

Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Summer Research Reflection

Something Like a Magazine That Only Professors Read

- Adeetya Kakkarr

When I called home to tell my parents that I had been selected for Laidlaw, I had a bad connection and almost none of the right vocabulary, because they do not speak English and the words I needed do not travel well between the language I write in and the language I speak with them. I described research as a very long piece of writing and publishing as something close to a magazine that only professors read, which is wrong in about six different ways and was still the closest I could get with the words available to me. There was a pause on the line while they worked out what I was saying. The part they understood without any help from me was that I was not going to be home that summer.

Neither of them asked what the paper was going to be about, partly because I had not given them the language to ask it with, and partly because the topic was never the thing that mattered to them. What they understood was that something had been offered to me that was never available to them at my age, and that the summer at home was what it cost. They agreed to that cost in about the time it takes to say yes to anything, and I spent the rest of the summer trying to make the work worth it.

The first task Dan gave me was a literature review, and it took me longer than it should have to understand that he wanted an argument about the reading and not a report on it. I came

out of a schooling system where academic writing in the sense this programme means it was never really taught, and where the most valuable skill was returning a correct answer in roughly the shape it had been handed to me. My first draft of that review did what I had been trained to do, which was to move through the work on deinfluencing one study at a time, describe each one accurately, and leave no trace of what I thought about any of it. I remember reading it back and knowing that something was missing from it without being able to name what, and assuming that this was the point at which everyone would work out that I was in the wrong room.

When Dan and I finally sat down to go through the review together, I had prepared myself to be told which parts of it were wrong. He spent most of that meeting asking me what I thought was actually going on in the material, and then leaving enough silence in the conversation that I had to answer him properly. At one point I said something about how the criticism in these campaigns always seemed to land on a product the company could afford to lose, and he treated that half-formed observation as though it were the beginning of a paper, which it turned out to be. He never handed me the argument I was supposed to be making, which was frustrating in June and is the reason there is a paper at all in September. He gave me so much room that for a long stretch I did not know what to do with it, and I kept going back to him looking for an instruction he had no intention of giving. Learning to work inside that much room, and to stop waiting for someone to confirm that my reading was allowed, is the biggest thing I am taking out of this summer. Being trusted earlier than you have earned it turns out to be the condition under which a person earns it, and if I ever supervise anyone I would like to be able to hold my nerve the way he did while somebody I believe in works their way through the room I have made for them.

My mother did eventually ask what the paper was about, months later, and the conversation went well enough that I wrote it down afterwards.

*There is no clean word for this
in the language I use with my mother.
I say writing, and she pictures a notebook.
I say published, and she pictures a newspaper.
I say the work is about advertising
and she says yes, they are all liars,
which is closer to my argument
than anything I managed in the abstract.*

Recruiting participants taught me more about asking for things than anything else I did this summer. My first round of outreach to marketing professionals produced almost nothing, and the longer the silence went on the more I edited the request down, until I was writing emails so apologetic that they barely asked for anything at all. At some point I stopped writing to the people I assumed would be willing to talk to an undergraduate and started writing directly to country leads of marketing, on the reasoning that the worst thing they could do was the same silence I was already getting. That is where the summer opened up, because one of those emails became an interview with a North American marketing lead at a major brand, and the material from that conversation took the project somewhere I had not planned for and could not have reached by being polite in a more appropriate inbox.

The interviews also came with an obligation that lasted well past the recording. People told me things about their employers and their clients on the understanding that I would handle it carefully, and a real portion of my remaining time went into pseudonyms, into decisions about what stayed out of the paper entirely, and into a long back and forth with my supervisor about the places where anonymity could fail. The leadership I actually practised this summer looked much more like keeping that promise after the interesting part was finished than like directing anyone.

Laidlaw has also changed what I am doing with the rest of my degree. I came in as a Rotman Commerce student expecting to study how firms sell things, and by the end of the summer I was more interested in how a firm decides which of its customers it is willing to lose i.e. who gets counted and why, which is why I am now doubling with Peace, Conflict and Justice Studies at the Munk School. In April that would have looked like a detour away from commerce, and it now reads as the natural path to me.

I still cannot explain this paper to my parents in a way that would satisfy a reviewer, and I have made a kind of peace with describing it as a long piece of writing about advertising. What I can tell them accurately is that I was handed a question, given more room to get it wrong than I knew what to do with, and eventually produced something I am willing to put my name on. That is a fair description of the summer they paid for by not seeing me, and it is a reasonable description of what I would like to keep doing.