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Testimonies

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Testimonies

Joel R. Pruce

The testimonies session was an interactive listening and dialogue event in which attendees listened together to stories submitted in advance that documented the Black student experience on campus. The goal of the session was to convene student staff and faculty to engage in a generative and critical conversation motivated by actual experiences. In attendance were students, staff, and faculty; together, we listened to four audio clips submitted by current and former students who narrated campus experiences. We listened together to cultivate a shared experience and baseline understanding to motivate the discussion. After each story, attendees met in smaller groups to react to what they heard, and they captured key takeaways. The resulting discussion succeeded in making connections across generations of students, identifying the essential nature of support services for Black students in their time at UD and demonstrating the necessary resilience exhibited by Black students in their efforts to merely make it through college.

What became clear to all was the consistency in the Black experience over time—students, staff, and faculty—and included the constant awareness of their minoritization; the pursuit of comfortable spaces where they were less likely to encounter racism; the normalcy of micro- and macroaggressions; the question of belonging; and the stress and weight of additional labor made necessary by the lack of extracurricular opportunities for Black students or the need for Black staff and faculty to support UD's diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Black members of the UD community shoulder these burdens as part of their mere existence on campus. They also develop survival strategies and adaptations that allow them to get by—to work effectively and to study and excel. But the

notion of their life on campus as “survival” returned in our discussion regularly.

“Survival” is not a fair or reasonable standard that we would wish to apply to Black members of the UD community; it’s an exceedingly low-bar that falls far short of the experience described through UD’s ethos. That said, fostering community is the single most important and positive element of the Black experience on campus—but “community” in this sense is a set-aside, carved-out collective, segregated from the broader (read: white majority) UD community. Student development is an indispensable component, though students exercise entrepreneurship to create experiences and spaces for themselves. So, even as Black students find comfort, safety, and peace on campus, they do so separately.

Living a dual experience, Black students express feeling warmth and joy while among their cultivated Black community and share pride in constituting that community, though they also report being acutely aware of their status in spaces they cannot control, like in classrooms or while walking through student neighborhoods.

This duality is most pronounced due to the disconnect between the expectations the University sets and the actual lived experience of the students who matriculate here. Expectations in this sense are communicated through recruitment materials and the way in which we talk about ourselves, starting from the president and trickling throughout the units. The one-dimensional and uncritical sense of “community” fails to take division into account—and even relegates those who feel excluded or marginalized, further exacerbating this feeling.

UD advertises itself as an inclusive space, but Black students consistently express feeling like outsiders who are not only not welcome but often feel under threat, forced to adopt a guarded posture. While nobody suggested that we promote a narrative of “hardship” for obvious reasons, we did discuss how the rosy picture we paint of UD is not equally shared by all campus members. “Resilience” or “overcoming obstacles” are accurate terms, perhaps, but still may not read well on a brochure or a digital ad.

We concluded with a reaffirmation of the indispensable nature of student development to support and cultivate the Black student community on campus, as well as acknowledging that the expectations we set for students should be recalibrated.