

ELI Final Paper

Just as advertised, the Emerging Leader Institute was a class like no other. Granted, I am only a freshman, but I can perceive that it will be different and have a greater impact on me than any other class that I will take in my career at the University of Kentucky. Through my participation in the activities outside of class, I have really developed another aspect of my leadership capabilities. I truly hope to keep building on the progress I have made within myself this semester through ELI and apply what I have learned to many other aspect of my life. ELI was not a life-changing experience (despite what many will say, they are simply overstating its importance), but it was a very helpful class that really encouraged the cultivation of leadership skills. However, it is very possible for someone to turn what he or she learned in ELI into such a life-altering experience or decision because what was taught in the class is very fundamental to responsible, efficient leadership in any situation or position.

My individual project that was assigned had the by far greatest impact upon me and my leadership abilities. I did not get the chance to play a large role in organizing and preparing for the group service project, which was a result of both my focus on my individual project and a simple lack of time due to my classes. I feel that if it would have worked out for me to play a larger role than I did in the group project, it might have had a similar impact upon me, but it did not work out that way. However, for my individual project, I chose to run a soccer camp at a local YMCA club that lasted for three consecutive Sundays for two hours each date (I have completed two of the sessions, the next will be this Sunday, May 1.). The turnout for these has been great, and each session to date has run incredibly smooth. However, because I have played soccer my entire life and coached for many years, I knew going into this that the challenge within the project would not lie in execution, but in initiation, organization, and preparation for

the sessions, and my expectations proved true. All of those challenges occurred because I was not used to being the executive in such a large project. I mean, I have served in multiple offices throughout high school, but there always was a sponsor to provide the contacts and do the grunt work. In this situation, I was person responsible for finding a place to do it, working with someone to find dates that would work, and marketing the clinic. I first needed to find a field to play on because, obviously, soccer cannot be played without a field. I also was hoping to find an organization (that had a field!) to sponsor me so that the marketing would be easier and so that the session would have the credibility needed to draw people to sign up for it. I was put in contact with Brent Cornett, the senior program coordinator for the North Lexington YMCA, who have a soccer field and league, and immediately met with him. He absolutely loved the idea, we got the dates down, and discussed how to market it and set up another meeting time to finalize the details. That took place in early March, and that is when the trouble began. I could not get in contact with Brent for over one month. The day of our second meeting, he had another meeting run over so he could not make it. I honestly tried to call or email him at least once a day for over three weeks without reply. This was causing me to extremely doubt that my project would be successful because it was crucial that we meet so I could discuss what to put on the flyer so that the session could be marketed. Through my persistence (the people at the front desk of the YMCA might call it rudeness), I was able to finally catch Brent while he was at the office. We got the flier out within two days, and within a week, there were 15 kids signed up.

Through organizing and planning this project alone certain traits of mine have really grown, and I have proved that I can become a better leader, something I was not sure could occur. The main challenge this project presented for me, and the one I learned the most from, was that it was completely my responsibility to take care of every aspect. In most leadership

positions I have been in, I have not been the one who is at the very top. That is not to say I have never had a true leadership role, because I have, but I have always had someone above me directing me how to lead and what to do. This was a drastic change for me, and I now appreciate what all goes into organizing a large event, as I saw the effort put into a small soccer clinic. Through all the meeting, trying to meet, calling, trying to call, designing the flier, and marketing the event at some of the other YMCA functions, this was a huge commitment for me. Through this experience, I have really learned how to handle things on my own and learned the necessary steps to take when undertaking a task on my own, or holding the top position.

Another critical aspect of leadership I had underestimated before I was burned by it in this project was the importance of effective communication. An extreme lack of communication was the single-greatest obstacle I faced in this project, and it almost caused me to have a stroke. When I could not communicate with Brent, and time was dwindling, I was incredibly nervous about completing the project. I even, at one point, started to reconsider what I was doing because I was certain that this was not going to work and I would fail the course. It is not even the actual communication that was so important in this situation, because every time we talked it was for less than five minutes, but it was the availability to communicate. Now, I am not trying to degrade Brent, because he did an excellent job helping me with everything I have been able to do, but he is not an accessible person at all, and he is in a leadership position within his organization. So indirectly I have learned that to be an effective leader one must be accessible and open for communication. This not only makes it easy to communicate with others, but it also instills the confidence in colleagues that you are accessible and if they have a problem they will be able to contact you with a problem. I did not have this confidence at all in this experience.

Another aspect that I learned a lot about in this project is one that not only pertains to leadership, but also applies itself from a marketing standpoint. This may be an extension of the lack of communication described above, but as the project drew on, I realized that my project was not exactly at the top of Brent's list of priorities. While this is understandable from his point of view, it should have been my responsibility to make sure that he understood that it should have been extremely important. As time went on, I did begin to assert myself and let him know that this was going to happen on these dates and there were certain things he had to do by a certain time. It was my persistence and assertion in the long run that I feel made him take me seriously. Therefore, one thing I learned was to have that attitude from the get go. It is still very possible to be persistent and assertive without being rude, and I felt I walked that thin line very well.

In all the aspects I have grown and all the small lessons I have learned in this project, the most important thing is that I walk away with the confidence and ability to apply what I have learned to my leadership in other areas of my life. This class is targeted at younger college students so that they might apply themselves to the university and make a difference, or emerge, and this is what I plan to do. I don't think this class has inspired me to become the next Student Government President, but more than anything it has shown me that the leaders in this community are not demigods, they're real people, and I can compete with them. And, in all honesty, I do not know if it is the impact this class has had or simply the terrible situation within my fraternity (I'm sure it's a combination of both), but I am fed up with how things are run and I am going to run for every single office in the fraternity and make a change. That is what this class is all about, instilling students with the confidence they need to stand up and make a change on a campus that can be intimidating at times.

In the situation with the fraternity, I will need all of the skills I have learned in my project, such as the persistence and assertiveness, because it is almost impossible to mobilize a group of college guys to do something with little or no reward other than self pride. Also, communication is an incredibly large portion of being effective within the fraternity because it has over one hundred active brothers who are spread out across Lexington and all operating on different schedules and who only meet once a week (where less than fifty show). Most of the problems that now exist within the fraternity are there because of lack of communication and organization. Both of these problems I feel ready to take on in part because of how the individual project prepared me.

While it is very important to apply what I have learned to a specific goal to put the knowledge to use, it also important for me to notice how I have changed because of the work I have done this semester through ELI. It may seem cliché and overused when writing this paper, but when I see a problem that I truly care about and is worthwhile to me (tough criteria to get past), I really look to see what I CAN do to change it instead of looking to see what COULD be done. I really don't think it is so much of a change of personality, but one of attitude and confidence. If I care about something to get mad about it, I now have the confidence to do something about it in some form or fashion. I may not lead a revolt or start the next American revolution, but I now feel equipped with the skills, knowledge and confidence to make significant change.