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Serving as an Undergraduate Instructional Assistant

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It was such an honor to be asked to facilitate a UK 101 class and assist in a Discovery Seminar Program course, that I didn’t fully understand how important my position as Undergraduate Instructional Assistant (UIA) was. My own participation in the program has led me to admire the innovation that recognized the need for, as well as created this amazing program.

The Discovery Seminar Program (DSP) was initiated as a means of providing first-term students with a rich, more personal experience through the courses offered. The University of Kentucky can become a very intimidating place. The students who arrive at UK each fall represent the best and brightest from their high schools and their communities. These students have already proven their ability to be successful, now they must deal with the transitions. DSP introduces first-term students to a college seminar setting. The classes are led by an enthusiastic professor with expertise in and love for the subject.

In some DSP courses, students attending the seminar sign up for a specific section of UK 101. The transitions and basic campus knowledge are addressed in the UK 101 course. DSP students are able to take advantage of the comfortable atmosphere provided in a cohort setting with a group of peers. The DSP/UK 101 cohort program reduces a huge university to a group of friends and eventually a family. These students recognize that they are more than a statistic, but are members of an educational community. This program also provides great faculty contacts and an upper-class mentor to guide students to comfort.

This is where my own experiences begin. I remember very distinctly the training sessions involved in becoming a UIA. Although relatively short, the lessons of what to do in “what-if” situations had me thoroughly frightened. I kept on thinking of the language the trainers were using in regard to the students I would be assisting. It made me think of my students as cookies fresh out of their molds. They suggested that some would be extroverted, while others introverted, some might have substance abuse problems, others depression issues. I kept wondering, how in the world with all of these possible concerns, does anyone make it through freshman year at UK?

Then the trainers began to supply a variety of answers; most would ultimately stem from me. As an instructional assistant I must perform several duties; in my studies I must serve as an exceptional student, in social situations an exceptional person, as an instructor and mentor I must be seen as a knowledgeable resource. I often wondered how the students would come to view me, and if it would
be the revered way I viewed my own instructors and anyone associated with them.

Regardless of how they came to see me, I quickly tried to figure each of them out. My training had made me much more attuned to the hint of any possible problem. I was able to utilize the journals that my professor required the students to keep, to see that they had quickly come to trust me. Their entries reintroduced me to many of the emotions I felt upon entering UK, as well as new struggles. Although some of the problems were more serious than others, I quickly realized just how important the UIA position is.

The most important part of my position quickly became “my students.” They were each so unique, but I could see myself in each one of them. Each one of them left an indelible mark. They reminded me what it was like to begin reaching toward a new goal, and I was so pleased to have had the training and support to help them. The most amazing thing to witness throughout the class was how my students grew and matured. The friendships they forged, are still apparent as I see them on campus, and read their posts on Facebook.

Our class was one that focused on a number of controversial issues within the history of civil liberties, including many topics that are still important. During the seminar, the students were introduced to a variety of opposing positions and were able to gain insights from many guest presenters. The environment fostered dynamic discussions, as well as increased awareness of contrary viewpoints. The students found their own voices as they listened to and evaluated the information that was presented. This increased the participation within the UK 101 orientation class. Because the students were comfortable with each other, they did not hesitate to express their views or answer questions. I hope that these qualities transferred to their other classes as well.

The last day of class was a huge milestone for my students; I could not wait to experience this wonderful goal with them. I was no longer their UIA. I no longer needed to tell students to “look at your syllabus,” nor would I be receiving journals and getting a glimpse into their daily lives. Our meetings at the picnic tables, while dodging squirrels flinging acorns, ultimately came to an end. These students have proven that they are ready for college and my hope of them gaining independence is now fulfilled. I approached this ending with the same emotions that I approached the beginning of this experience, a mixture of honor and trepidation. While I am pleased to have been selected to occupy this position, I was reluctant to give it up. What will happen to my students, who will ultimately succeed and who, if anyone, will not? More importantly, what kind of a role have I played in each of those possibilities?

My DSP professor explained UK and the reasons for attending such a prestigious university exactly, when he said “students can take classes anywhere, it is the opportunities that make a university worth attending.” I wish that I could have had a mentor like him as a freshman, his discussion of various opportunities makes me want to get very involved with everything. I feel very fortunate to have him as a mentor now. I not only hope that he and this program have the same effect on my students as they had on me. I also hope that my students are able to grasp how fortunate they are to have had this experience. My students have experienced a huge milestone in their academic career. The way that they have progressed will ultimately determine much of their futures. Some of them have clearly been ready for this since high school, while some are still working things out. This point, I believe reflects the ultimate goal of the Discovery Seminar Program as well as UK 101. Through assembling a variety of students, and attempting to create a “community,” they will be given the skills and role models to focus their goals and the journeys that will take them there. Even those who have not achieved academic or personal maturity are able to see what their goals require. Students can begin to understand what is expected and comprehend what they want to achieve, while simultaneously gaining a support system. I have very high hopes for each of them, and am happy to have had the chance to know them.