Pitt Student Hashaam Jamil Wins Distinguished Emerging Leadership Award

Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences junior Hashaam Jamil received the 2017 Distinguished Emerging Leadership Award at Coro Pittsburgh’s annual Martin Luther King Jr. Leadership Awards ceremony. The awards recognize individuals who have honored the legacy of King by demonstrating an inclusive approach to leadership.

“For me, the most rewarding part about service is watching other people find their passions,” says Jamil. “Seeing people grow and find purpose through service is so inspiring for me.” A native of Woodbridge, N.J., Jamil did not initially have much service experience when he arrived at Pitt, but he quickly developed a passion for it by working with the Office of PittServes as a work-study student.

“By the end of my freshman year, I had become really engaged in community outreach,” says Jamil. “I sought out leadership roles and started to love being a leader. From there, I became a resident assistant and participated in the Emerging Leaders Living Learning Community.”

Jamil is pursuing a double major in psychology and sociology. His college career has been marked by a commitment to service and a desire to promote a culture of diversity and inclusion. He currently volunteers with the Student Civic Engagement Council (SCEC) of PittServes, and he was accepted in the Pitt School of Social Work’s Browne Leadership Fellowship Program in 2016 to serve the North Side community of Pittsburgh.

“With SCEC and the Browne Fellowship, I was able to spend months on the North Side learning more about neighborhoods I had no idea existed,” Jamil says. “I met incredible leaders who accepted my colleagues and me into their community and let us learn more about the area. The experience taught me that the key to fostering relationships and solving problems in a community rests in learning about that community’s history, its personality, and who that community represents.”

In addition, Jamil has been a leader in Pitt’s Bottom Line program. He describes the program’s purpose as “bridging differences between diverse communities through something all communities have in common: community service and the want to make your community better. By focusing on that commonality, we can build a foundation for different groups to work together and really show that we are inclusive, no matter your faith, skin color, sexual orientation, or physical or mental ability. It’s a great way to show Pitt that no matter who you are, there are people of all different backgrounds who welcome you and want you to be a part of not just their community but the Pittsburgh community as a whole.”

Jamil also volunteers with the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh and is currently working with the organization to develop an interfaith dialogue.

“By the end of my time at Pitt, I hope that any incoming student—no matter what their beliefs are—will feel like they can be accepted here,” says Jamil. “And I think that getting involved in service is a great way for students to make connections and find that they are welcome in our community.”

Not only does Jamil hope to encourage more students to become involved in service, but he also wants to be a source of hope for his peers who may be struggling with mental health issues.

“I suffer from depression, and the night I found out I was nominated for the MLK award, I was feeling really bad—feeling like a failure,” Jamil says. “Depression is that voice in your head that sounds like you but is 10 times louder.

“It was at that moment that I decided to check my e-mail, and I saw that I was nominated for this award,” says Jamil. “I realized that there were people out there who love me, who were proud of me and what I’ve accomplished. Being nominated meant that their trust in me had made them feel validated.”

More than anything, Jamil strives to empower students to feel like they have a voice in their community. “I’ve been able to use community service as a way to not only show them the difference they can make but also connect them to people with passions that may align with their own,” he says.

Portions of this article were contributed by the Division of Student Affairs.
MESSAGE FROM THE ASSOCIATE DEAN

A Liberal Arts Education Prepares Students to Succeed in a Diverse World

The liberal arts education provided by the University of Pittsburgh's Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences produces students who are not only work ready but also life ready—students who are equipped to succeed in all areas of life in an increasingly diverse world.

All of the core courses that Dietrich School students take as part of their general education requirements are purposefully crafted and selected to achieve that goal. These courses help students to develop skills that will benefit them not just in any career they may choose but also as active participants in a globalized world. These skills include critical thinking, ethical judgment, written communication, and intercultural competence, to name just a few. (And, as students build these crucial skills, each credit they earn moves them closer to graduation!)

To expand these efforts and offer students more opportunities to develop these life-ready skills, Dietrich School faculty members approved the addition of a diversity requirement to the school’s core courses. Beginning in fall 2018, students entering the Dietrich School will be required to take at least one course dedicated to diversity.

As stated in the requirements, these diversity courses “focus centrally and intensively on issues of diversity and do so in a manner that promotes understanding of difference. They provide the student with analytical skills by which to understand and critique the knowledge to be able to participate more effectively in our increasingly diverse and multicultural society. The courses may address those who are limited to such issues as race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religious difference, ability difference, and/or economic disparity.”

The diversity requirement, along with the other general education requirements, will help students to develop the capacity to put tough issues into a larger context, think critically, and understand multiple viewpoints. These skills are critical, especially in these polarized times, as they enable students to connect with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and build stronger networks. They enable students to sift through the massive amounts of information they receive each day from so many varied sources, analyze it, and use it in ways that are meaningful to them. They allow students to become not just educated, employable adults but people with the skills necessary to imagine and implement solutions to the problems that arise rather than simply conducting arguments about the issues of the day. In this way, these courses are helping to grow our students into future leaders and change makers, not just future empiricists.

In the words of Marvin Kravol, president of Oberlin College, liberal arts courses “prepare students to lead meaningful, considered lives, to flourish in multiple careers, and to be informed, engaged citizens of their communities and the world.” The new diversity requirement will enhance the liberal arts core education that Dietrich School students receive and help the school to make good on its promise to produce life-ready students who will not only succeed but lead in an increasingly diverse world.

Professor John A. Towner
Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies

Celebrating the Year of Diversity at Pitt

Throughout the 2016–17 academic year, members of the University of Pittsburgh community have explored and celebrated difference—across race, gender expression, veteran status, disability status, politics, ethnicity, and religion—as well as examined social inequalities as part of the University’s Year of Diversity.

Pitt student groups, faculty, and staff were invited to submit event proposals to the Office of Diversity and Inclusion throughout the year. The Office of the Provost provided matching funds up to $5,000 for qualifying proposals.

One proposal that received funding was called #Stop-Thethade. The event educated the University of Pitts- burgh community on the implicit bias of colorism. Colorism affects preferential treatment and benefits to people within a race who are of lighter complex-ion, and it manifests itself in different ways in different regions of the world. The purpose of the program was to educate Pitt students and encourage them to examine their personal color bias and reconsider their subsequent actions. Forty students from the University attended and came to a deeper understanding of this conditioning that has occurred that causes these biases as well as their impacts.

The event featured presentations by award-winner of the Vira I. Heinz (VIH) Program for Women in Global Leadership followed by snippets of famous documen-taries. Topics such as the historical ties of colorism; global colorism with a focus on China, Ghana, and India; and colorism in our everyday lives were covered.

The conclusion of the event was an interactive round-table discussion, during which attendees shared what they had learned and how they would move forward to challenge and deconstruct colorism.

For a complete list of University events and to learn more about the Year of Diversity, visit yeardiversity.pitt.edu.

Faculty Perspectives on Diversity

Lisa Jackson-Schebetta, Assistant Professor and Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre Arts

“When I think about diversity, I come at it from the point of view that difference is an inherent resource. That is, the more—and multiple—voices, experiences, and perspectives at the table (and in charge of the table and designing the table), the richer the conversation. Diversity is a difficult word and a conflicted practice. Diversity is not a one-off effort but rather a sustainable and long-term commitment. Diversity is not a top-down mandate but a ground-up, person-to-person labor.

“I am a theater maker, a theater scholar, and a historian. Every story we tell or share is a single slice, and that slice presences, represents, and absents many, many voices. In the classroom, I collaborate with students to practice listening; to build capacities for being with each other; and to imagine, create, and maintain spaces in which difference is not only valued but needed. Sometimes I cocreate reading series of plays with students, colleagues, and community members. At other times, we craft spaces in and around the classroom or theater to come together and dialogue, or students, as teaching assistants, and I work together to craft class experiences and lessons. At still other times, I step back and support rather than lead. I learn each day from students, and it is my job to support each and every student, to connect them to resources, and to honor their voices and experiences. I look forward to our continued work—learning, making mistakes, and building together.”

Todd R. Reece, Director, Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program

“Pitt students will encounter people with a variety of gender identities and expressions for the rest of their lives. As director of the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program, I truly have explored gender and sexuality studies as part of their liberal arts education. Gender has a long and complicated history that informs and influences our present cultural climate. The field of gender studies offers a unique perspective on human differences, the nature of gender, and the role of gender in shaping human experience.

“This is not to say that gender and sexuality do not factor into the position, and I have yet to hear students produce an answer to my question. Their inability to answer always helps them to realize that thinking about people who are like them and not like them with respect to gender and sexuality will help them prepare to function in a diverse workplace of the 21st century.”

Christel N. Temple, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Africana Studies

“A liberal arts education emphasizes social responsibility, accountable citizenship, diversity, and expanding the intellect’s capacity to envision change. Addressing diversity in a campus setting reiterates both the privilege and responsibility of higher education. The campus is a site that gifts knowledge, formally and informally, to those of us who are fortunate enough to have a life structure that allows us to devote significant moments of our day to thinking and learning.

“We make the mistake of approaching diversity as something external to us rather than internal. It is a belief that influences our choices, and we can measure a person’s diversity based on his or her behavior. The core feature of diversity as a belief is an awareness that even though humans are in competition with one another, we have an ethical and moral responsibility to self-regulate our individual, cultural, economic, and social egos. This means that we embrace a more harmonious order of human existence wherein we understand that what is normal is that life is a series of benefits and opportunities as well as losses and disappointments. This is equality.

“Diversity means that we temper our impulses to understand that no group or identity should always be on the top or always be on the bottom—that what is ethical and responsible citizenship is a commitment to balance, harmony, and reciprocity in human encounters. This approach to understanding diversity is what I hope we pursue at Pitt. The terms ‘inclusion’ and ‘tolerance’ have limitations because both inherently imply that there is a dominant group called upon to be more benevolent. I would like us to speak more freely about the possibility that willfully resisting diversity is a type of cognitive or psychic challenge or even a pathology.”
Open Door Project Hopes to Spark Campus Conversations about Diversity

Just as a handful of jigsaw puzzle pieces reveal only part of an image or a few notes of music offer a mere suggestion of a symphony, the mosaic of a university community can never be glimpsed when the same voices are always heard. But when that community gives voice to the full spectrum of its stakeholders, a university can become so much more: It can become a change agent, a crucible for ideas, and a place where the future is shaped and knowledge is created.

That’s the philosophy driving the Open Door Project, an ambitious and potentially game-changing diversity and inclusion initiative of the University of Pittsburgh Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. Designed as a series of ongoing and stand-alone programs throughout the University’s Year of Diversity, the project seeks to move beyond window dressing and lip service to create a template that will serve as a vehicle for efforts to embrace diversity in the years to come.

“This is really a kind of multipronged program that involves a series of presentations and discussions around various topics,” explains Michele Colvard, executive director for staff personnel and senior assistant dean of the Dietrich School. “Diversity is something that brings new perspectives to any conversation that you might have, and it’s important in doing the best that we want to do.”

Because too much competing information can cancel out each individual message, the trick is to find a way to bring new ideas forward without drowning out others. The overarching goal is to ensure that the Pitt community is inclusive of everyone, especially people whose race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity or expression might leave them feeling isolated on campus.

“I think it is particularly important to have a transparent stand on inclusiveness,” says Colvard, noting that the project hopes to help faculty and staff become better advocates for all students while also giving them—the students—a voice in shaping the University’s diversity agenda.

The idea is to make the Year of Diversity a springboard for an ongoing dialogue because our concepts of diversity shift, as do the relevance of topics and the overall climate in which challenges exist. By maintaining flexibility to respond to those shifts, Pitt hopes to emerge as a leader in fostering diversity.

Through presentations known as “community conversations” held at locations across the Pitt campus, the Dietrich School has helped to facilitate respectful dialogue. Pop-up presentations have explored topics such as the historical context of modern social justice movements, election year rhetoric, and how religious intolerance fuels violence. Colvard hopes that the Open Door Project will help participants find a way to have conversations that might otherwise be intimidating.

“I’m excited that our staff has taken the lead to develop and implement this program. It’s important to bring as many perspectives to conversations and dialogues as you can,” she says.

For more information about the Open Door Project, visit opendoor.pitt.edu.

Using Research to Create a More Inclusive Environment

First-year student Destiny Diess and Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies Program instructor anupama jain are collaborating on a project about diversity and inclusion in higher education as part of the Office of Undergraduate Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity’s First Experiences in Research (FE-RI) program. Their goal is to identify proven ways to promote an inclusive environment for people of different cultures, races, genders, sexual orientations, religions, and more at universities like the University of Pittsburgh.

The ultimate goal of the project is to inventory and assess existing diversity resources and programs at Pitt while identifying additional ways to create an even more inclusive environment. This project strives to help people feel more empowered to talk about differences not only in an academic setting but also when interacting with peers in social spaces.

“I have found that many people feel very uncomfortable when talking about or understanding differences because they never learned how to initiate interactions with diverse types of people,” Diess says. This recognition sparked her interest and motivation to participate in a diversity and inclusion research project.

Diess and jain’s project, Diversity and Inclusion: Theory and Practice, focuses on uncovering different ways, whether large or small, that universities and colleges have demonstrated improvements in the climate for diversity among students, faculty, and staff.

These efforts are based on research showing that while most colleges and universities have been striving for a diverse population of students and faculty for decades, they continue to fall short. One of the ongoing challenges is the lack of sustained and documented plans for the successful inclusion of historically underrepresented people in a university’s culture. There also is a lack of data showing which demographics are included or excluded in particular higher education contexts.

For this project, Diess is relying on the ample reading material and guidance that jain has provided to her as her research mentor. Together, they read through peer-reviewed papers from the University’s library databases, discuss diversity with University leaders, try to understand global diversity through TED Talks, and communicate with student groups. Their research topics include White privilege, inclusion models, affinity groups, and University of Pittsburgh demographics.

After their research is concluded, Diess will present a poster at FE-RI’s Celebration of Research on April 21. Additionally, the team will produce a report for University leadership sharing their findings and potential recommendations.

Discussing diversity can be uncomfortable. Deciding what diversity means can be challenging. Making an effort to be inclusive can be complicated. Regardless, the University of Pittsburgh focuses on being an inclusive space for everyone.

Before I came to Pitt, I lived in a town in West Virginia composed primarily of White, Catholic people. My knowledge of people from other cities and countries was limited, to say the least. Now that I have been a student at Pitt for almost three years, I have learned about people who live by other creeds, speak different languages, and have distinct perspectives on a variety of topics.

As a film studies major with a minor in gender, sexuality, and women’s studies and a job as a peer advisor, I constantly learn about and meet people who are very different from me. When I first started training to become a peer advisor, the other interns and I went to the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh not only to volunteer but also to learn about Islamic services and customs. I was able to watch a group of Muslim individuals pray that afternoon. Afterward, the interns and I asked a Muslim woman questions about Islam as well as how to be a good ally. It was refreshing and comforting to gain knowledge about a person who I may not have known much about otherwise.

In one of my classes this year, we are making a film about the Year of Diversity at Pitt. The experience has been eye-opening. Before I was a part of this group, I really thought I knew how to define diversity, but I had never been asked to do so. Once I was, I realized how complicated and challenging it was to decide what diversity was and whether something was diverse or not. We interviewed students, instructors, guest speakers, filmmakers, and Pitt faculty members in an attempt to figure out what diversity is and why it is important. After interviewing these people, there seemed to be some truths that were agreed upon by everyone when asked about diversity. Diversity is getting out of your comfort zone and learning about people who are different from you. It is trying to understand people who have been brought up in ways with which you are unfamiliar. It is understanding that a person will almost never align with the ideas you have in your head about his or her identity.

Pitt has allowed me to meet so many people who are unlike me and who have had experiences that are very different from mine. Thanks to the education and experiences I have had so far, I feel more comfortable engaging in difficult discussions with people who have opposing points of view and am now more open to learning about how others think and live.
Summer Classes Support Academic Success

Registration for summer sessions is now open! Summer sessions classes are designed to help students reach their educational goals no matter where they are in their academic careers. Summer sessions provide an exciting opportunity for students to catch up on needed credits, stay on track to graduate on time, or get ahead of schedule for the fall term.

Students nearing graduation can choose from hundreds of upper-level courses to complete their degree. Newer students can enroll in popular courses and labs that fill quickly during the academic year, complete general education requirements and prerequisite courses, or focus on a tough class without the stress of a full course load. And with the flexibility of enrolling in classes during 4-, 6-, and 12-week sessions, students can take summer classes without forgoing summer jobs, internships, or family vacations.

For more information on the benefits of summer sessions and to check out specific course offerings in all disciplines, students should talk with their advisor or visit summer.pitt.edu.