Faculty Spotlight: Jera Niewoehner-Green 04/21

This month’s DEI Faculty and Staff Spotlight features Dr. Jera Niewoehner-Green who is an assistant professor and program coordinator for the Community Leadership major and Leadership Studies minor in the Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership (ACEL).

Why is engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion, important to your work?

DEI work for me is both personal and professional. Growing up, I heard painful stories from my mom, who was Mexican American, about how she was treated because of her skin color and first language (Spanish). Racism was also very present in my hometown which was predominantly White with African American/Black making up ~10% of the population and LatinX ~2%. But racism was still to me growing up, an individual event. There were racists, and there were those who were not. The same applies to gender and sexual orientation. There were those that were sexist or homophobic, and there were those who were not. I was not going to be one of those people, because that was how I was raised. However, the impact of bigoted acts had real implications for my family, friends, colleagues, and students that I learned through stories over the years. When I worked in the Nashville school system and began more formal study of community development as part of my master’s work, I realized it wasn’t enough to “not be that person” since these issues were systemic. I hope that my contributions to DEI work, however small, can be part of systemic change through education, reflection, and growth. I do the work to honor my mom, friends, students, colleagues, and anyone who has not felt safe or welcome in school and community spaces. It’s a journey, and I am still learning.

How do you contribute to DEI work within CFAES and or the greater university or community?

I have tried to work at a few different levels, and I focus some of my service and curriculum development work in the area of DEI. At the department level, I have been part of ACEL’s DEI committee since I began at OSU in 2017. Through that role I have helped plan DEI-related professional development for our faculty and staff, facilitated workshops and dialogues, and identified resources for continued learning. I also include content related to inequality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class as part of my undergraduate and graduate leadership courses. At the college level, over the past year, I have been fortunate to work with Drs. Mary Rodriguez, Joyce Chen, and Francesca Hand on a grant to support culturally responsive graduate
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mentoring for underrepresented minorities. This program will kick off later this semester. Finally, I have been collaborating with OSU Extension and the Office of Outreach and Engagement under the leadership of Dr. Nicole Nieto to develop DEI programming for Extension personnel. We are hoping this program can roll out in the summer.

**How did your career path lead to this type of advocacy work?**

I began DEI work while I was a teacher of a high school community leadership course. The high school in which I worked was primarily comprised of underserved students from Northwest Nashville. I partnered with a local non-profit that focused on DEI work, and we engaged the leadership students and the broader student body in social justice retreats. This was the beginning of my journey in learning about DEI and gaining a deeper understanding of my students’ experiences. Through this work, I decided to pursue a master’s degree in Community Development and Action, rather than focusing on curriculum and instruction. This provided me a theoretical foundation to learn more about inequality and apply it to the contexts in which my students lived. As I left Nashville to pursue a doctorate, I took those lessons and experiences with me, and I worked to incorporate the study of inequality and empowerment in my research as well as outreach and professional development. I continue this work in my faculty role here at OSU. All of that to say, it really began with learning about DEI and social justice alongside my high school students. It’s sometimes surprising to find myself here 14 years later!

**What do you see as strengths within CFAES related to DEI?**

Within CFAES there are many faculty, staff, and students ready and willing to take on this type of work. I think there is a growing community who wants to continue to see positive change for not only for CFAES, but also their stakeholders in Ohio communities and related industries at large. The establishment of the CFAES DEI team is going to be instrumental in getting this work done as there has already been some organizing and mobilization of the college. Having DEI leadership at this level is important and something that is not present at some other colleges across the university.

**In what areas would you like to see growth within our college related to DEI?**

Something we have talked about in ACEL is how to engage more of our undergraduate students in dialogue around DEI. The classroom and extracurricular spaces at a PWI can be hostile to students of color. Further, the White, heteronormative space of agriculture can also be difficult to navigate for LGBTQ+ and BIPOC students. Acknowledging that all of our students play a role in creating inclusive spaces within CFAES is an area I think we could focus programming.
What advice do you have for other faculty or staff who are interested in getting involved in DEI work?

Dr. Richard Milner IV wrote a book entitled, *Start Where You Are but Don’t Stay There*, that is focused on the preparation of teachers to work with racially diverse populations. I love the title of this book because I think it is a concept we can apply to DEI work in general. We are all starting from different places related to DEI based on our identities and personal history. I think acknowledging that makes it easier to enter into the work. Whether it is reading a book, listening to a podcast, attending a workshop, making changes to a syllabus, or developing relationships with people who have different identities than yourself, all are ways in which to learn how to create more inclusive spaces and work toward equity. Our ACEL DEI committee has framed our work as “Opportunities to learn and reflect, to share, and to take action.” That way, we don’t stay where we started.