Reflecting on the 4th Annual 1st Gen College Student Summit

On April 9th, First Gen Connect made the pilgrimage to Williamstown, MA to take part in the 1st Gen College Student Summit, hosted by Williams College and Class Action—a nonprofit established to identify and address issues of class and classism. The summit brings first gen students and the staff that support them together to engage in dialogue on issues impacting the first gen community.

With over 170 students and 50 staff representing 31 institutions of higher education, discussion was lively. Individual schools were given the opportunity to propose and create their own sessions on the unique ideas and challenges that drive their first gen programs.

The summit kicked off during the Gaius Bolin Reunion, a gathering of Williams’ first gen alumni and alumni of color. Bolin was the first African-American to attend Williams, graduating in 1889, and went on to a distinguished law career.

After opening remarks by Associate Dean of the College, Rosanna Reyes, we went to Teach It Forward, TEDTalk-style sessions where passionate and influential students and leaders spoke on themes of full participation in both education and life, leadership, and relying on our inner voice.

Dr. Robyn Hayes, an Ivy League PhD. and critically acclaimed filmmaker, addressed the perceived dichotomy of her life, growing up in a 90% black neighborhood where 16% of adults had a college degree. With her father in prison and her mother struggling with addiction, her grandfather, a doorman, raised her and put her through school. He brought her to his retirement party in the building where he worked because he wanted the residents to see her, because every door he opened, he opened for her.

Dr. Hayes discussed the myths of leadership and feels leaders are cultivated, not born, and are a product of what we do, not who we are. She addressed the social construct which drives people to go to college to get a “good job”. She posits that the “good job” track leads people to positions with stability and some financial success but without the ability to create change. She calls those people Managers, and the change makers, Owners. She says: “Managers are servants to owners, vehicles to others’ vision and voice. Owners are the most powerful decision makers and have the most access to the ability to make change. Owners have careers, managers make paychecks at the whim of owners. Managers have good jobs.”

Dr. Hayes believes that women, the LGBTQIA community, and students of color are encouraged, both by society and individual advisors, towards the “good job” track. She exhorted the audience to strive for conviction in their ideas and drive to enact change, to become Owners.

The necessity for first generation students to strive to enact change, to take on the risk and challenge of Ownership and move beyond just getting the Good Job, to promote and fight for access, were resonant themes that continued to sound throughout the summit and echo still as we reflect on the day’s conversations.

*** To learn more about the 1st Summit or to continue these conversations, email Associate Director Phil Dardeno in the University Service Center.

Sessions included:
- Perspectives on 1st Gen Families
- When will #BlackLivesMatter?
- Consciousness Raising: A feminist discussion through an intersectional lens on the first generation lived experience
- The Struggle to Be 1st: Immigrant Edition
- Transferable Skills, Informational Interviewing, LinkedIn . . . Oh My!
- Money Matters on Campus: Williams’ Financial Literacy Initiative

Complete Workshop List