each other.

Who I am

Studying Metro Manila also gave me an opportunity to engage with the Philippines in a way I had never done before. I was learning not only about housing policy but also about Philippine institutions, legislation, governance, development, and politics. There was something personally meaningful about conducting research on a place that was both academically distant and personally familiar. I knew the Philippines through family, memory, culture, and lived experience. This summer gave me another way of understanding it as a researcher.

This has made me reflect more seriously on what it means to be a *Filipino-Canadian research scholar*. I do not want my identity to simply appear in the introduction of my work as a statement of positionality and then disappear from the rest of the research. I want it to inform the questions I am willing to ask. My experiences can help me notice things, but they also come with responsibilities. They require me to remain careful about what I assume, whose experiences I represent, and what the evidence actually allows me to claim. I can care deeply about an issue while still approaching it critically.

The Future: LiA and the Life I want to Lead

As I move into my second Laidlaw summer, this is the lesson I most want to carry with me. I began this project because I cared about what policy ultimately means for people. My next step is to move closer to those people. In my second summer, I hope to pursue work that allows me to create a tangible impact within a community. After spending this summer tracing policies through documents and institutions, I want to better understand what those systems look like from the perspective of the people who experience them. I want to move from asking only how commitments travel through institutions toward also asking what those commitments look like when they reach communities or when they fail to reach them at all. I do not yet think my responsibility is to arrive with a solution to someone else's problem. Instead, I want to listen,

work alongside communities, and understand what meaningful contribution actually looks like. The first summer taught me how to research a problem. I hope the second summer teaches me more about how research can participate in responding to one.

More than anything, this summer reminded me why beginning with a clear sense of purpose matters. There will always be tedious parts of research. There will be long documents, difficult questions, competing directions, drafts that do not work, and days when motivation is low. What sustained me was not constantly feeling inspired. It was discipline, support from the people around me, and returning to the reason I started. When I think about this summer now, I do not only see the final research report. I see myself coming home from work and deciding to read a few more pages. I see conversations with my supervisor that changed the way I understood the project. I see ideas that were abandoned and arguments that slowly became clearer. I see hundreds of pages of documents eventually becoming something that I could explain in my own words.

Most importantly, I see a clearer understanding of the kind of researcher and leader I hope to become. I want to continue doing work that remembers people when institutions reduce their experiences to numbers. I want to ask questions that come from both intellectual curiosity and the communities and experiences that shaped me. I want to remain comfortable comparing the things we are told do not naturally belong beside each other. And I want to take greater pride in approaching research as a Filipino-Canadian scholar whose experiences do not prevent rigorous scholarship, but can help shape meaningful questions.

This summer taught me that progress rarely happens all at once. Research did not become clearer in one breakthrough, and I did not suddenly become better at balancing all of my responsibilities. It happened slowly: another document, another conversation, another revision, another day of trying to be slightly better than the one before.

Sometimes that is what growth looks like.

You keep chipping away at it.