

Women of Color Trailblazers Leadership Conference fosters dialogue



Photo by Emma Chaffee '22

Jossie Valentin, Tahirah Amatul-Wadud, [Na'ilah Amaru](#) and Sophia Marcellus '21 speak at the conference.

BY OLIVIA MARBLE '21

Mount Holyoke's Students of Color Committee (SOCC) hosted its 6th annual Women of Color Trailblazers Leadership Conference this Saturday, April 9.

The conference consisted of workshops that taught students "peer networking, professional and personal development skills," according to the event's webpage. The conference also included a business expo networking event, a student highlight workshop that featured Destiny Williams '19 as a speaker, a keynote panel discussion and a VIP meet and greet with the panelists.

Latrina Denson, Associate Dean of Students, Community and Inclusion and the SOCC advisor, spoke about the importance of the conference. “It’s a time when we actually center women of color, who are often one of the lowest people on the totem pole, unfortunately, and tend to be overlooked,” she said.

According to Denson, approximately 200 people registered for the conference and around 150 people attended.

The keynote panel discussion was lead by Sophia Marcellus ’21, chair of the SOCC. It featured keynote speakers Jossie Valentin, Tahirah Amatul-Wadud and Na’ilah Amaru.

According to the event’s program, Valentin is currently in her third term as Holyoke City Councilor and will soon work as the state director in Massachusetts for Elizabeth Warren’s presidential campaign.

Amatul-Wadud is an attorney who won as the Democratic candidate for Massachusetts’ 1st Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives. She ran against 29-year incumbent Richard Neal and received 30 percent of the vote.

Amaru is an advocacy and policy strategist. Previously, she was a policy advisor to former Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed, a legislative aide to U.S. Congressman John Lewis and executive director of the New York City Council’s Black, Latino and Asian Caucus. Currently, she consults with community-based and nonprofit organizations on issue-based and legislative campaigns.

The panelists discussed a variety of issues during the panel, which lasted for an hour and a half. They talked about their backgrounds, the challenges they endured, how they overcame them and shared advice with the students of color in the crowd.

Towards the end of the panel, Amaru addressed the crowd and said “I see you. In a society, in a world that silences us, that ignores us, that tries their best to destroy us, to erase us, I see you. And I am lifting you up and I am rooting for you every step of your journey.”

Shula Mathew ’22 attended the keynote and said that quote was the biggest takeaway for her. Overall, she described the panel as “eye opening.”

Natacha Almanzar ’21, the alumnae liaison for the SOCC, said that one of the purposes of the event was to help students of color feel recognized and appreciated. “I think imposter syndrome is something that’s so deeply ingrained and [...] there’s so much othering of ourselves and that we do to ourselves,” she said. “This conference was made to decolonize that, decolonizing our minds and decolonizing the way we view ourselves [...] it was fun to plan and to finally see all the efforts we were doing to break that down.”

The first Women of Color Trailblazers Leadership Conference was held in 2014 under the leadership of Quanita Hailey '12. Denson said that when the conference was first created, Hailey did not want the students of color to do all the presenting and teaching, but rather learn from people who have leadership experience. She wanted the students of color who attended to “have role models, people that they can look [at] and be like ‘I see an image of myself, a reflection of you in myself, as you’re presenting and sharing your wisdom.’”

Since then, the College has been bringing women of color who are activist leaders to campus every year. “People were all here to say the same message,” Marcellus said. “As a POC community we will all still have each other, regardless of what type of situation will occur. We’ll have each other’s back, and this conference is proof.”