

## **Devin Smith**

### *The Emerging Leader Institute*

My name is Devin Smith and I am freshman from Louisville, Kentucky. I first heard of the Emerging Leader Institute (ELI) from a brochure on leadership opportunities I received during my summer advising. Wanting to get involved, I decided that I would apply for the Institute for the spring semester. I honestly had no idea what I was about to experience when I received notification that I had been accepted into the Institute. After orientation I developed mixed emotions, those of excitement and nervousness, about the class. As the semester comes to a close, I realize how much this class has helped me develop, not only as a leader, but also as a follower. In order to be a leader one must understand how to listen to others.

Throughout the class, I made many discoveries about myself. By determining my leadership style, I was able to recognize and appreciate my strengths and improve my weaknesses. Knowing my strengths and weaknesses helped me reinforce the image I had of myself. I confirmed the idea that I was people oriented and a team player. However, I realized that fearing a loss of stability and being possessive of my time was embedded in my personality. I became aware of what to improve on in order to make myself a more effective person and communicator, as well as a leader.

Coming from a background that lacks in diversity, I was unsure of how I would handle working with different (from me), but extraordinary, people. However, I soon discovered that working with such a diverse group enabled me to grow. Throughout the class, I was exposed to many different personalities, ways of thinking, and cultures that I had never experienced before. Being in a diverse situation only helped to emphasize the

uniqueness of myself. I discovered how much I had to offer in terms of ideas, attitudes and beliefs. By drawing on all twenty-six different personalities and thoughts, our class was surrounded by a supportive and growing environment. Not only were the people diverse, but the topics of conversation were those that I had never addressed before.

Most importantly, I gained the understanding that leadership comes in all shapes, forms, and sizes. Leaders are those who develop a vision in their heads for the betterment of society or the world around them (be it in the home, at work, on sports team or in the community). A true leader is one who shares the ideas with others around them and implements a realistic plan to make the vision a reality. I realized that it is more important to focus on the planning and progress of the vision rather than on the outcome. Winning or losing does not matter. It is how much effort one puts into his or her work. From now on, I know that I am a leader if my efforts have made a difference in one individual's life.

The most challenging experience in the Institute was to develop my personal, individual leadership project. When we were presented with this challenge, we were given no suggestions and no boundaries. However, we were told that it would only be successful (not that it had to be successful) if we reached for an issue that lay close to our hearts. With that in mind, I decided to concentrate on self-esteem in young girls. Even though the world we live in is look-obsessed and is a culture that is poisoning to young girls. Even though there have been major advances for women, levels of sexism continue to increase causing girls to hide their creative spirits and destroy their self-esteem. Everyday girls consider suicide, develop an eating disorder, and grow less curious and

inclined to take risks. Many girls blame themselves and fail to look at the world around them.

When the opportunity arose to do a leadership project, I decided that helping with this problem was something that I felt strongly about and was close to my heart.

Somewhere in my life I was blessed with mentors ( be it parents, coaches, friends) who helped me develop a positive self image which has helped me to be successful in life.

Wanting to make a difference in girls lives, my main goal became to help girls discover their true selves and to present them with tools to handle peer pressure situations that would tempt them to steer away from their true selves. I developed a program to be implemented with small groups of girls around the ages of twelve and thirteen ( this is the age of puberty and peer pressure). I am currently working with the Girl Scouts of America to implement this program.

This project gave me the opportunity to establish a vision and to set goals while remaining flexible and patient. I addressed certain issues that helped to develop my leadership skills. I was forced to weigh the circumstances and make the best decisions. It gave me the opportunities to be a leader on individual levels. I would consider myself successful if I made a difference in one girl's life.

My experience in ELI has provided me with confidence to take on the challenges of life. The skills I have learned will stay with me forever and enable me to be successful throughout my college and work careers. Overall, ELI has shown me the importance of networking. Being in the Institute has put me in touch with wonderful UK faculty members and given me opportunities that I would never have experienced. To continue

the ideas of my individual leadership project, I will be working with the Race Relations Council in Lexington.