

## **Mark Bellou**

My name is Mark Bellou and I am a sophomore at the University of Kentucky. Over the past semester, I have the great privilege of participating in the Emerging Leaders Institute. Even though I had been told of what to expect by many of my friends and fraternity brothers who had taken the course before me, I was still unsure of what exactly the ELI experience would mean to me.

### **What did I do while in ELI that stood out to me?**

First and foremost, I believe that the unique classroom experience had a tremendous effect on my learning about the different aspects of leadership. Unlike other courses, I felt comfortable in sharing my thoughts and feelings, and I knew that if I had a question, I could always count on the faculty and peer mentors for assistance. At the orientation, I got the chance to meet my fellow emerging leaders and faculty. Knowing a little about each other before starting into the course created a friendlier environment, and I felt like I was part of the group immediately. The first day of class, I was greeted not with a syllabus, but with the smiling faces of people who knew my name. That should say something about the caliber of people involved in ELI.

The different leadership seminars and presentations were another thing I found to be unique. In addition to being stimulating and useful, I liked the fact that all of the information was provided and that each presenter integrated leadership skills in an activity to increase interest and understanding. Instead of a traditional setting where you are crammed in a desk and forced to spend the whole period scribbling out notes, ELI encourages a less confrontational atmosphere and more interaction and creative thinking.

A big part of the growing I did happened from my individual leadership project. I knew that working full-time and going to school full-time would provide a challenge, but I was pretty organized and I felt ready. As ideas circulated in my head, I had trouble picking out the best one. Decisiveness as a leader was thus, one of the first skills I had to work on. After a couple weeks, time was growing short and I needed to get started, so I chose to host a Haunted House for underprivileged children. I was making progress calling around to gather volunteers and decided to use our fraternity house as the destination. I figured it would be easy to decorate, organize and find help. Another part of being a leader, however is never assuming. Just when I thought things were going as planned, I found myself with an increasing number of volunteers who couldn't make the commitment after all.

Finally, with Halloween right around the corner, I decided to step up, and take on a new project. I decided that a Thanksgiving Can Drive would be a great way to make a big impact on the community and a good way to put my leadership skills to the test. I also would have enough time to adequately plan it, even considering my busy schedule. After calling God's Pantry, an organization that collects and distributes food, as well as a couple of philanthropy chairs, I got the feeling that this project had hope for completion. Although the project is not complete at the current time, I hope to have met my goal of

1000 cans by this coming Thanksgiving and make a difference despite the past failure of my original project.

**So what impact did it have on me?**

This may sound corny or cliched, but I look back on ELI and I realize what a positive memory it has been, and how different my life would be like if I had passed the opportunity up. Before, leadership was something I took for granted. Although I had taken several leadership positions previously, I did not consider myself a great leader at the time. Through ELI, I learned that leadership takes many different forms and is not some magical force that just happens when it is needed. It is the sweat, blood, and tears of somebody striving to help achieve a goal.

Over the last semester ELI has taught me something much more valuable than what any math, science, or English course has. Nothing can replace the self-confidence, public speaking, communication, and organizational skills that I picked up. It has also opened my eyes to how much work and dedication goes into being a leader, but also to how fulfilling and rewarding it is at the same time. ELI gave me much more than I had asked for, including an increased hunger to help others, and a passion to succeed.

I came into this course not knowing exactly what ELI was, what kind of leader I was, or how I could grow as a leader. I left, however, with a sense of personal identity, growth, and satisfaction, knowing that as an emerging leader, I could make a difference. The skills I learned and honed in this class are already being put to use now, and will be for the rest of my life.

**Now what will I do because I have experienced this?**

In the future, I hope to put the skills I now possess to work at school, work, the community, and my fraternity. This may include volunteering for student organizations, organizing community service projects, creating a better work atmosphere, or even becoming a peer mentor to a future ELI generation. One of my past goals has been to become president of my fraternity, and I feel more confident now that this goal can be completed. Although I cannot predict the future, I have no doubt that the ELI program will be one of my most highly valued experiences and one that I will never forget.

Sincerely,

Mark Bellou...