

Free Range Reflection

Many of us are afraid of diving head first into the unknown. New, unfamiliar environments, uncertain situations and unexpected turn of events often leave us feeling uncomfortable and anxious. The first moment of my journey with Free Range was realizing (or rather, admitting) that life begins at the end of your comfort zone. One week before our departure, Professor Carson emailed out the itinerary with the description “You will get the impression that things are not very organized at the moment. If you have worked with me before, you will not be surprised.” It was at this moment that I knew that accepting my bursary with Free Range was the perfect opportunity to throw myself into the unknown and broaden my horizons beyond my ordinary life back in Ottawa. Little did I know that from this point on, my loosely-structured time with Free Range would be one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

With Free Range, I was privileged enough to join scholars from all over the world to work collaboratively on one of six research topics, under the guidance of established rural research for one week of conferences in Storuman, Sweden. Starting with the first day, introductions from Free Range scholars was an exceptional opportunity to hear students and world-renowned researchers speak passionately about their areas of study, professions, and research, in the comfort of what felt like long-time friends. Witnessing the conference room at the Centre for Rural Medicine in Sweden filled with a range of individuals from various academic backgrounds, gathered together to be a part of Free Range’s interdisciplinary approach at enhancing health and wellbeing in sparsely populated areas was truly remarkable. As a result of the various academic backgrounds, discussions in topics such as researching in

Indigenous communities and models of social capital were able to be further divulged. In my opinion, the interdisciplinary approach that Free Range prides itself on is not only valuable to this area of study, but absolutely necessary in solving pressing issues affecting remote areas around the world. The interdisciplinary approach used by Free Range included individuals with backgrounds ranging from city planning to clinical psychology. This allowed us to cover topics like rural youth health, eHealth initiatives, and recruitment and retention of rural professionals in more depth by considering the varied perspectives from which each topic can be explored. Furthermore, I believe the interdisciplinary approach was particularly useful because it fostered the use of critical thinking skills by contrasting of perspectives across disciplinary boundaries - something that does not garner enough attention in my undergraduate studies.

In the last three years of my university career, the Health Science program at Carleton University has prepared me thoroughly in the field of life sciences - a necessary foundation for any science undergraduate degree. As Carleton University is a globally recognized post-secondary institute, it is well equipped with highly influential professors, and an abundance of literature and resources that provide nearly an infinite amount of knowledge to its students. However, outside the boundaries of Carleton's community, there exists important skills that are seldom found within classroom walls. Fundamental skills, such as communication, networking and the development of interpersonal relationships, must be learned elsewhere. For these reasons, I am extremely thankful that I had the opportunity to experience and begin to develop these skills with the help of world renowned rural researchers. Free Range leaders did a fantastic job creating a relaxed environment that facilitated the exchange of information and experiences between scholars and students, one-on-one. By exposing myself to a broad variety

of leaders in different fields, I felt that I was able to absorb the most useful data that would further enhance my project. For instance, it was after speaking with Laleah, a graduate student from Carleton, that I became aware that a real gap in literature knowledge exists in the area of mental health service availability for youth in rural and remote areas, a direction I now wish to pursue for my honours thesis. Although I am far from reaching the ultimate 'social capital' status of a networking expert, described so well by Dr. Koch, I do believe that networking is one of the most valuable skills an undergraduate student can cultivate. I am excited to continue to improve my networking abilities as I believe it is the preface of all career development and, like any muscle, must be exercised at each opportunity for future improvement.

In addition to Free Range leaders being eager to impart their knowledge and expertise to students, they also did an outstanding job at tailoring meetings towards complications students were experiencing with their projects. As many of the undergraduate students were having difficulties narrowing down research topics, Professor Taylor, Professor Schoo, and Dr. Harwood were able to assist students by mapping out, step by step, the necessary pathway of thesis writing through the process of the research hourglass. Here, I learned that one does not need to be concerned if the initial footings of their research topic are not precisely defined. My research area- designing health services for hard to reach rural youth, fell into this category. By working through the 'hourglass process', our topics may be refined and narrowed down further with each successive step. With this knowledge in mind, my team decided we would begin with a general Scoping review to determine a typology of rural youth and their availability and accessibility to health services in Canada, Australia and Sweden. Next, upon assessing gaps in the literature, we would each focus on a different aspect affecting rural and remote youth

health when writing our thesis. Second, I was previously not aware that thesis and academic writing can never have a neutral tone. Professor Schoo shed light on the concept that world views, research designs and methods are all interconnected when framing your research. One must always describe the lens they are looking through in academic writing to inform the reader of any possible bias. I look forward to further utilizing the resources Professor Schoo provided to determine the framework I view the world through, and apply this towards my fourth-year thesis project.

Although I believe my time spent with Free Range has provided me the opportunity to fill my own personal 'gaps' in thesis writing, studying Health Sciences at Carleton has additionally allowed me to recognize the complexity of interactions that determine an individual's health status. For instance, credits taken in the Social Determinants of Health, Health Psychology and Emerging Issues in Biomedicine have expanded my knowledge beyond the specific physiological processes that define an individual as 'healthy'. These courses, taught from the social perspective of health, proved to directly translate to my proposed research contribution to the Free-Range - "designing youth health services for 'hard to reach' rural populations." For instance, many of the social determinants of health are part of the complex interactions that effect the wellbeing of youth in rural and remote areas. This can include individual characteristics, such as the direct environment youth reside in. Factors such as living in isolated areas, living alone, and/or youth who have moved away from their home towns, have the potential to affect the health and wellbeing through their accessibility, or lack of accessibility, to health services.

The barriers experienced by local youth were illuminated in the process of transcribing an interview from Laleah, a graduate student also working on the rural youth health project. Although the process of transcribing is a tedious task in itself, the insight gained regarding the lack of health services available for youth was astonishing. There were a series of significant issues that I took away from this interview. Laleah stoically informed us how certain groups of adolescents, including the Indigenous Sami youth and refugees, aren't receiving a fraction of health service care we receive in urban areas of Canada. High school counsellors and social staff are overworked, drug and alcohol addiction rates are high, and youth social services are almost non-existent. Furthermore, the greatest eye-opening aspect of this interview was that adolescents living in these areas may need to travel hundreds of kilometers to speak to health care professionals, such as psychologists and general practitioners. After personal conversations with students in the dormitories of Storuman who were attending university, I was overwhelmed by their feelings of social congestion in rural towns, where they found scarce resources to implement changes to their lives. They recounted stories of their peers who had committed suicide in recent years and credited the lack of purpose, direction and feelings of belonging within social groups. This reminded me of one of my favourite books, *Tribe*, by Sebastian Junger. In this novel, Junger does a fantastic job at highlighting the struggle of alienation that soldiers face upon returning home after combat. He credits the tribal bond so closely held in our DNA and demonstrated by our ancestors, that is revived between soldiers in combat and lost upon returning home, most often resulting in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. As a result of the lack of social service and activities offered to youth in rural Sweden, I observed similarities in the loss of social ties these youth described. By designing locally

accessibility health services, such as mental first aid courses, alongside the recruitment of more health professionals and investment into physical activities, I believe that these crucial social interactions with trusted individuals can be restored in rural communities facing high degrees of poor mental health in remote areas of Canada, Sweden and Australia.

In addition to networking with leaders, some of my favourite memories from our time in Storuman and Umea were made alongside my fellow Canadian peers. In our time in Umea and Storuman, I learned much about myself and my housemates. Even though Liam, Claudia, Saam, Michelle, Sydney and I had been familiar with each other, some of us close friends from course work, I was thrilled at how well we worked together. While spending time in Umea under the same roof, we shared ideas, space, and endless laughs. We cooked meals together, navigated foreign landscapes, and got the chance to discover each other. There's something to be said about the family dynamic that brings people together while preparing a meal. Reflecting on this time now, I believe we connected so well because we all shared common interests. Each of us came from different family backgrounds and upbringings, but we were all connected by our desire to contribute to a greater cause, learn new things, and lead healthy, active lives.

Furthermore, our perspectives on health translated similarly into our ambitions to improve health care availability for these rural communities.

Next, over the course of our stay in Storuman, I was taken aback by the gratitude the graduate students showed the six of us. Each of them took us under their wing by making sure we felt comfortable with our work and where our projects were heading. Furthermore, I looked to them as role models. Each of the graduate students had various experiences, shaping them into well-rounded individuals. Whether it was Laleah bringing valuable insight from her time

spent working in indigenous communities, or Sam with his carefully articulated, intelligible thoughts leading Dr. Harwood, a Free-Range leader to exclaim in an Australian accent “okay, I didn’t understand one word you said, but you sound smart” or Reyhaneh offering personal insight into cultural values held by Iranians over salads from the local grocer. Laleah, Sam, and Reyhaneh were great examples of students who worked hard to carve out their own paths in research. Not only were they working hard in school but they showed us many admirable qualities that I would not only want as a researcher, but as an individual. I am truly thankful for the time we spent with them and the experiences we shared.

In conclusion, having the opportunity to travel to Sweden and participate in conferences with like-minded, academic individuals who wish to see a world with greater health service accessibility, regardless of where they live, is incredibly inspiring. With the tools Free Range leaders have equipped us, and the connections forged, I wish to impart these skill sets throughout my research project, and as I navigate through life.