

My ELI Experience  
By: Nick Perez

My name is Nick Perez. I am a freshman at UK from Houston, Texas. I took this course without knowing of anyone who had taken it. I had received the information for the class from my academic advisor Melinda Edgerton who also happened to be my faculty mentor for the class. I thought it would be a good idea and a great way to sharpen the leadership skills I already had. I was in for a surprise.

The first day of class was unlike any other first day I had ever been through. It was on a Saturday about two weeks after school had started. There were about 24 other people in my class and we got to know each other very well that day. We did activities that required us to talk personally with one another. We then ate some really good food provided to us by the catering service. That was one of my favorite parts. During the next couple of weeks, we did more “get to know you” activities in the classroom.

There were several specific activities in class that we did that stood out to me. At the moment, I will discuss one. Lance Brunner came to talk to us for a couple of days about mindfulness. As part of the lecture, we went outside in the free speech area and played a game. The game was called “look in the mirror.” The object of the game was that we were to be “blind” and led around by one of our seeing classmates. Every so often we would stop at a particular scene chosen by the seer. There we would open our eyes for a brief period of time and “look in the mirror.” It was very interesting to be led around by someone and be forced to trust that they would not throw you down a flight of stairs or run you into a brick wall. It was also fun when the roles were switched and we had the change to lead the other person around. I wanted to show my person the most beautiful sights in that area. I stopped at several different trees and once had them look upward to see the Patterson Office Tower. It was fun to see the reaction on

their face after they had looked and realized that the picture of what they had seen was really quite nice and peaceful. It was also fun to see the mistrust in their eyes, but eventually see them relax and begin to trust you fully. During this activity, I learned to trust people. Most time I like not to rely on other people and I prefer to take care of things on my own. I realize that I must trust people because I cannot function on my own when I am blind. Since this activity, I have been more aware of my lack of trust. I try very hard to overcome this and it is helping me quite a bit.

Another activity that stood out to me was the diversity activity. Our class was very diverse. We had people from all over the state and some from out of state like Ohio and Indiana and Texas. We had diverse opinions; there were many democrats and republicans alike. More importantly we had diverse ethnicities. Some participants in the class were African American and Latino (of which I am one). Mimi Haley and Winn Stephens who are members of the UK faculty came for two days to present on diversity. At the beginning, we were on one side of the classroom facing outside. Meanwhile Mimi and Winn placed large poster-sized sheets of paper on the wall on the other side of the classroom. Those sheets of paper had specific groups of people written on them, like “African American Women,” or “Jewish People,” or “Latin Americans.” Our objective was to write a stereotype that we have heard for every group; there were about 12 or 15 groups. At first it was funny to see some of the things that people were saying about these types of people. Many of the things became somewhat offensive after people got used to being outside of their comfort zone. It was good to be in a place where it was okay to express ourselves and not be afraid of scorn or ridicule. I learned, after this session, that some things I say could be hurtful to people. I also learned that my skin is extremely thick and things

that people say about my ethnicity don't bother me at all. The reasoning comes from my mindset that I am me, not I am Latino. I don't let my ethnicity determine who I am.

It was very educational to have participated in the DISC exercise. DISC is a personality and leadership test. D is for dominant leadership; this person likes immediate results and usually makes quick decisions. I is for influential leadership, this person will create a motivating environment and try to generate enthusiasm. S is for steadiness, this person is patient and very predictable. C is for conscientiousness, this person is very detail oriented and will use indirect and subtle ways to approach conflict. We filled out different bubbles for answers that we gave depending on how we responded to certain things. In the end, we found out what style of leader we were. I am a combination of D and I. This activity is very accurate. I am very much like the paper indicated that I would be. Everybody else's was also very accurate. I now have the understanding of why I do certain things in response to conflict. I know where I can and will be effective in certain leadership roles. I also know where I will not be effective. As a result, I can try different approaches to problems to make sure that things get taken care of with maximum efficiency.

The activity with the most impact was probably the trip to Sun Bridge Nursing Home. For the group community service project, we chose to throw a Halloween party for a nursing home. We had started planning about two weeks ahead of time and we had a plan of how we were going to do things. One group was going to play bingo. Another group was to do snacks, then crafts. The next group was going to read ghost stories. Finally, the last group was to have a dance for the elders. Once we got into the party room and were set up, nothing really went as planned. We had snacks for the whole period of time that we were there. We did bingo as a large group; we did the same with Ghost stories and everything else. Even though things did not

go as planned, the experience was wonderful. We all took a big step out of our comfort zone that day. I remember one of my class mates saying in the beginning that he did not want to go to a nursing home. The last time he had gone to one, a lady chased him down the hall thinking that he was her ex-husband and calling him Robert. During the crafts time, I talked to several of the residents of the nursing home. This part was the eye opener. Many of the residents did not appear to know what was happening. One of the residents had not seen his wife in several months because he paid for her to be placed in the finest nursing home in town. One of the residents was only in his forties and had been in an auto accident, he was put there by his parents. He was a man who loved women; he danced with all of the girls from class and a few of the female residents. Another resident was nearly blind, but he was able to carry on a perfectly normal conversation. We had talked about where he came from and what he did for a living. He asked me several questions about my background and about Texas. Another man I tried to talk to couldn't really say much. Every time I would ask him a question that he appeared to understand he would laugh. We tried to decorate a pumpkin. He said he wanted it to be called "Jim." It was very sad to see those people living in a place like that. It was also sad that many of them had not been visited by their families in a very long time. Friends, I will never forget the day that I went to Sun Bridge Nursing Home.

As I look to the future, I take this new bag of knowledge along my journey. There are many leadership positions which I hope to use the skills that I developed in ELI. I am currently involved with UK Student Government as a member of the Freshmen Representative Council. I hope to be a part of Student Government for a very long time. During my time on FRC, I have been taught things that reinforce the basics taught in ELI. I have been told of different types of leadership and different traits necessary to be an effective leader. I believe that the combination

of ELI and Student Government will allow me to go far in the future. I also hope to become a leader through Young Life. Young Life is an organization which is Christian based and its goal is to reach out to adolescents who do not know God. I plan to be a leader who interacts with high school kids. This would be a rewarding experience; it is an indescribable experience to see someone come to know God. I think that I will be able to use the skills in ELI in this role because I know what kind of leader I am. Another long term goal of mine is to one day end up in the United States Senate. I believe that the mix of my people skills and my new leadership will allow me to go that far.

In closing, I would like to thank Rhonda Strouse and Rachel Zeillmann for leading the class. Rhonda, you have done so much and Rachel, I know you will go far. I want to thank Melinda Edgerton and Joe Ruschell for being excellent mentors and helping us achieve our goal as best we could. Joe, good luck next year in law school, wherever you end up. Melinda, I will continue to see you on a regular basis, you are my academic advisor. I want to thank all my wonderful classmates. Guys, you all have been wonderful and I've enjoyed spending this time with you. I want to say that I hope Matt Ray gets better. Once again, thanks to everyone for making my ELI experience and freshman year memorable.