

## **Jason Rahmel**

### *Opening Envelopes; Opening Doors*

The most exciting and rewarding experiences in life are those which we as individuals go into with an open mind and a will to learn. To be honest, I never had heard of the Emerging Leaders Institute until late in my first semester of my freshman year. The application envelope arrived in my dormitory mailbox and was quickly discarded somewhere onto my cluttered desk. I felt that my time could be better spent doing something other than just reading another piece of campus mail. A few days later, during one of my compulsive room cleanings, I came across the envelope which I had discarded a few days previously. To my surprise this was not just another bill or campus newsletter. It instead came from the Emerging Leader Institute. My curiosity peaked ; I opened the envelope to find an amazing opportunity at my fingertips. The letter and information packet stated the Emerging Leaders Institute, or ELI, was a unique small group experience that dealt with leadership and community service. After checking up on the program at the ELI website, I decided that this was something that was right for me. I spent that night composing my essays for the application and spent the next week waiting for a reply concerning my admission to the program. About a week later the course coordinator called and said that she was pleased to invite me to participate in the Spring 2002 Emerging Leaders Institute. A new and exciting journey had begun.

I walked into the opening day retreat still not really sure what to expect. I still had doubts if ELI was right for me. Four months later, I can say that it was all I had hoped for and wanted out of such a class. The Institute allowed me to come into contact with some wonderful campus faculty and administrators. I had never envisioned that I would be

given the opportunity during my college career to hear the words and wisdom of some of the foremost minds on the University of Kentucky campus. Twice a week I was given the opportunity to hear professional individuals present on important matters such as time management, communication, self-reflection, and diversity. Each individual was able to open my mind to new possibilities concerning these aspects of leadership. I was also able to gain new perspective on these leadership topics through conversation and dialogue with the other members of my ELI class. Each participant in the class had a unique and different view on leadership and what it meant it to be a leader. These separate views allowed me to open my mind to the fact that not every person thinks or acts in the same manner; allowing me to understand that being a leader means that we should be accepting and understand of other individuals' points of view.

The members of the ELI class were another great part of the experience. It is difficult in the university setting to truly get to know those around you. The ELI experience allowed me to spend time getting to really know individuals from a variety of backgrounds and beliefs. The personal interaction and contact that is a part of ELI allowed me to meet new friends and branch out around campus. Individuals that would have normally been just faces in the crowd have become my good friends.

Perhaps the greatest part of the ELI experience came from the small group sessions that I was part of every week. The ELI class is broken down into smaller groups which become the backbone of the ELI class. Each small group works together to discuss their individual community service project, their group community service project, and their reflections of the week past.

These small groups provided a comforting and relaxing atmosphere where group members could discuss anything from personal problems to success and achievements. These groups also provide close friendships and an opportunity to genuinely meet people from all walks of campus life. They also allow you to make connections with individuals and groups that you had previously been unaware of. These small group sessions were always looked forward to, and there is not a single minute I spent with mine that I regret. The ELI experience is something I would recommend to every college freshman looking for something different and rewarding in university life. It provides a completely different atmosphere than you could find anywhere else on campus. The small size of the class allows for a great chance to meet new people and really interact. And the presenters provide exciting information and strategies that can easily be used to enhance an individual's leadership techniques. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the class is the opportunity to take part in both an individual and group community service project. It allows participants the chance to apply their leadership skills, as well as allowing them to reach out into the community. These aspects create an exciting atmosphere for both education and application.

I will leave the ELI program with much more than I came into it with. It is the type of program where, if you put forth some real effort, the reward is great. Through ELI I have both a better understanding of myself, as well as a better understanding of those around me. I also have honed some skills that will have a dramatic effect on my leadership and performance in the future. I understand now that I have both strengths and weaknesses in my leadership style. But through ELI, I can now better concentrate on my strengths, and minimize my weaknesses.

