“Building a Pitt Community” program engages first-year students in reflection on diversity

(PITTSBURGH, PA – August 29, 2017) “We must seek to understand others’ experiences, so that they can understand ours.” Such a message was shared with the Class of 2021 by facilitator Dr. Jamie Washington at the diversity-themed “Building a Pitt Community” session on August 24, 2017. Through an interactive exercise, students were called upon to share aspects of their background, while simultaneously reflecting on and celebrating the diversity of experience and perspective that exists among them.

Dr. Washington led the exercise by reading statements related to identity and past experiences. If a statement applied to them, students were asked to stand. Encouraged to participate only at a level that was comfortable to them, students were able establish an important foundation for community-building: recognizing and validating the experiences and perspectives of others—even when significant differences exist.

“This is what it means to belong to a community,” said Washington, president and founder of Washington Consulting Group (WCG), a multicultural organizational development firm, located in Baltimore, Maryland. “Just because we have diversity, doesn’t mean we engage in it. But right here, right now, you—the Class of 2021—are taking that extra step to not just recognize diversity, but to see the true value of it.”

Kenyon Bonner, vice provost and dean of students, echoed this sentiment during his remarks earlier in the program. “What makes you unique is important to our campus community,” he said. “We’ve made it a priority to assemble a diverse staff, faculty, and student body—so that everybody can see themselves represented. We want everyone to feel like they can succeed here.”

Dean Bonner, who was joined by speakers Linda Williams-Moore, associate dean of students and director of student life, and Provost Patricia Beeson, also challenged students to step out of their comfort zones and embrace opportunities for learning that exist both in- and out-of-the-classroom.

“There is no doubt that you will hear things that make you uncomfortable, as you engage with people who don’t necessarily think like you,” said Dean Bonner. “But embrace those temporary moments of discomfort, because that is how you grow.”

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