

College to career

Women in Leadership Conference brings alumni back to campus to advise and mentor current students

BY COLLEEN LENTILE ('14)

Be kind. Be confident. Be honest. Get over it. Successful female role models shared these words of encouragement with attendees at the Second Annual Women in Leadership Conference.

On Saturday, Jan. 31, the conference welcomed 150 attendees and featured 11 guest speakers. Undergraduates, from freshmen to seniors, and a number of graduate students attended. Their backgrounds and interests were as diverse as those of the presenters, with majors ranging from marketing to political science to theatre to communication studies.

JMU First Lady Mary Ann Alger welcomed the attendees. "No matter how many details you hang on to from today's speakers, the one thing that's really important is that you go away today feeling supported," said Alger. "You do have a whole lot of wonderful people, particularly wonderful women, who are available to help you and consult with you."

Speakers for the day included JMU alumni Virginia Coles ('81), principal at Zenzu; Bethany Clark ('03), director of global customer engagement and community at TOMS; Hilary Mann ('03), actress; Chiquita King ('09, '11M), senior consultant at Booz Allen Hamilton; and Gwendolyn Brantley ('07), partner account manager at Cisco Systems.

Though the conference focused on female students transitioning from college to career, many of the speakers gave life advice as well. While discussing how to find your passions in life and how to land your dream job, Clark suggested that the attendees answer the following questions: "Who are you? What do you want? What conflicts will you need to get past? How will you get to [what you want]?" Dietetics major Cara Christie ('16) said, "[Seeing] successful women giving advice and insight on the path to success ... is great motivation for the future."

Lunch consisted of small-group discussions hosted by faculty, staff and the alumni panelists. Students were able to choose a discussion group covering such topics as social media, the value of internships and work-family balance. Madison Sairns ('16) a political science and anthropology double major, said, "I liked the diverse group of speakers. The working lunch was brilliant.

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... It was valuable to hear great advice reinforced and reiterated, and to have the opportunity to have small-group time for focused discussion."

Philanthropist Heather Hart, who along with her husband, G.J. ('84), made a major gift to name the School of Hospitality, Sport



(Top): JMU students April Sautter ('15) and Javay Frye ('16) gain insight about networking from the Women in Leadership conference panelists. (Right): a fellow speaker greets Bethany Clark ('03), director of global customer engagement and community at TOMS.



and Recreation Management in the College of Business, keynoted the after-lunch session. Her stories of California Pizza Kitchen's philanthropic outreach activities focused on Inspired Acts, which is an opportunity for CPK employees to serve the communities around them through fundraisers and community service projects. "Heather Hart had the whole audience captivated," said April Sautter ('15). "Her story and the work that CPK does really made me think about what kind of company I want to work for."

Panelists for the afternoon included alumni April Armstrong ('92), CEO of AHA Insight; Megan Bazzle ('14), Bazzle's Bakery owner; Lucy Hutchinson ('06), executive recruiter at Capital One; and Rachael Roehrig ('01), senior scientific executive at 3D Communications.

Sautter gave the day high marks. "I am a senior now and really focused on finding a job, but this conference would be good no matter what year you are at JMU. The alumni offered great advice, and they were all very willing to connect and try to help every one of us," she said. Hannah Nyberg ('15), a management major, agreed: "It was a great opportunity for networking!"

The conference was yet another example of JMU's involved alumni staying connected to Madison and making a meaningful contribution to current students. Yi-Ping Lu ('15), a psychology major, said, "It was inspiring... to see and experience a group of graduates, as well as faculty, come together to pay it forward. At first I thought it was only going to be a conference, but it turned out to be an inspiring and encouraging experience."

Plans are already underway for the Third Annual Women in Leadership Conference.