Welcome Home

When I was younger, leadership to me meant that you were involved in extra-curricular activities and everyone liked you, especially teachers. It was drilled into our heads that leadership was a necessary trait to have for applying to colleges, getting a job, etc., but to me, being a leader is so much more than building a strong resume. Being a leader means I value being a mentor, display strong communication skills, and having respectful relationships with professional staff on campus, all to make Minnesota State University, Mankato a great place to be. In this, I want to leave my mark at MSU and be remembered by others as a passionate leader who took great effort in making all college students feel welcomed and help them grow and achieve their goals. I feel a great opportunity to achieve this is by becoming an Orientation Peer Assistant (OPA).

Ask any freshman on campus and I bet many of them can still name who their OPA was during orientation. I know I still remember both of mine almost two years later. Why are Orientation Peer Assistants so remembered? Because OPA’s are usually the first people to interact with incoming students that are close to their age, have gone through freshman year already, and are genuinely happy to help students with any question they have. I feel as a strong leader on campus, the top four leadership qualities I can utilize as an OPA are consistency, discipline, harmony, and empathy. Being consistent and disciplined means I am organized, can be relied upon, and is willing to give all my energy at any time of day. I feel my strongest asset is the ability to lead with harmony. I make sure everyone has a voice on my team, meaning any idea voiced is given an equal chance to weigh out the pros and cons of utilizing it. This is a great skill to have while working with other OPA’s or students during training and orientation sessions, as more student feel comfortable with sharing their opinions. I know a lot of OPA exercises with students deal with “forming a team” to create those first friendships on campus. Being able to lead with harmony can strengthen the relationships between students through mutual trust and understanding, on top of growing into who they really can be here at MSU. The last leadership quality I possess is empathy, the way in which I can relate to others on a more emotional level. Students coming into orientation are excited, nervous, and possibly downright terrified in the face of everything going on. Having empathy for others makes it easier to be able to communicate with students that they are not alone by sharing personal experiences and hardships because ALL freshman go through some sort of emotional turmoil when starting college. Not to mention being an active listener to students who can’t seem to find their niche during orientation can also be helpful. I know as a student I struggled to fit in during my orientation, but as I began my freshman year I found lifelong friends and the support I needed to face challenges through my career at MSU.

One of the biggest challenges I faced recently was through my work as the Residence Hall Association (RHA) as the President. I started my freshman year as a representative for my floor, I1, and became a part of the executive board as the Programming Communications Coordinator my second semester at MSU. In April of 2016, I nominated myself for President and was elected into the position. This opportunity has further strengthened my leadership skills in the areas of my personal leadership style, public speaking, and dealing with interpersonal conflict. I am told often told by professors that I am one of the busiest students they know, juggling RHA, school, and other extra-curricular activities. It’s only understandable that occasionally one these areas will slip, and during my first week back for this semester it was RHA. My leadership style as the President of RHA had led someone to hold animosity towards me, feeling underappreciated as an individual on my executive board. In retaliation, this person started a feud between my coworkers and I over their hurt feelings, leading myself to wanting to give up RHA entirely. Instead, I let the surfaced emotions between everyone die down and faced the conflict head on by reaching out the individual, saying we needed to sit down and have a very important conversation. By doing this it resolved a lot of issues surrounding the topic, and I also discussed how we can continue to improve our team standards for the rest of the year during our next executive board meeting with everyone. Handling conflict is a scary idea, but doing so without the prompt of being forced by another adult let me grow into a more responsible and dedicated leader. It is important for me to be an integral part of RHA, keeping the organization strong, because I want student’s housing needs taken care of so they can focus on other challenges they may have while studying at MSU.

Three of the biggest challenges I feel freshman face when coming to college is how to transition from high school to college academically, how to accept that not everyone they meet will become their friend, and simply put, how to be an “adult”. Every student that steps foot onto MSU’s campus comes from a different background and different skills meaning they will all approach these challenges differently. As an OPA, it would be my job to help them overcome these challenges to the best of my ability. I have been working with eservices for over five years, and I have helped several students map out how to take their generals and what’s best to take with certain classes. Having these skills will hopefully allow students to feel more at ease with how their academics will start in the fall. As far as the other two challenges, by creating a fun, structured environment for students can help them understand they are going to meet a lot of people and it’s going to be overwhelming, but as OPA’s we are here to help guide you these first couple days even if we don’t become best friends. I want students to embrace who they are by being empathetic and an active listener to them, showing that I may not have all the answers, but it will all work out in the end.