

Laidlaw Scholars Leadership-in-Action 2026

Alexandra Hui, Cornell University

This summer, I travelled to Alajuela, Costa Rica with the support of the Laidlaw Foundation to complete my Leadership-in-Action project at INCAE Business School. I was assigned to work with INCAE's Initiative for Health Management and Innovation on researching the Silver Economy (goods and services for the elderly) in Latin America. Though there is significant Silver Economy research in other global regions, there is a lack of Latin American data and literature on the topic. The purpose of the project was to establish a baseline understanding of present support systems for the elderly and the amount of scaling needed to meet the region's rapidly rising demand. This would be accomplished over the 6-week period through a combination of literature review in English and Spanish, interviews with local community leaders, and utilizing other countries' Silver Economy policies for case studies.

The experience of working as a researcher was unlike anything I have ever experienced before. It was an extremely self-motivated, independent lifestyle, where I was responsible for holding myself accountable on deadlines, deliverables, and scheduling. Though I had weekly check-ins with my supervisors, Professor Andrea Prado and project manager Marilyn Fonseca, as well as the occasional university event or meeting, I spent many days in an isolated working environment. This was a jarring experience for me as a social person and a people-motivated leader. My top 5 CliftonStrengths are Empathy, Futuristic, Responsibility, Discipline, and Relator. Most are within the Relationship domain! Though I knew about my circumstances prior to my arrival, contemplating the situation was very different from living in it. I believed that I could adapt to, and maybe even enjoy the isolation, thinking that it would be a good change of pace from school days saturated with interaction. However, being alone had the opposite effect from creating peace; it actually made me realize how much I valued having people around me to

collaborate and share experiences with. To process this challenge, I turned to Critical Moment Dialogues, as instructed by our pre-departure leadership training. By stopping to reflect upon my emotions and ground myself in the environment, I came to two realizations. Firstly, my discomfort with being alone was important to learn because it helped me to understand the kinds of careers I want to pursue in the future. Secondly, it was a very special opportunity to figure out how to use my strengths in more unconventional ways *outside of the workplace*. To do this, I drew upon my Personal Leadership goals of Empathy, Balance, and Appreciation. I knew that I wanted to use my people skills and empathy to connect with others, and I knew that I needed to find that outside of my work environment. The logical answer was in the other aspects of my life: my travel explorations on the weekends, my grocery shopping runs, and my calls back home. I tried to strike up conversations with my Uber drivers, my cashiers, or anyone else that I'd run into. The language barrier made most conversations rather brief, but I occasionally got to learn fun tidbits, like what artists they enjoyed singing for karaoke! Additionally, I spent more time talking to my family and friends over the phone, sharing about my adventures and listening to their stories of the home I missed dearly. Both my foreign and familiar conversations made me feel more fulfilled than ever, even on the days when I'd walk into an empty office at work.

Though I worked hard to align my life with my personal leadership, I was also lucky enough to have other leaders to learn from. I admire every brilliant professor and hardworking student I met at INCAE, but my mentor, Profe Prado, stood out to me in particular. She is incredibly even-keeled, sharp, and respected, but also kind, thoughtful, and funny. Though her packed schedule made it difficult to see her often, she was consistent about staying in touch and monitoring my well-being when she was absent. And when we *did* meet, she always brought a sense of direction to my work, great patience for my in-progress Spanish, and ideas for what we

could tackle next. Throughout my time at INCAE, I was deeply grateful for the thought she put into me and my work, and I quickly learned that I was not the only one who thought positively of her leadership. My colleagues explained that she was very respected in the community, but in a way that was very particular. Instead of voicing her opinions loudly, she did so in a way that was intentional, that advocated for what she believed in without stepping on others or imposing her views upon them. That is something that struck a chord with me, and it's an aspect of leadership that I hope to emulate. Forbes calls it *quiet leadership*, when leaders “build trust through consistency rather than showmanship” (Robinson). It takes confidence and belief, particularly when we are taught that being loud means that more people will hear you. However, thanks to Profe Prado, I've now seen quiet leadership in practice, and I know that it is just as, if not more effective than any other style of leading.

After such a personally and professionally enriching experience, I was very proud to produce several excellent outcomes from the LiA. These outcomes come in the form of both deliverables and a lasting foundation for future scholarship in the area. In terms of deliverables, I produced a 31-page report synthesizing international academic literature on the Silver Economy, a market sizing on the Costa Rican Silver Economy in 2025, and two educational slide decks that integrated the previous deliverables with a series of interviews conducted with local leaders. I focused on three specific areas of the Silver Economy (financial services, housing adaptations, and workforce re-entry) as directed by my mentor, in order to produce more narrow and deep research. The essential conclusions of my work were that although Latin America has been aging faster than any other region in the world since 1990 (ECLAC/CEPAL), there is little preparedness in its systems or mindset for the elderly population boom that will occur in around 30 years. Banks do not see their elderly customers as lucrative, housing developers have no plans

to build retirement homes, and the average community has little understanding of the scope of the issue. A huge mindset shift is required in the near future for the region to age with sustainability and prosperity.

My LiA's products lay the groundwork for future scholarship, research, and innovation in the field. My professor plans to use my deliverables for a class she is developing on the same topic, and will continue to build upon my findings in future academic projects discussing the Silver Economy. It's my hope that my LiA can continue to be furthered and leave an impact that lasts beyond one person. As more and more scholars pick up the topic, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, we will gain a greater understanding of how to address the looming structural crises and the best ways to care for an elderly population.

Prior to this experience, it was hard to see myself as a global change leader. As a teenager with limited travel experience and worldly knowledge, I had no sense of the impact I could create or the communities I could create change for. In many ways, the Laidlaw program was pivotal in changing my self-perception by equipping me with a vision for a better world and the resources to help achieve it. This is especially apparent in the way that we interacted with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals when preparing for our LiA experiences. We were asked to identify a SDG to work towards, and I selected #3: Good Health and Wellbeing. Though I wrote it down dutifully on my worksheet, I secretly didn't expect that I'd actually be able to do anything meaningful enough to advance the Goals. After all, I was just a kid! However, after going through the entire LiA process, I am proud and astounded that I truly created positive change towards the SDGs as a Laidlaw Scholar. When the Laidlaw Foundation and INCAE trusted me with real responsibility, I was able to step up and contribute to not only my original SDG goal, but also many others such as #4: Quality Education and #11: Sustainable

Cities and Communities. The experience changed my entire perspective about the role of youth in creating global change. We are *all* changemakers, and when given the opportunity to make a difference, we are more than up to the task.

With regard to my personal goals and intentions, I believe that the LiA experience has emboldened me to dream bigger and imagine my future on a global scale. I'm currently studying Government and Business, and as a US-Canada dual citizen, the scope of my future work had previously been limited to my two home countries. However, the international nature of my experience has made me consider what it would look like to have a global career. Whether it's working for a think tank that monitors international relations, joining the Foreign Service, or working inter-continently in business or consulting roles, there is a huge variety of careers that I'm now considering with more weight. Additionally, my experience helped me to narrow down my academic focus into the subfields of International Relations and Comparative Politics. I've always been interested in every subfield of my major, but the complexities, cultural diversity, and unique perspectives within the international world have drawn me in like no other. With this stronger understanding of my direction, I'm even more excited to continue taking classes and building expertise in my chosen field.

All in all, my Leadership-in-Action experience was absolutely invaluable in my personal, professional, and academic development. Being a guest in Costa Rica's wonderful communities, working towards a greater cause, and learning more about myself as a leader simultaneously is something that I will remember for the rest of my life. It has shaped me for the better. I am forever grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation and the Einaudi Center for International Studies for the opportunity to serve as a Laidlaw Scholar.

Works Cited

- Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). "Trends in Population Ageing and the Demographic Characteristics of Older Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean." ECLAC,
www.cepal.org/en/infographics/trends-population-ageing-and-demographic-characteristics-older-persons-latin-america. Accessed 1 Sept. 2026.
- Robinson, Cheryl. "Quiet Leadership Is a Top Workplace Skill in 2026." *Forbes*, 26 Jan. 2026,
www.forbes.com/sites/cherylrobinson/2026/01/26/the-workplace-skill-too-many-loud-voices-miss-quiet-leadership/. Accessed 1 Sept. 2026.