

Student Leadership

by Ashley J. Ryerse

Some of the most important people you'll meet, during your entire lifetime, will be in college. This is why becoming a part of a student association is one of the many keys to a successful college experience. In a student group, you can find a comfort zone, with people of similar interests, supporting a specific cause or interest. For Native students, it is an important way of making friendships and creating solid cultural support networks.

In my experience, being a student leader is self-rewarding for a multitude of reasons. During my undergraduate years, I was honored to serve as Co-chair of Michigan State University's North American Indigenous Student Organization (NAISO), from 2008-2010. Providing leadership to a group of my Native peers and representing at a major university was a humbling experience. It was crucial to understand NAISO's foundation, history and mission as the impetus behind group planning throughout the academic year. When I began my first leadership experience in NAISO, I saw the group as a support network for Native and non-Native people to learn and grow from each other. Our mission inspired the organization in its representation of Native students at Michigan State University (MSU) and developing leaders and representatives within MSU. While undergraduate student organization life is integral in developing leadership skills, I also see it as an important stepping-stone to a door that opens when you reach graduate school.

Currently, I am attending graduate school at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. I am also President of the American Indian Student Association (AISA). Graduate school is a uniquely focused learning environment and student organizations, within this educational structure, assist in facilitating issues particular to the school's focus. Each event and discussion presented by AISA has its foundation in professional development, while serving a distinct benefit to the field. In my perspective, this further illustrates the significant role that leadership plays and the potential each leader has to infuse the organi-



Ashley Ryerse

zation's members with energy and drive towards the group's collective goals. Furthermore, as graduate students' lives are abundantly demanding and active, each scheduled meeting's efficacy is crucial. It is through this group framework that group evolves seamlessly.

Additionally, whether it is a carefully planned collaboration on a specific issue or, more broadly, creating an environment where cultural competency issues can be discussed freely, networking in graduate school is quite different from that of undergraduate work. As a graduate student, you are held to a higher standard of professionalism. This is reflected in the organizational structure of the student association. While there are the essential leadership positions of the group, it is important to understand leaders, at this level, work as facilitators to keep goals and goal attainment in the forefront of the group's consciousness and recognize that each member deserves an opportunity to contribute equally. In essence, the hierarchical nature of many traditional group frameworks is dismissed, in favor of a collaborative, egalitarian structure. Members of graduate level organizations often bring with them their own leadership experiences and skills, which give them the capacity to be effective leaders in their own right. While this dynamic can lay the foundation for conflict, it can also bring fresh and diverse perspectives. A valuable leader will employ active listening skills on all viewpoints, mediating when needed, and helping the group discover new and different paths. This is essential to networking and continuing to develop professionally, not only with-



Ashley and her fellow 2011 Washington University Powwow Co-chairs

in our own group's mission, but in the wider context of our field of study, as well.

Reflecting on the different aspects of being a leader, I embrace the continuous learning and evolution that happens as students make a transition into higher educational institutions. Undergrad was a time of growth, developing as an emerging leader and learning to navigate through organizational system structures. Graduate school leadership solidified my confidence as I reached out to faculty, created partnerships with other student associations and facilitated efficiently between nascent professionals. My strength and assurance is resolutely grounded in the experience of leading at the undergraduate level. Without this foundational experience, I may not have had the courage to lead in this type of setting. Personally, I was taught to live in a way that improves the quality of life of those around me. This is what leadership means to me. The opportunity to build confi-



Ashley and her nephew, Liam, on her graduation day May 2011

Graduate Student Association Leadership

- Mission driven issues are clearly defined by your field of study
- Utilize facilitation skills, as graduate students come with their own leadership skills and experiences and are equally qualified leaders
- Professional development is the core of planning
- Have a strong passion, conviction, strength and confidence for the group's endeavors

dence, while upholding a strong conviction, enhances the passion others feel for the organization. These are the characteristics that are valued in a leader, a person who creates the space for new ideas and enthusiasm for the organization.

In my opinion, I was not born to lead and I am neither extroverted nor outspoken. However, I have risen to this challenge because I believed and was inspired by NAISO's mission. In turn, I became dedicated to the group's principles and realized that I had the strength and confidence to lead a group of my Native colleagues at a professional level. I acknowledge the sense of willingness to lead, as an undergraduate, as an integral learning landmark to assess my skill set, in relation to the needs of the organization. It also gave me a sense of personal reflection in relationships with people and myself. In graduate school, I continue to hone these skills to develop my professional career, to support the professionalism of my colleagues and, ultimately, further the empowerment of my People. ♦

(Ashley Ryerse is a member of the Potawatomi Nation. She is currently working towards her Masters Degree in Social Work at the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. She received her B.A. in Social Work and American Indian Studies, from Michigan State University.)

In my opinion, I was not born to lead and I am neither extroverted nor outspoken. However, I have risen to this challenge because I believed and was inspired by NAISO's mission.