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Laidlaw Research and Leadership Program

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My Leadership in Action Experience with Picacho Con Futuro in Medellín, Colombia

This past summer, I had the opportunity to complete my Leadership in Action (LiA) experience with Picacho Con Futuro, a local NGO in Comuna 6 of Medellín, Colombia, through makesense Americas.

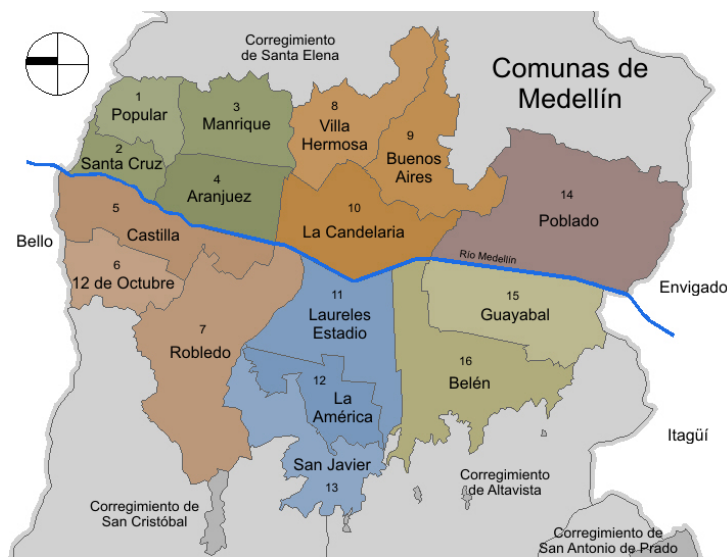


Fig. 1. SajoR, “Mapa de las Comunas de Medellín, Colombia,”

Picacho Con Futuro was initially founded in 1987 as a response to decades of violence, displacement, and a lack of opportunities, and today, focuses on strengthening the community through culture, education, and art. My role was to collaborate with three other Laidlaw Scholars to familiarize ourselves with cultural café’s around Medellín, understand the needs of Picacho Con Futuro, and ultimately, design a proposal for Barrio Mío, Picacho Con Futuro’s own future cultural café, a place where members of the community can come together.



Fig. 2. Dai, Victoria. The three other Laidlaw Scholars and I, who partnered with Picacho Con Futuro. 15 July 2026. Author's personal collection.

Before my LiA

Before my LiA, my Laidlaw cohort took the CliftonStrengths assessment, a quiz that helps one discover their natural talents. I ended up getting Relator, Competition, Achiever, Discipline, and Deliberative; in other words, I perceived myself as someone who values deep, meaningful relationships, but is motivated by achievement and competition, and approaches tasks with discipline and careful consideration. When I first got these results back, I didn't think too much of it; it felt like just another personality test. But, looking back, I realize each of these traits were actually shaping the way I was leading during my LiA – perhaps even a bit too much.

Lessons I learned during my LiA

As someone who likes getting things done, the first week of my LiA was a bit tough; we explored Medellín rather than starting our project. So, naturally, when it came time to write my leadership reflection that week, I hit a wall: how could I have learned anything about leadership if I didn't do anything that involved needing to lead a group of people? Looking back, I think some of this frustration came from my discomfort with being in a new environment. For me, focusing on a project was familiar; exploring a new city and navigating an unfamiliar culture was not.

That's when I remembered the phrase from Cornell's pre-departure orientation: "you are a guest in someone's home". With this statement in mind, I realized that understanding the place, culture and people the café will exist within is crucial for a successful proposal. As a leader, I should be trying to learn the context my leadership is requested within rather than seeking immediate gratification. This is akin to the idea of "Community-Based Participatory Research" (CBPR), which is a globally known approach that involves the community within health research to reduce health disparities, resulting in programs designed to emphasize wellbeing, rather than just pathology (Marrone et al.). Although our project was not focused on health research, the idea still remains the same: solutions are most effective when they are developed with community involvement, something I will also take with me into the future as an aspiring medical professional.

Then, while designing our first proposal of Barrio Mío during week 4, I hit another roadblock. When working on group projects, I tend to have a clear vision for what needs to be accomplished and when. In this case, I was also working with three people I had only recently met, each with their own working styles. So when progress was slow or going in a direction I hadn't envisioned, I noticed my habit was to take over those tasks. I quickly realized, however,

that this was exhausting, unrealistic and counterproductive. My pursuit of “perfect” results was making me more hostile towards my teammates, and creating the opposite of the collaborative environment a leader should foster. I realized that being a good leader is about giving other people the space to contribute their own ideas, regardless of how well you know them. By doing so, we accomplished things I could not have done alone, such as designing a web page, creating a pamphlet in InDesign, and modeling the café in 3D. This experience also reflects the concept of empowering leadership, which focuses on encouraging each other in decision-making and challenging tasks (Ceri-Booms et al.). I learned that while my strengths help me with discipline, they quickly become my weaknesses when I prioritize productivity over patience and flexibility. This is definitely something I want to continue working on in my everyday life.

Recognizing my leadership strengths

While my frustrations revealed areas I needed to improve, my LiA also helped me recognize strengths I had not fully appreciated. During a leadership exercise with my makesense cohort, we were asked to photograph different parts of UPB (a local university) to spell a word that represented what leadership meant to us. In a split-second decision, I chose “communication”. Yet when we each shared what we had spelled and I saw how each word represented each of my peers, I realized that communication was something I valued far more than I realized. As my LiA progressed, I frequently found myself initiating communication between the makesense organizers, other Laidlaw Scholars, Picacho Con Futuro’s team and local volunteers, making sure that everyone was on the same page.



Fig. 3. Dai, Victoria. Spelling of “communication” using objects within UPB. 14 July 2026.

Author’s personal collection.

The exercise also showed me different ways people value leadership. While I focused more on the logistical side, my peers focused more on a leader’s character, such as “humility” and “hope”, aspects of leadership that hadn’t immediately come to my mind. Seeing these different interpretations reminded me that there truly is no single way to be an effective leader due to everyone's different personal strengths.

Overall LiA Reflection

Ultimately, when I reflect back on my LiA, what sticks with me the most is not the nights I spent designing our proposals, but the interactions I had with the local community. I still remember in vivid detail the days we spent with the ladies that worked in the kitchen of Picacho Con Futuro, who kindly bought us lunch, the kids within Picacho Con Futuro who didn’t judge us for looking different and welcomed us into their lives, the women from Mujeres Con Futuro who welcomed us into their Saturday activities, and the women from Proyectando Sueños who not only also fed us dinner, but also freely expressed their honest disagreements on our café ideas, and who performed some of their traditional Colombian dances for us. These moments where I was able to sit down with people I would’ve otherwise never met became the most memorable parts of my entire LiA.



Fig. 4. Dai, Victoria. Us doing a workshop with the kids within Picacho Con Futuro. 15 July 2026. Author's personal collection.



Fig. 5. Dai, Victoria. Us after our conversation with the women from Proyectando Sueños. 22 July 2026. Author's personal collection.



Fig. 6. Dai, Victoria. Us after our conversation with the women from Mujeres Con Futuro. 18

July 2026. Author's personal collection.

Ironically, however, these moments also revealed one of my biggest regrets. Instead of focusing so much on the work, I wish I had spent more time talking to locals and hearing their stories. This realization is almost the complete opposite of the mindset I started my LiA with. Looking back, I realize that my Relator strength, or the value I place on meaningful relationships, was perhaps my greatest leadership strength all along. I entered Medellín believing that leadership was about getting things done, only to leave realizing that the moments I valued most were the ones that had nothing to do with productivity at all.

Perhaps the clearest example of this kind of leadership that I strive for was someone I had worked closely with during my LiA: Picacho Con Futuro's director, Adrián. Within Picacho Con Futuro, Adrián is the person that everyone leans on for support. Even during our final presentation, he let the community members provide critical feedback and listened to what they had to say. He is someone who really works for the community rather than himself. But even

with all his responsibilities, he was always kind and patient with the four of us. He pushed us to be creative and to think of new ideas, but even just as a person, he always made sure to call us by our first names and spoke slower Spanish for us to understand. Even with all his responsibilities, he placed such a high emphasis on the people around him, something I think is extremely admirable and hope to emulate in the future.



Fig. 7. Dai, Victoria. Us with Adrián (fourth person from left to right who is standing up), makesense organizers and other members of Picacho Con Futuro after our final presentation. 12 August 2026. Author's personal collection.

Our impact

In the end, we were able to propose our vision of Barrio Mío for Picacho Con Futuro. Within the proposal, we not only redesigned the café with online 3D modeling, but also included a monthly activity calendar, logo ideas, a food and drink menu, board games, an inventory of materials needed for the café and kitchen, and a web design of the cafe for Picacho Con Futuro's website. Our proposal serves as a well-researched starting point for Adrián and Picacho Con

Futuro to adapt as needed. Hopefully, with the help of our proposal, Adrián is able to get the remaining funds needed. The idea of Picacho Con Futuro having their own cultural café is already a huge milestone for Picacho Con Futuro, and hopefully, the café will become a reality and be enjoyed by the community in the coming years. Anyone can read more about our proposal by looking at the Pamphlet that Pippa Lewin from Durham University designed:

<https://simplebooklet.com/barriomo>.



Fig. 8. Lewin, Pippa. Pamphlet that summarizes everything we proposed for Barrio Mío. 12

August 2026. <https://simplebooklet.com/barriomo>.

Looking ahead in the future

As I look towards the future, I hope to continue contributing to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by working with local communities and taking action, whether it be volunteering with hospice and headstart programs or working as an EMT. My long term goal is to become a doctor where I hope my life work can contribute towards SDG #3, ensuring good health and well-being of all. However, good health doesn't just come from the medical care system; it starts from the day a child is born. The SDG's I focused on during my LiA, Sustainable Cities and Communities (#11) and Reduced Inequalities (#10), are examples of

important factors of a healthy community. Ensuring that the communities people live in are safe, there is access to quality education, and that a person's socioeconomic status doesn't interfere with their access to healthcare and opportunities are essential for everyone's wellbeing. My LiA showed me that health ultimately comes from strengthening the communities around us.

Ultimately, my LiA shaped how I understand myself and the type of leader I want to be. I hope to carry the lessons I learned in Medellín by approaching people with patience, listening to their experiences, and recognizing that meaningful change begins with understanding the communities I hope to serve. I will be forever grateful to the Laidlaw foundation and Cornell University for this opportunity and experience.

Works Cited

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