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Emerging Leader Institute

Final Paper

*ELI: A Building Block for the Future*

Throughout life, certain events and occurrences go unnoticed, passing as cars on a highway. However, there are certain happenings that make an impact and alter one's way of living. Personally, I wanted ELI to be one of those passing cars of the highway, fading in the distance never to be remembered. Unbeknownst to me, ELI would be an experience that I will never forget, one that I will keep with me forever. I can proudly say that my tenure in the Emerging Leader Institute had a profound impact on my way of life. Not only did it alter my perception of things, it changed the way I think and act. On paper, ELI is a three-credit course taken pass/fail; however, in reality, it was an epiphany that provided a catalyst for my personal leadership development. Setting foot into the classroom everyday, I knew that I was entering a room filled with overachievers. Surrounded by class presidents, team captains, and acclaimed academic students, there was an aura of motivation and dedication that could not be ignored.

ELI allowed me to find my personal leadership abilities and foster them in order to emerge as a leader. Every day of class there was a new guest speaker, promoting a different aspect of leadership previously unknown to myself. The instructors offered stimulating discussions of how to assess my personal leadership characteristics, challenge the system, problem solve, and weigh and balance my priorities. A combination of all of the discussions and exercises enabled me to evaluate where I stood in life and where I wanted to be. The realization that I was not where I wanted to be forced me to take action and become a leader.

The entire ELI course provided countless illustrations of positive leadership, for example the group ropes course, group exercises, and the individual leadership projects. However, one specific event that stands out in my mind as the epitome of effective leadership was our class community service project. Every individual took on a leadership position in the project, whether involved in the planning, organization, or execution. After setting a goal of an autistic day at the Lexington's Gymnastics Center, committees formed and individuals stepped out as leaders in communications, finance, atmosphere, and food. On the road to our goal, we indeed encountered roadblocks; however, persistence paid off and we overcame all the hindrances. Although I was not as active in the planning as others, I took part in the execution of the project, playing with the autistic children at the gymnastics center. For four hours, I took children around being their personal friend for the day. The time that I spent at the gymnastics center proved to be a memorable one. Bombarded with schoolwork and fraternity management, I tend to lose track of the importance of service. However, it took one day, one afternoon for me to realize what really matters in life. The experience proved to be so rewarding, not physically, but mentally. Four hours of playing with children made my week, knowing that for a short period of time I made a difference in a person's life. Seeing Isaac follow me around the entire center wanting to constantly play on the trampolines and in the pit, let me realize that he looked up to me. When I left for a few minutes, he searched the entire place incessantly in an attempt to find his friend for the day. This experience helped me understand the small victories in leadership and the huge rewards.

Our group community service project encompassed absolutely every single aspect of leadership discussed throughout the semester. As I now glance back at some of the course materials, the strategic action planning guide is an almost exact model of how we approached our

project. Starting with step one; we unknowingly followed the entire guide, not leaving out one step along the way. More than that, our class followed Kouzes and Posner's five characteristics of leadership. The reason that our group community service project had such an impact on me was not only because I had a great time playing with the autistic children or because I felt rewarded after the day was complete, it had an impact on me because it was an absolutely perfect example of leadership. Looking back, I was not aware of this during the process; however, it is true, we executed our project by the book. This realization really helped me to understand the importance of the class and my classmates. I was able to take part in a class that not only fosters the most important quality in life, but the experience also surrounded me by peers with such an intense motivation for leading, which in turn inspired me to step up and take the leadership roles that I currently hold today. Our group project incorporated so very many essential aspects of leadership it cannot be put into words. As an observer at times, I witnessed my peers' difference in leadership through gender, organization, culture, and diversity. I saw firsthand how the different techniques employed by leaders based on the previously listed factors. People invoked different leadership styles, and I realized that those styles are all effective in certain circumstances. Leadership is not concrete, and our classes' diversity in leadership roles provides the evidence to support that claim. The community service project tested everything we learned in the class, acting like a final that the class passed with flying colors. Although I learned so much from the course materials, I cannot give any credit to the material for inspiring me to become a leader. Sure enough it provided a guide on how to lead, but it was not responsible for motivating me to become a leader. I owe 100% of my motivation for leading to my classmates. Each and every one had an inspiring story, experience, or example of how they were leaders and all I could do was look up to them for their accomplishments. I sat in class all semester,

watching and learning from them. As a reserved person, I tend to observe and reflect to myself. Listening to Blake tell of his history and leadership is one example of the type of behavior that I wanted to emulate. Another prime example of leadership is Megan, always taking initiative and always speaking her mind. Katie's leadership and initiative in our group project amazed me. The list goes on and on, and every single person in the class has had the same effect as the three I listed. I truly looked up to these individuals, and they inspired me to run for President of Sigma Phi Epsilon, apply for being a UK 101 peer instructor, and any leadership position I hold in the future.

Although the semester has come to a close and our classmates are departing their separate ways for summer, my leadership is far from over. I am the youngest person in the history of my fraternity to become president. I have one year in office to lead by example and be to others what my peers in ELI have been to me. Having experienced ELI and having the title in the fraternity that I have, I am in a position to truly take my fraternity to the next level by emphasizing leadership. I want to act as a mentor to my chapter, and have individuals look to me as modeling the way for them to follow in my footsteps. The position that I hold sets the bar for the future, and without my time in ELI, I would not have the utmost confidence that I have now to make a difference and be an effective leader. Before this course, I was a bystander. I saw a problem and thought, "Somebody should fix that." I lived a passive life, allowing others to create the change that I wanted to see. I thought that leaders were those who created a big change, ignoring all the small victories that come with leadership. However, ELI proved to be an experience that would shatter all of those false assumptions. After multiple leadership assessments and exercises, I found that leaders are not only those outspoken overachievers. I realized that I had my own leadership style that was just as effective. I found that I was a vocally

reserved, dominating and inspiring individual, and these characteristics are indeed those of successful leaders. Once I understood that I had the capability to lead, I sought out opportunities to put by abilities to practice. I became more involved within my fraternity, organizing events and heading up committees. This made me realize that leadership does not revolve solely around the big picture and huge changes. Rather, leadership entails every aspect of life. I found that I could be a leader by tutoring my friends, doing a favor for a friend, and acting ethically. This is when I understood the leadership concept of modeling the way. By showing others what I can do to be a leader, I am also paving the way for them to follow my example and act as leaders.

In closing, leadership is a continual process; it is not a set of actions, but more a way of living. One thing that helps me to continue the process of leadership is a certain quote that I tell myself every day. It says, "Every day, you can either take one step foreword or take one step backwards." This helps remind me of how my actions each day build on those of the past, and without constantly moving forward, I am only slipping behind. It is with great pride that I can say that I have always had a capability to lead, and it was a combination of the coursework in ELI and the people involved in the class that brought the true leader out. Now that I realize my potential and have begun to develop my abilities, the possibilities for future leadership positions and roles are endless. I changed from having to lead to wanting to lead. Some decisions come with regrets, but the worst thing that can happen is to regret not doing something. I am so glad that I chose to participate in ELI because if not, it would have been a something that I would always regret.

A special thanks goes out to Jared and Angel for making this unforgettable experience happen. It truly shaped my life and is something that I will carry with me for the rest of time.