

Leading Through Connection: My Camp Bearcats Peer Leader Experience

Serving as a Peer Leader for Camp Bearcats during my sophomore year was more than just a fun way to kick off the school year—it was a turning point in my journey as a leader and mentor. Camp Bearcats is a weekend retreat designed to help first-year students build connections, gain confidence, and feel more at home at the University of Cincinnati. As one of the peer leaders, I worked with a group of ten students (among the ninety total campers) to guide them through team-building exercises, personal reflection, and shared experiences. Going into camp, my personal goal was to step into a leadership role that would prepare me to become a Resident Advisor. What I didn't expect was how much the experience would teach me about myself in the process.

Throughout the weekend, I found myself growing in real-time—learning how to build trust, foster inclusion, and create a supportive space for new students. One of the most meaningful moments came at the end of camp, when several students from my group handed me personal letters and notes, sharing how much the experience meant to them. That small but powerful gesture reminded me that leadership isn't about being the loudest voice—it's about being present, intentional, and human. In this reflection, I'll explore what I learned about myself through Camp Bearcats, the challenges I faced and overcame, and how this experience helped me grow in alignment with the University Honors Program's focus on inclusion. More importantly, I'll share why this experience truly mattered and how it continues to shape the goals I have for myself moving forward.

Going into Camp Bearcats, I was excited but also unsure of what kind of leader I would be. I had leadership experience before, but this was one of the first times where I was responsible for helping a group of completely new students feel safe, welcomed, and excited about college. I quickly realized that my strengths—humor, curiosity, and empathy—weren't just personality traits; they were leadership tools. By leaning into those qualities, I was able to break the ice, get students talking, and slowly create a space where they could be themselves.

What surprised me most was how naturally the connections formed once I stopped trying to “lead” in the traditional sense and instead focused on just being real. I wasn't there to be perfect or to know all the answers—I was there to listen, relate, and support. I learned that being a good leader doesn't mean always taking charge; sometimes it means stepping back and letting others speak, or simply asking the right question. This mindset shift not only helped my group bond more deeply, but it also helped me grow in self-awareness. I began to understand the kind of leader I want to be—one who leads with authenticity and

trust rather than authority or control. The experience gave me a stronger sense of purpose and confirmed that I want to keep mentoring others, both as an RA and beyond.

Despite how rewarding Camp Bearcats was, it wasn't always smooth sailing. One of the biggest challenges I faced was group engagement—especially at the start. Some students were shy, closed off, or clearly nervous about the whole experience. I remember feeling a bit stuck during our first group session, when half the group stayed quiet no matter how many icebreakers or activities I tried. It made me question if I was doing something wrong or if I was failing to connect with them.

But instead of giving up or getting frustrated, I paused to reflect and adapt. I tried asking more open-ended questions, pulling students aside for one-on-one chats, and slowly creating small moments of vulnerability—like sharing my own story of coming to UC from another country. Bit by bit, the dynamic started to shift. Students began talking more, laughing, and even supporting each other. By the end of the weekend, they weren't just engaging—they were invested. The challenge taught me the importance of patience and flexibility. I grew by learning how to read the room, try new approaches, and trust the process even when the results weren't immediate.

Camp Bearcats reminded me that leadership isn't about always having control—it's about building trust and meeting people where they are. I came out of it more confident, more emotionally intelligent, and better prepared for the challenges I'll face as an RA and in any future team environment. The growth I experienced wasn't just in skill, but in mindset. I no longer see challenges as problems to fix quickly, but as opportunities to slow down, connect, and grow.

The Camp Bearcats experience directly aligns with the University Honors Program's focus area of Inclusion. At its core, Camp Bearcats is about making students—many of whom are away from home for the first time—feel like they belong. As a Peer Leader, I saw firsthand how important it is to create spaces where people feel safe to be themselves, ask questions, and form genuine connections. With a group of students from different backgrounds, personalities, and levels of comfort, my job wasn't just to lead them through activities—it was to make sure each person felt seen, heard, and valued.

One of the ways I practiced inclusion was by being intentional about how I communicated. I made space for quieter voices, encouraged mutual respect within the group, and shared parts of my own story to build trust. Being an international student myself, I knew what it felt like to enter a new environment and wonder if I'd fit in. That understanding helped me empathize with my group and lead from a place of compassion. Inclusion, to me, isn't just

about making room for everyone at the table—it's about making sure they feel like they belong there.

Camp Bearcats taught me that small gestures can make a big difference—like asking someone how their day is going, remembering something they mentioned earlier, or simply listening without rushing to respond. These simple acts build trust and foster inclusion in ways that are deeply human. The weekend reminded me that inclusion isn't a one-time action—it's a mindset and a commitment. As I move forward in UHP and my future leadership roles, I plan to carry this mindset with me, working to ensure that every community I'm part of feels as welcoming and open as the one we created at Camp Bearcats.

Camp Bearcats wasn't just a weekend retreat—it was an experience that fundamentally shifted how I think about leadership, connection, and the kind of impact I want to make. It mattered because it gave me the chance to be someone I wish I had when I first started college: a guide, a listener, and a source of steady encouragement. Seeing my group slowly open up, form friendships, and end the weekend feeling more confident reminded me why I'm drawn to roles that involve mentoring and community building. The handwritten notes I received from some of my campers weren't just kind words—they were proof that the work I put in mattered, even in ways I couldn't always see in the moment.

This experience helped clarify a lot about my future. It confirmed that I want to keep creating spaces where people feel supported and empowered, whether that's in residence halls, classrooms, or future workplaces. As someone pursuing engineering, it's easy to get lost in technical challenges—but Camp Bearcats reminded me of the human side of any system or organization. People are at the core of every community, and leadership without empathy doesn't last. The lessons I learned about inclusion, patience, and presence will continue to shape how I approach my role as an RA and any future leadership or mentorship opportunity I take on.

More broadly, Camp Bearcats helped me see the value in slowing down and showing up for others. That mindset is something I want to bring into my work as a Global Citizen Scholar. Whether I'm building innovative solutions in engineering or collaborating across cultures and teams, I'll carry forward the belief that people thrive when they feel heard, included, and encouraged. This experience reminded me that creating that kind of environment is something I'm not only capable of—but deeply committed to.

Looking back, Camp Bearcats was far more than a leadership opportunity—it was a powerful experience of self-discovery, growth, and impact. It taught me that true leadership is less about directing and more about creating space for others to thrive. I learned to lean into my strengths, navigate real challenges, and build a community rooted

in inclusion and empathy. These lessons will stay with me far beyond that one weekend; they've become part of how I see myself as a leader, a mentor, and a member of the University Honors Program.

As I continue my journey—through roles like Resident Advisor, in research, or future professional paths—I'll carry forward what Camp Bearcats gave me: the confidence to lead with compassion, the patience to listen, and the drive to uplift others. It reaffirmed the kind of leader I want to become—one who builds not just projects, but people. And in doing so, it brought me one step closer to the kind of Global Citizen Scholar I aspire to be.