

## Nez Perce Student Honors his Leadership Skills on Campus

by Edmund Frazier Myer

Shelby Leighton, 21, Nez Perce, maintains a busy schedule as a senior at Washington State University, mentor for the Native American Student Center and chair of Ku-ah-mah student organization.

Leighton comes from a family of "Cougs." Both his parents, his aunts, uncle, and grandpa all attended WSU. So the decision to attend WSU was an easy one for Leighton.

He said that he went to a lot of games in Pullman growing up. He recalls coming to games when the basketball team made its historic sweet-16 season, and when Klay Thompson led the squad into the NIT. So he was familiar with campus before arriving as a freshman.

Initially, when enrolling as a freshman he said he wanted to study to be a doctor and was focusing on pre-med.

"There were certain diseases I wanted to look at, and maybe try to help solve or at least help contribute in some way," Leighton said.

Knowing he wanted to pursue that specific line of work, Leighton said he knew he had to get into a lab and start doing research. He spent the 2015 summer in Pullman at a muscle mechanics lab studying skeletal muscle, and was rewarded by having some of his research published in the *Journal of Physiology*.

Last year, however, Leighton changed majors. He said being at the stage where he was unsure of his future career was a hard time in his life, as it is for most students trying to figure out what they want to do after college, but he knew that he wanted to somehow be able to use his degree to go back and help his community.

"My source of wanting to be a doctor in the beginning was to come back to my community and help my people and other people in general," Leighton said.

When looking at the best way he could help people, it came down to wanting to get into business or law, and he decided that business may be the best way for him to directly help people.

Leighton knows that with his tribe and many others, the executive and higher-up positions in tribal departments are often filled by non-tribal members.

"It's not that they're not deserving of a job, but I think there is kind of a missing element not knowing the cultural background as much," Leighton said. "I'm sure they go through training or some type of exercise to learn it (Native culture), but not being a tribal person is a bit of a disadvantage for those businesses."

Leighton said his goal is to become a tribal person in an executive role. He hopes to come a strong leader and "help those communities prosper."

Now, Leighton is certified as a business management major and is on track to graduate December 2017. In addition to being a full-time student and taking multiple business classes, he is also a mentor for new Native students, chair of Ku-Ah-Mah, and part of the WSU Tribal Nation Building Leadership Program.

"The first year and a half I was pretty disconnected, and I wanted to get more involved in the community," Leighton said.

He started by filling in for a former mentor who studied abroad for a semester. He said it was kind of tough because the mentees had already built relationships with their prior mentor, but it was the opportunity that he was looking for to get more involved.

He's mentored for the past two years. As a mentor Leighton invites new Native Cougs to the Native American Student Center and helps them feel welcome. For a lot of students who are new to campus, having a familiar face makes them comfortable. He said that he enjoys being able to meet with them and interact throughout the year.

He also helps ensure that the Native students are aware of the resources available to them, whether it's through Native American Programs or through other outlets. He explains that a lot of students are unaware of what is offered, such as tutoring, advising, counseling, scholarships, and activities both at the Native Center and on the campus at large. Some students know about certain resources but they don't always know where to start, so another part of Leighton's role is help answer these question and point them in the right direction.

Leighton said that it's important to have another Native American welcome new Native students to campus "because we are such a small community." He acknowledges that all Native students don't have the same circumstances, but being a tribal person they probably felt the same way, or had a similar upbringing.

"It's hard to get them to open up and be fully unreserved about what they are going through," Leighton said.

Being a mentor has taught him to be persistent, and has helped him develop different methods of interacting with individuals.



Shelby Leighton

Leighton said, "There is a lot of potential in the Native Programs and the effect that it can have on the WSU community and the Native community itself."

"I think the tribal students here should really be willing to get involved, and start exploring their own interests and getting direct experience from that," Leighton said. "That's the best way for them to develop themselves."

Leighton is also the chair of Ku-Ah-Mah, an ASWSU committee and one of the Native American organizations here on campus. As chair his main role is to coordinate and organize the annual round dance, Pah-loots-puu powwow, and various other cultural events the organization hosts throughout the year. He's also attends the ASWSU budget meetings and presents the current status of the committee and what their future goals are.

He said that things such as running meetings, giving presentations, understanding budgets, and being in correspondence with advisors and people in Student Involvement has all helped with the learning curve he had to get over to understand more business management situations.

After he finishes his undergrad, Leighton wants to pursue an MBA and gain more knowledge of how the industry works, then go back in work within his community.

He expects to be in a management position for some type of business or organization, and plans to use the skills he's developing now in college to help him become a better leader in the future. He hopes to one day go to different tribes and help them.

[Native American Programs](#), PO Box 641046, Washington State University, Pullman WA 99164-1046, 509-335-8618, [Contact Us](#)