



# University of Pittsburgh

*Division of Student Affairs*

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## **Staff, faculty, and students explore “privilege” at annual Social Justice Symposium**

“One of the biggest threats to our progress is passivity,” said Pitt student Jahari Mercer. “Our silence can be deafening, but our collective voice can never be diminished, and it is our job to be the voice for every issue that matters.”

Mercer’s sentiment captured the purpose of the Division’s annual Social Justice Symposium, hosted by the Office of Cross Cultural and Leadership Development on Thursday, January 19. The theme of this year’s Symposium, “Creating a Just Community by Unmasking the Faces of Privilege,” called for participants to examine their own respective privileges, while also learning to utilize such privileges for the good of others, who do not enjoy such advantages.

“The word ‘privilege’ has become a divisive and off-putting word for many,” said Vice Provost and Dean of Students Kenyon Bonner. “But today, I ask that you not allow your preconceived notions to impede this learning opportunity. We need to be humble enough to recognize the need for growth and understanding.”

Open to all members of the Pitt community, the Symposium was facilitated by Dr. Diane Goodman, a trainer, consultant, professor, and activist, who has been addressing issues related to diversity for more than thirty years. Dr. Goodman defined “privilege” as “benefits or unearned advantages given to members of a dominant group.” During her presentation, Dr. Goodman utilized an interactive approach to facilitate dialogue and discussion among participants.

“To begin the conversation, we must first examine how social identities—race, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion—shape our experiences of power and privilege,” said Dr. Goodman. “What does privilege look like in our daily lives? And how can we use that privilege to be more effective allies?”

Participants explored such questions through small group discussions, and then shared their general opinions and concerns with the larger group.

From there, focus shifted away from recognition of privilege and toward the concept of “allyship,” which Dr. Goodman defined as “members of privileged groups working in solidarity with people from marginalized groups to take action against oppression.”

“To be an effective ally, we must speak up for others, but not speak *over* them,” said Dr. Goodman. “We must recognize our own privilege, and be willing to listen and understand the experiences of others.”

“As an ally, you must recognize that you are a guest in someone else’s house,” said Sheba Gittens, Academic Advisor of Pitt’s TRIO SSS program. “Don’t bring your baggage into the home and allow it to impede your line of sight.”

The Social Justice Symposium served as the culmination of CCLD's "MLK Week," which included diverse programming aimed at honoring the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"This Symposium allows us to continue to educate ourselves," said Dean Bonner.

"Oftentimes, our perception of our intercultural competencies is skewed. This does not make us bad people. But it means that we must allow ourselves to become a student, so that we can ultimately become better teachers."

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