

Joseph Ruschell

Reflecting on my semester's endeavor of developing my leadership skills, I realize that what stood out to me is two-fold. First were the struggles and frustrations of the individual leadership project. Allow me to elaborate. I have always had a deeply rooted desire to improve the quality of public education in the state of Kentucky, so for my project, I decided that I wanted to find a way to start on this endeavor. The idea that came to fruition in my mind was to set up a network of tutors from the University of Kentucky to work with children in the ESS Programs of the area elementary schools. The ESS program targets "at-risk" students, in other words, students who are at least a grade level behind in subjects such as reading, math, and others, and provides them with an extra hour of instruction once or twice a week.

As I labored to find contacts at the schools and visit them in order to become acquainted with the program, it was smooth sailing and I had the feeling the project might go off without a hitch. But I soon learned that it is impossible to create a group from scratch without running into serious difficulty. My difficulty came in finding an organization on campus that I could work with and would be willing to volunteer. After I found my first strong lead, I focused all my attention on this one group, and tried to give them some ownership of my project. As I soon learned, only focusing on one group was a big mistake, for as the semester wore on, and spring break came and went, I suddenly realized that my projected tutor source was not going to come through, and I realized that being a leader involves covering all the bases, and leaving absolutely no chance that an idea will not make it to reality.

As my frustration mounted, my mentor group attempted to come to the rescue. As I sat dejected in our group early one Thursday evening, our mentor said, "Joe, you've sparked a lot of flames, and you have to nurture them if you want to keep them burning." Later that night, the simple meaning behind this comment dawned on me and I was reenergized by the help I was able to give my group members and the confidence that they had in my vision. Of course, all of these realizations happened late in the semester, but I was beginning to sense another aspect of ELI that I believe might have been the most important to me, and it depends directly on the people with whom I was surrounded.

I can't help but smile as class days and discussions pop into my head, and I see more clearly the development of the class from twenty-seven individuals into a cohesive unit. This is truly the most remarkable power that ELI has. Going into the program, there is so much talk of the leadership project and your personal development as a leader, yet coming out, it is clear that this has nothing to do with one person. Rather, the enrichment of ELI is hidden in the quality of person it attracts, and its uncanny ability to bring people together.

At the beginning of our time together, we stared each other down, all motivated beings seeking to come to a deeper understanding of how we could make a difference. All I had heard from the participants of years past was how close the group came during the semester, but as I looked around at orientation, I admittedly had my doubts about this actually occurring.

And for a while I thought I was right. During a session facilitated by Elizabeth Bates, the ELI coordinator, we talked about group dynamics and the phases that groups go through in order to truly come together. As she spoke, I remember thinking that the

rubric we were discussing wasn't really applying to our class, and only later did I realize that we were moving through the phases just as they are prescribed. My fears that perhaps we were an incompatible group came to their peak when we tried to plan our group community service project. It was a disaster. We were in a room, by ourselves, and there was entirely too much "leadership" being offered by too many people. The experience equated into two of the longest hours of my life. The voices (loud ones at times) were there, but no one was able to fall into the role that was needed by the group. Everyone wanted to be a leader, but no one wanted to lead. I realized that day perhaps more than any other that the "leaders" at the microphone can tear apart a fortress faster than it took the many leaders involved to build it.

But we survived the day, and, interestingly enough, by the time of our final activity, a ropes course, we had built up a trust and become a group that could depend on each other. I believe that now, that after all we have been through, we could be given any problem and together we would solve it. I cannot pinpoint where this change occurred during the class, but I felt a bond on that last day that was more than classmates, more than a group Û we could have possibly been considered a team.

So as I take my leave from ELI, it is, as always, important to look ahead, and have a vision of how past experiences can help in molding future ones. My desire to improve the quality of education in Kentucky is as stronger than it has ever been, and I have realized the importance of having multiple avenues to follow and to explore all possible resources. More importantly, however, I have a new respect and understanding for the necessity of team building. Groups of people can be brought together, and the stronger

the bond between them, the more they will want, and will subsequently be able to accomplish expands exponentially.