

The ELI Experience

Emerging Leader Institute is more than just a class. It is an experience. Furthermore, it has been one of the best experiences of my first year of college. From class twice a week, to weekly mentor meetings, to the group service project, and finally my individual project, I am amazed by how much I have learned and how much I have grown in three short months. ELI has provided me with numerous skills that will be beneficial during not only my next few years of college, but also beyond.

On that Saturday morning, at our first class, I remember feeling both overwhelmed and excited. I was impressed and slightly intimidated by all the awesome things my peers had done and I could not wait to get to know them better. I was already worrying about the individual project. However, more than anything else, I was excited about the semester that was ahead of me. I had absolutely no clue what I was getting myself into, but I had a feeling that it was going to be fun to find out and it was.

One of the sessions that really stands out to me is the DISC profile and the discussion of leadership styles. I learned that I have an IS leadership style, which describes me perfectly and showed up in many of things I did during the semester. Through my Influencing leadership style I tend to generate enthusiasm, entertain people, and be optimistic. I thrive off of social and public recognition of my accomplishments. However, I struggle with being direct and firm, concentrating on the task, being realistic, and time management. Through my Steadying leadership style, I tend to be consistent, helpful, and loyal. I prefer minimal conflict and predictability. I have trouble being

flexible, prioritizing, and dealing with pressure and change. The DISC profile helped me to recognize my strengths and weakness. This allowed me to try to maximize my strengths and work on improving my weaknesses.

Another valuable lesson was the class on conflict resolution. As my leadership profile showed, I prefer minimal conflict and the examples we went over in class taught me new and different ways to settle conflicts. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument showed that I tend to either compromise, accommodate, or avoid. I really dislike conflicts and I will try my hardest to resolve them. Most of the time, I will even compromise some of my own positions, just to find a solution to the problem. Ron Hustedde's discussion challenged us to look at problems in a different way and come up with a solution that benefits both parties. He encouraged me to not give in so easily and to try a little bit harder to collaborate, instead of compromise.

I learned a great deal during my semester in ELI, but the most helpful session to me personally was Rachel Zeillmann's discussion on time management. Before ELI, I knew that I was not good at managing my time, but I did not know how bad I truly was. Rachel handed out two schedules. One for our plans for the week and the other for what we actually did. I tried it for one day and my two schedules looked like they were from two different days or two different people. I always complete my tasks and each item is always crossed off my to do list before I go to bed at night. However, I procrastinate better than anyone else I know. This often means that I do not get enough sleep and that I am stressed out on a regular basis. I have good intentions to work ahead, but it never seems to happen. I really struggle with prioritizing and I get distracted easily, which means that my work is rarely one of my first priorities. This leads people to think that I

am trying to do too much and I am often told to cut back on my activities. However, through ELI, I recognized the source of my problem, which was time management. I am not trying to do too much; I just need to make better use of my time. ELI and specifically my small group became a support system. They not only encouraged me to prioritize and concentrate, but they also held me accountable for my ELI project. I knew that each week at our Wednesday meetings, I needed to have accomplished something. This meant that in order to have time to work on my individual project, I had to work ahead on my other school work, which meant that I had to try to create a schedule and stick to it. I still really struggle with managing my time, but I have improved. I also now know how much of a weakness it is and therefore, I know that I need to try even harder to manage my time.

As a whole, Emerging Leader Institute has been a very rewarding experience. It has challenged me to be the leader and person that I want to be. I was challenged the most by my individual project. It took me quite awhile to come up with an idea, but through brainstorming with my small group, I decided that I wanted to make UK a friendlier campus. Many of my friends had transferred after only the first semester or were planning to transfer at the end of their freshman and I wanted to do something to help freshman stay at UK. By making UK a friendlier campus, it would be easier for freshman to make friends, which would then make them feel more comfortable here. At first it seemed simple; I needed to come up with events where UK students could show their school spirit. This increase in school spirit would give all students a common bond, which would therefore make UK friendlier.

I used Lori Garkavich's asset based approach to determine what benefits UK already had that could help me with my project. Many of the assets I thought of were already being used productively, but there was one main asset that I felt we were not using at all. We have the vast majority of freshman living on campus in UK's residence halls, which is awesome, but we do not do anything with them. We do not do much to help them adjust to college and make friends. We have a great Greek community and those in it are 28% more likely to stay, so I wanted to focus more on those not in the Greek system. I researched the first year retention rates of the University of Kentucky and other similar school and I noticed that UK's retention rate of 77%, was higher than other Kentucky state schools, but lower than many of our benchmark schools. I knew that the freshman retention rate was an issue, but I did not realize how huge of an issue it was. Therefore, I wanted to concentrate on freshman, especially those living in the residence halls.

I decided to start at the top and work my way down. My original idea was to have a huge competition between all the dorms called Dorm Wars. It would consist of three main parts, an actual competition, with activities such as volleyball and tug-of-war, a best T-shirt competition and a charity drive. It would culminate with a bonfire the night before a football game. My mentor, Rachel Zeillmann, sent me to go see Winn Stephens, who was a huge help. He helped me realize that I needed to dream big, but still be realistic. We decided that I did not need to have a huge event to accomplish my goal of making UK a friendlier campus. I considered just having a South Campus Dorm Wars, but it still seemed too big. After that, we came up with The Battle Between the Two Towers, but I would still have to do a lot of planning and planning a huge event was not really realistic

for me at the moment. Therefore, we came up with the idea of having a Blanding Tower Relay for Life Team, which would allow me to make my dorm friendlier and help people make friends, but the planning would be done for me. I had finally found a realistic project that would also help me to make UK friendlier.

My Relay for Life Team was not as easy to pull together as I thought it would be. My hall director was not very cooperative and I had to meet with him four times before he decided to let me do my project. I wanted to do my project, but he did not want to do any work. We had to collaborate and it took me awhile to convince him that I would do absolutely everything and he did not have to any work at all. Finally, on April 16th and 17th, The Blanding Tower Team participated in the University of Kentucky's Relay for Life. At first, I was disappointed that my team consisted only of my friends, but once we got there we made friends with some other teams and we still met new people. Everyone made new friends, helped raise money for the American Cancer Society, and had a good time. Overall, my project was a success.

Through my individual project, I not only came up with an idea, but ELI provided me with the encouragement and support system I needed to follow through and make my idea a reality. I learned a lot about myself in the process. My IS leadership style was definitely noticeable. I was very good at motivating my team, being optimistic, and keeping them entertained, but I struggled to be flexible and manage my time. I learned that sometimes it is better to work from the bottom, my friends and my dorm, up, the University at whole, in order to accomplish a goal. My project has also helped me to be more confident in my leadership abilities and I now know that I can be more than just the motivator. I tend to always work with other people, but my project made me step up to

the plate and do it on my own. I now know that I can be serious when I need to be and I now know that I can be the one person completely in charge of a successful project.

At the end of my presentation, I encouraged my classmates to smile, be friendly, and say hello to people they know on campus. It is little things like this that truly make UK seem friendlier and hopefully it spreads. Little by little, I hope to accomplish my goal. However, the greatest outcome of my project has been my personal growth. There are so many things that I want to do now. Eventually, I would like to be a tour guide. Many of my favorite freshman year memories are from Sorority Recruitment Week, my first week on campus, so I also would like to be a Gamma Chi. I want to help new freshman have as awesome of a first week as I did. Sometimes, the University of Kentucky is just not the right school, but I want students to have every opportunity to decide that UK is the school for them. I have had so many positive experiences here at the University of Kentucky and I want to pass them on. No matter where I end up in the next few years or even beyond, I know that I will take the lessons I learned in ELI with me.

This semester in ELI, I have learned more than I ever thought possible and I have met so many wonderful people. My peers have both inspired me and challenged me. I could not have asked for more positive, supportive, and encouraging classmates. My peers have become more than just my classmates, they have become my friends. I honestly can not wait to see and hear about all the awesome things that they are going to do in the next few years. Emerging Leader Institute is truly an experience that I will never forget.