



Hall of Fame INDUCTEE

2023



DENISE JONES

• CLASS OF 2009 •

Academics

Denise Jones is the daughter of two dedicated and passionate educators who made personal sacrifices for Denise and her sisters to attend South Fayette. Despite her high achievement at her former middle school, Denise found she was unprepared for the academic rigor of South Fayette. Through mentorship, external academic support, and her own volition, Denise overcame her skills gap and began excelling personally and academically. Enrollment in honors and AP courses resulted in an authentic love for learning, and Denise began seeing herself as a Black woman capable of pursuing post-secondary education. She graduated with honors and earned a senior award for service.

At Allegheny College, Denise majored in economics and minored in Black studies. She graduated *magna cum laude* and won four prestigious academic honors. A destiny-filled run-in with an on-campus mentor led Denise to apply for Teach for America. She was accepted and spent two years in the classroom with some of the most vulnerable youth in San Antonio, Texas.

While in Texas, Denise met young people with poise and promise but who were lacking the resources and opportunities to display their brilliance. This experience helped Denise understand the joys and limitations of teaching, particularly in bureaucratic systems, and prompted her to transition into graduate school at Teachers College, Columbia, where she received her Master's Degree, hoping to find the panacea for the classroom ills.

In search for more solutions, Denise agreed to work at her father's community-based, nonprofit organization, Youth Enrichment Services (YES), to help young people become their own best resource. What started out as a three-month commitment turned into four years of designing new programs, securing partnerships and funding, building YES's research apparatus, and helping young people chart their post-secondary pathways. As part of Denise's tenure at YES, she helped youth access new possibilities and, in doing so, they received \$4 million in scholarships and matriculated into the nation's most prominent and prestigious colleges and universities.

Denise is in the fourth year of a PhD program in education and psychology at the University of Michigan, where she is building a post-secondary pipeline for youth of color. Through her dissertation, she is exploring how contextual and environmental factors influence Black youths' orientations toward the future and advancement toward adulthood.

Denise attributes her success to those who took a chance on her and helped her see that she was destined for so much more -- in every space, someone saw Denise's light and created opportunities for her to excel. Because of this, Denise is fully committed to paying it forward and using her research and university resources to make room for more youth like her at the table.