Faculty Spotlight: Nicole Debose 08/21

This month's DEI Faculty and Staff Spotlight features Nicole Debose. Nicole is an Area Leader and Program Director for OSU Extension in Cuyahoga County. Nicole has over 15 years of experience working with nonprofit and public organizations to meet the needs of Cuyahoga County residents. With a strong knowledge of program development, project management and fund management she promotes the strengthening of families, enhancement of agriculture systems and the expansion of local business opportunities.

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

In addition to being an Area Leader, I serve in state and national Extension DEI leadership capacities. It is important that I have a broad perspective of life experiences of those different than myself to help address the needs of the local community while also addressing state, national, and global issues. I do my best to continuously increase my understanding of others, by listening and asking questions. This positions me to help inform decisions on programming, staffing, and approaches to improve DEI. I also feel a responsibility to encourage others to think beyond themselves, highlighting similarities so differences can be valued instead of feared.

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

Since 2019, I have served alongside Laquore Meadows as co-chair of the Extension DEI Taskforce. Together, the Taskforce has implemented a book club, participated in panel discussions, and created videos to encourage natural inquiry and trusted communication. I look forward to working with Extensions’ cabinet and our Director, Dr. Wilkins to explore personnel, policy, program, positioning, and partnership recommendations the group recently submitted. In 2020, I assumed the leadership role for DEI with the National Urban Extension Leaders (NUEL). Facilitating national conversations, alongside CFAES faculty and DEI professionals from other Universities. These dialogues that allow colleagues to respectfully express themselves while identifying solutions has been most rewarding. Recommendations and concerns collected from these national dialogues has been shared with state Extension Directors and recently the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. I look forward to contributing to next steps with Extension and NUEL.
How did your career path lead to this type of advocacy work?
My career path has allowed me the privilege to engage in policy, legislative, and community conversations. As a social worker fresh out of college, I learned that poverty, drug addiction, violence, and mental health challenges can impact any family regardless of race, community of residence, education, or income level. I quickly learned that decisions for low-income families and families of color are often made by individuals with minimal understanding of the social and institutional barriers those families face each day. These and other institutional decisions are often based on assumptions, by those who have good intentions, and no idea how their decisions truly impact people’s everyday life. This sparked my commitment to asking those impacted by decisions what results they would like to see, offering reasonable expectations for outcomes, and using my voice to speak on their behalf when they are not present. I do my best to hold true to this in all situations.

What do you see as strengths within CFAES related to DEI?
Over the past year I have noticed an increase in awareness of DEI related challenges, professional development opportunities, and celebration of successes. Discussing topics like territory recognition and needs of all learners demonstrates that the college looks beyond race and ethnicity when approaching DEI topics.

In what areas would you like to see DEI growth within our college?
I see amazing potential for CFAES to create more welcoming internal and public facing environments for students, staff, and program participants who are not white, male, heterosexual, or Christian. Intentional and consistent strategies, for example, performance accountability will help ensure each one of us contributes to fulfilling our responsibilities as members of a land-grant university and positive investor in all of Ohio’s communities. I know this may not be of popular opinion. However, without accountability it is easy for each of us to keep doing what we’ve always done, only serving with those we are most comfortable with, and only considering the group or groups we represent. Increasing understanding of what DEI actually means is another opportunity I see for growth. I think some people, in general, only hear black and poor when they hear the term DEI.

What advice do you have for other faculty or staff who are interested in getting involved in DEI work?
Here’s my advice in no particular order. DEI makes people uncomfortable because it is an emotional topic that impacts people’s livelihood, quality of life, and happiness. It’s ok to be vulnerable. You might be surprised how relieved you feel after asking a burning question of someone different than you. Find a person or group you feel safe with to express yourself without giving or receiving judgement. There is no wrong question and there is no wrong response. Enter all DEI conversations with an open mind and open heart. Remember the golden rule:
Treat others how you would like to be treated