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Leadership for Global Change

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LIA in Medellin, Colombia

The LIA is a fantastic learning opportunity, yet I was nervous before starting the project. I would be traveling to Medellin, Colombia, to work at a mysterious nonprofit. I was worried about being a “parachute” volunteer, a gringo who would do more harm than help. However, after a discussion about our “use” as volunteers with a fellow Laidlaw scholar during my first night in Medellin, I was able to reevaluate my fears. During our conversation, my new friend argued that the money that the Laidlaw foundation had dispensed to bring us all to Colombia would have been better used on direct donations towards the organizations themselves. And I agreed. But I also found myself arguing that this program had a different and important secondary value besides its international impact.

The program was about our growth as students. It was meant for us to have these exact conversations, to discuss how money should be spent and what efforts we should take to create the most impact globally. As students from prestigious universities, we have many opportunities, but we don’t always understand their value. Programs like the Laidlaw scholars program are incredible because they help us to better understand our own privileges. While these lessons are maybe not worth the thousands of dollars of scholarship money, I am grateful to have benefited from this program, and to have grown from my experience abroad.

The Project:

I worked with the organization MakeSense in Medellin, and I specifically was part of the group that partnered with Platohedro. Platohedro is a nonprofit organization located in Medellin, Colombia with artistic and technological education programs and artistic residencies. They support and learn from children, teenagers, young adults and women, and believe in a holistic approach that combines psychosocial support with education and access to new opportunities. We helped Platohedro to organize their communications materials and to plan and execute a fundraising campaign primarily aimed at international donors.

The Impact:

When we first met with Platohedro, my team partook in a two hour meeting, and looked through five powerpoints and eleven reels in order to try and understand their mission. They did not have a concise pitch about who they were. Based on these inconsistencies, we decided that an important part of our fundraising campaign would be to try and help Platohedro to communicate their identity to potential donors. Thus, we evaluated their website, social media, and current donations options. We then researched new opportunities, and eventually implemented several important changes. First, we were able to redesign Platohedro's website, making it more streamlined and easy to navigate. Next, we redesigned Platohedro's Patreon, making the payment options more financially accessible to potential donors. We also started a Vaki (a Latin American crowdfunding platform) to appeal to Latin American audiences. Furthermore, we started a LinkedIn and provided recommendations for their new TikTok account. Along with these steps,

we worked on communications materials such as posters, emails, and promotional videos, and finally we created a list of potential donors for the actual campaign. Our work hopefully will help Platohedro gain new donors and more recognition for what they do! However, in my opinion, our most important impact was helping Platohedro to explain themselves succinctly as an organization.

Leadership Learning:

During this project, I gained confidence in my abilities as a group leader and project manager. As a history major, I have not completed many group projects, and I have never been a part of a serious project on this scale. However, I regularly complete many long research papers in my history coursework. Thus, I have experience taking initiative to start projects, doing research, and dividing projects into smaller manageable tasks. These skills helped me to contribute to our project and to make it a success.

Furthermore, throughout this experience I realized that I don't need to diminish myself in group settings. My other group members noticed how often I would apologize, and how much I would preface my ideas when I shared them. By the end of the project, I gained enough confidence in myself that I would share my ideas without hesitation.

It's difficult to determine your own leadership style. I'm only beginning to be able to see myself as someone who could be a leader, so I don't know how to categorize myself or my strengths in a particular way. However, I wanted to mention that I am grateful for my teammates' support, and how they helped me to start imagining myself as a leader.

General Reflections:

Living in Medellin helped me to appreciate and understand many of my own everyday privileges. One important aspect of the city that I didn't understand before arriving was its precarity. Certain areas of the city were very expensive and touristy, whereas other neighborhoods, especially on the hills surrounding the city, were filled with makeshift homes without basic amenities. Visiting all of these neighborhoods helped me to understand more about the negotiations involved in Colombia's governmental control. Our tour guide in Communa 6 emphasized that armed groups claimed to control land ownership in some of the areas with makeshift houses, which was all legally the government's land. I thought that one interesting example of how the government navigated these negotiations was the cable cars and the transformation of Communa 13 from a violent neighborhood to a tourist destination. In Patrick Naef's article, "The Criminal Governance of Tourism: Extortion and Intimacy in Medellín," he states that, "Las Escaleras [Communa 13's outdoor escalators], as well as the nearby urban cable cars, now feature as the most important symbols of Medellín's social urbanism, a world-acclaimed programme designed to address inequalities by investing in public infrastructure in poor neighbourhoods." Given the precarity of government presence in certain neighborhoods, having the elevators and the cable cars seemed like a symbol of the government's reach, a way of laying a claim to a territory. Getting to experience the Medellin public transportation system myself reinforced my understanding of this culture and geography of the city.

I think that it's important for people who have so many privileges and opportunities through their education to have these new experiences where they are forced to be uncomfortable

and powerless. And even though six weeks is not a very long time, I was able to grow from when I was forced to interact with an unfamiliar culture. In their article, “A catalyst for learning or reinforcement of inequities: Using a critical hope lens to understand the potential and limitations of short-term study abroad in fostering students’ ability to effectively interact across differences,” Nyunt et al. emphasized the importance of mindsets for personal growth during short-term study abroad experiences. They noted, “When participants approached STSA focused solely on their own learning and intent on observing or consuming another culture and failed to connect learning to cross-cultural experiences after STSA, learning was minimal and STSA reinforced ethnocentric viewpoints.” While there is a danger of white-saviorism and self-centeredness on LIA projects, I think that the emphasis on community-centered service during our experience abroad helped us to avoid these potential pitfalls. Because we were collaborating with the host organizations we could not ignore Medellin’s culture. We had to interact with it in order to communicate and collaborate with our organizations. When we were forced to be vulnerable, we could not present ourselves as saviors.

Having these experiences of learning new things by being physically in a new location was one of the most valuable parts of my LIA. I am forever grateful to the Laidlaw foundation for this experience to learn and volunteer.

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