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Lessons Learned: Three Student Leaders Reflect on Their Experiences in the Berry College ESL Program

Meghan Albritton, Emily Mather, and Victoria Millard

In this reflective Student Voices piece, three student leaders reflect on their experiences in the Berry College English as a second language (ESL) program. Please see the accompanying article written by Meghan Albritton, Emily Mather, and Victoria Millard's faculty mentors about the unanticipated ripple effects of the Berry College ESL program (Barnes & Tate, 2021).

Emily Mather

My experience with the Berry College ESL program has had a great impact on me, both in terms of the development of my leadership skills and my understanding of social issues. Working closely with the immigrant community helped me recognize the difficulties many individuals face, which has encouraged me both to vocalize my support to immigrant individuals and to educate other members of my community about the particular challenges faced by immigrants. My work with ESL has also inspired me to actively support immigrant families within my community by tutoring children and acting as an interpreter or translator for parents communicating with school staff. Moreover, my leadership role in the ESL program allowed me to develop leadership skills such as humility and respect.

One of the surprising leadership skills I have learned in ESL is humility, a lesson that has not been easy for me to learn. I sometimes feel the need to do everything on my own because I fear being thought incapable. Such isolation creates conflict because the desire to prove myself prevents me from accepting help from student coworkers and volunteers who may be able to perform certain tasks more effectively than I can. Pride kept me from recognizing and encouraging the strengths and leadership skills of other students who contribute to the ESL program. The desire to prove myself capable and worthy can best be combated by humility. Recognizing my inability to do everything on my own is not a sign of weakness but rather the beginning of developing myself as a leader.

Additionally, through my involvement with ESL childcare, I have learned the importance of mutual respect and trust. In order for ESL childcare to be a nurturing and loving environment, reciprocal relationships of respect between myself, the volunteers, and the children are essential. I work to cultivate respect and trust in a number of ways. For example, throughout the year, I try to communicate with each volunteer and child at least once each night, calling them by name. When children are acting in ways that harm the ESL environment, I pull them aside and speak to them quietly, thus demonstrating respect for each child and addressing their unique emotional needs. At the halfway point in the semester, I meet with each volunteer to ask questions such as, "Are there any moments you are proud of or any children that you feel you have connected well with?" I intentionally affirm each volunteer, mentioning specific moments in which I noticed them being helpful, kind, and loving. I hope to let the volunteers and children know that I appreciate and respect them.

In addition to contributing to my learning of leadership skills, my work with ESL has helped me become more aware of social issues, especially those related to immigration. Through the ESL program, I witness the struggle of working long hours in a taxing job during the day and then struggling to stay awake during English classes at night. I ache for parents trying to communicate with their children's teachers in a language that is not their own. I hear children expressing fears that their parents will not come home from work because they have been deported. My growing understanding has allowed me to become an ally for immigrants and their families. The exhaustion, fears, and frustrations of the immigrant community are palpable in our ESL program, but their joy, strength, and kindness are vibrant as well. I know and love the ESL students and their children. For this reason, I choose to be an ally for the immigrant community.

Of all my experiences thus far in college, my involvement with the ESL program has been the most meaningful and impactful. Interacting with

the children and volunteers at ESL has taught me the importance of humility, mutual respect, and allyship with marginalized communities. Whether I serve children, immigrant populations, or other individuals, these are lessons I will carry with me beyond graduation.

Victoria Millard

To say that my 4 years working in the Berry College ESL program—2 years as a teacher and 2 years as the student director—have influenced my career path would be an understatement. I never thought my Spanish would be good enough to allow me to be a successful language teacher. However, joining this program in my freshman year of college, initially as a secondary education and chemistry double major, helped me realize that I needed to pursue language teaching instead. I decided to change my major to focus on becoming a Spanish teacher.

The hands-on experience I received in the program allowed me to apply pedagogy that I learned in my education classes to practice, including my personal research on the beliefs of teachers, students, and textbooks regarding pronunciation instruction in the ESL classroom. Teaching in a community-based program allows more flexibility for teachers compared to the specific standards imposed by school-based programs. I experimented with various types of teaching and activities to grow as a teacher and to find the type of teacher I wanted to be in my future language classroom. The skills I learned in my 2 years teaching in the Berry ESL program helped to ease my transition when I traveled to Quito, Ecuador, for 3 weeks to teach English. Both experiences helped me learn how to establish quality relationships with my students.

Along with the hands-on experience I received, I led the program as the student director during my junior and senior year. I coordinated a group of teachers across all proficiency levels to offer classes to an average of 70–80 students per week. I was able to develop important leadership skills such as integrity, patience, and dedication that I will bring with me into my first year of professional teaching. Being an effective classroom teacher is about more than knowing the content; it also includes being a role model to your students through empathy and understanding, knowing that sometimes there are priorities outside of the classroom that students struggle with as well, and guiding students through whatever issues they might deal with inside or outside the classroom. Throughout my 2 years as

student director, I held on to the relationships with my former students and was able to advocate for them in ways that were not possible when I was in the classroom. Learning how to advocate for the needs of the ESL students will help me do the same for my future students, as I am now better able to understand the different dimensions of a language student's experience.

Before working in the ESL program, I had limited interactions with immigrants. The stories that my students told me will stick with me forever—stories about their struggles coming into the country and their fears of having to return or of the impact of the current political climate of the United States. Listening to these stories made me a better teacher because I grew in my empathy for my students and for immigrant communities. As student director, I advocated for students' voices and helped students find ways to stay involved in the community; I brought in local professionals to discuss immigrant rights and informed the students of other opportunities to continue practicing their English outside of the classroom.

I consider myself to be more of an advocate for the immigrant community because of the influence of the ESL program, something I wish to continue in my teaching career, possibly starting an ESL program of my own one day. I hope that I will be able to continue having an impact on the immigrant community by listening, empathizing, and learning as I continue to grow as an educator for my students now and in the future.

Meghan Albritton

I joined the ESL program my first semester at Berry College, and through engaging with the families, staff, and volunteers, this program remained my favorite part of the week. I didn't realize exactly what I was getting into or the lasting impact that the program and the people would have on me, but my life was changed for the better. Through participation in the Berry College ESL program, I gained new skills, perspectives, and an understanding of the challenges that many immigrants experience in this country.

During my 4 years with the ESL program, I gained leadership skills. As the childcare director, I was responsible for coordinating a team of volunteers, organizing the weekly and annual activities, and teaching and supporting the kids and their families that we were privileged to know and serve. I learned to adapt, to think critically, to have an open mind, and to prioritize tasks through my involvement with this program. I

also learned to listen to those around me, to strive to make a difference through the relationships I built, and to embrace the differences among cultures and languages.

In learning to lead better, I was pushed out of my comfort zone on a regular basis, which is where all my growth happened. My communication skills, beliefs, and the way I think were regularly challenged, which eventually made me more confident in the things I stand for and the decisions that I had to make. I learned that it's okay to not know all the answers, and I also learned that sometimes stepping back and depending on others so that they can get out of their own comfort zones is a valuable leadership skill. I recognized that leading is sometimes simply sitting with a child or listening to their mom to build a relationship, while other times it's speaking up even when you are afraid to do so. The families and volunteers that I worked with taught me that leading is just several quiet acts of bravery and kindness rolled into one.

My time in the ESL program also provided me with so many insights into the lives of immigrants in our country. My students made me aware of the severity of the problems the immigrant community has faced while looking for better lives for their families. I heard stories from little kids who cried at school because they didn't know how to ask to go to the bathroom. One child told me how they missed school to accompany their mom to doctors' appointments, and they had to translate when the doctor said that their mom's cancer was back. I saw little ones who didn't get three meals a day and who didn't always have a jacket or a pencil when they needed one, and yet I was continually amazed by their strength and resilience despite all the challenges students and their families faced. From them I learned what it means to work hard, and in them I found examples of what it means to be brave and to persevere and what sacrifice and holding on to hope really looks like.

More than just English, we taught students and their children that they can do whatever they want in the future, that their education is important, and that they have people rooting for them. We showed them that what they had to offer was enough, and we got to watch as they grew up in that confidence and support. Participating in the ESL program at Berry College was an absolute joy, and I will forever be grateful for the joy and hope I garnered through getting to work with so many families and volunteers with whom I shared a common love for the language and for other

people. I know for a fact that I learned so much more from those kids than they learned from me, and I'm a better educator, leader, and advocate because I knew them.

Reference

Barnes, J., & Tate, J. (2021). An on-campus ESL program reflects on the ripple effects for students, the institution, the local community, and beyond. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 14(1). <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol14/iss1/9>

About the Authors

Emily Mather graduated from Berry College in 2021 with a B.A. in Spanish and a certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. She is currently pursuing an M.A. in Spanish at Bowling Green State University. Victoria Millard graduated from Berry College in 2020 with a bachelor's degree in secondary education and Spanish. She is currently an M.Ed. in Languages student at the College of Charleston and teaches Spanish II and III at St. Pius X Catholic High School in Atlanta, Georgia. Meghan Albritton graduated from Berry College in 2019 with degrees in Spanish and environmental science. After spending a year in Spain teaching and a year as an AmeriCorps volunteer, she is currently pursuing an MPH and an M.S. in geography at Virginia Tech.