

Laidlaw Scholars Programme

Reflection on Laidlaw Summer #1

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At the University of Toronto, the Laidlaw Scholar title is a title that holds a lot of weight. As the only participating Canadian university, there is a certain elitism attributed to the group. Sitting in my AC-less freshman dorm at the University of Toronto during the hot first week of September, I had no idea what the Laidlaw Scholars Programme was, let alone that I would be finishing my first year of university with that title. The process of attaining that role was parallel to many other academic experiences I had at my globally top-ranking university; sleepless nights spent working away at my proposal, countless cold emails sent to potential advisors, receiving “no” after “no” after “no” and still choosing to wake up every morning and continue putting in the work to earn an interview spot. When I finally received the email of acceptance, a wave of adrenaline ran over me, realizing I had earned one of the highest academic ranks possible as a first-year student at the University of Toronto.

But, despite all the emphasis on exclusivity and scholarly superiority, what stands out to me about the Laidlaw Scholars Programme is its equal emphasis on the non-academic. To be selected as a Scholar at the University of Toronto, you do not necessarily need to outperform everyone else when it comes to your academic or research experience. While those components certainly hold weight, you are also assessed upon on your leadership and collaborative qualities, which are arguably equally as important to the Laidlaw Scholars Programme. That in itself is why the Programme aligns so well with my values and beliefs as an academic. Because it is not just about how good you may seem on paper; it is about your motivations, your values, your ability to adapt and operate within a team, about knowing when to take the lead and when to take a step back.

Throughout my first research summer, it became clear to me why these character traits and values were so important throughout the selection process. Research can be very isolating;

and as a first-year university student with next to no research experience under my belt, it was incredibly easy to get in my head, to develop anxiety about the integrity or quality of my work.

When this happened, there were truly only three things I could fall back on. First was my incredible research advisor, Professor Victoria Arrandale, who addressed every concern I had with disarming honesty. When I expressed my anxiety about utilizing semi-structured interviews in my methodology, a component that requires careful and strategic navigation of semi-natural conversations with human participants, she coached me step-by-step on how to approach the data collection. Her trust in my abilities reinforced my own confidence and significantly reduced my anxiety. Second was my Laidlaw cohort, comprised of twenty-four other university students, along with Co-Directors Shraddha and Elena. In periods of uncertainty, turning to my cohort's group-chat and organizing meetings with the Co-Directors enabled me to openly the sources of my anxiety and develop actionable solutions to address them. But third, and perhaps most important, was myself and my mind. My internal discipline, motivation, and optimism was what truly prevented me from spiraling. Having a positive mindset is what enabled me to pull myself out of those periods of self-doubt, and having discipline is what encouraged me to continue working despite lacking the energy to do so.

Thus, while I undoubtedly faced many practical challenges throughout this first Laidlaw summer, it was ultimately a mind game more than anything. Some days, I came home from work exhausted and burnt out; some days, I had the entire day to focus on my research and somehow found myself unable to open my laptop until the sun was already setting. By no means was I the "perfect" Laidlaw Scholar; I spent many days worrying my research was not feasible, or not high quality, or even helpful at all. I doubted myself and my abilities and wasted precious hours convincing myself that everything I did was wrong.

But I also did the opposite. I coached myself through those mental battles. I utilized the support systems available to me, and I learned the power that a mindset change has on your productivity, work ethic, and mental well-being. And, evidently, I emerged on top, given the fact that you are reading this right now. At the end of it all, I realized that is exactly what the Laidlaw Scholars Programme is about; it is about first-hand experiencing how intersectional these leadership qualities truly are. Having a strong work ethic is entirely interconnected with having strong self-confidence. Possessing high critical and analytical thinking skills is not possible

without developing mental determination and perseverance. These competencies do not exist in isolation; and to fine-tune one skill, you inadvertently fine-tune hundreds of others throughout the process. So, given all the struggles I endured this summer, by no means am I a perfect Laidlaw Scholar; but that is exactly what makes me a perfect Laidlaw Scholar.