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ERIKA JAMES IS DEAN OF WHARTON, BUT HER TEACHINGS GO FAR BEYOND BUSINESS SCHOOL

[Dori Zinn](#) | August 3, 2023



Erika James is the Dean of the Wharton School. She’s making major changes for women in business and bringing others along with her.

Erika James admits that she never intended to work as a faculty member, much less a dean. Until she became one.

“I studied psychology in college because I was following in the footsteps of my stepfather who was a clinical psychologist,” James says. “When I was graduating, I realized I have no idea what one does professionally with a psychology undergraduate degree. So to prolong the professional decision, I just went to graduate school.”

Like some of us who feel lost after school, James went on to... [more school](#). And that turned out to be the right move, because PhD prep brought her to the right people.

“My dissertation advisor said, ‘why don’t you try academia for a year?’” James says. “I tried it my first year. One year led to two, led to five, led to 10. And I found myself in this academic career that I actually really enjoyed.”

She became a faculty member and later on started major programs, like the Women’s Leadership program at the University of Virginia’s Darden School. Later on she became Dean at Emory University’s Goizueta Business School. In July of 2020, she became Dean of the Wharton School of

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Business at the University of Pennsylvania.

Even though James admits that academia wasn't originally her plan, [being a Black woman who leads](#) a prestigious business school is showing others who look like her what's possible.

"There are stereotypes around black women in particular, and we are constantly trying to mitigate and navigate the nuances associated with that," James says. "It matters less for me just because of the point where I am now. But it does matter for the future generation of folks who aspire to be in leadership positions."

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BUILDING SPACES FOR WOMEN IN BUSINESS

[Wharton opened almost 150 years ago](#), but the school didn't start admitting women until 1954. Even then, there weren't that many women attending.

"There was a time when we didn't see women entering business schools much at all," James says. "At a school like Wharton, women in the ABA level represent 50% of the class. That's major progress. What do we need to do to help shape their interests and sense of competitiveness in careers that are going to pay at the higher levels?"



James sees how the next generation is intentionally looking not only for where they spend their money, but where they're earning money. And that means for those in academia, equipping those future leaders with the right tools.

“It’s important that we provide a set of opportunities and learning engagements for our students that mirror what’s happening in the world,” she says. “They are highly invested in finding ways to contribute and give back — not once they’ve made all their money, but even beforehand. And all along the way, the choices that they’re making in terms of the companies that they seek to work for. Those companies better have a purpose and a mission that’s far greater than just profit.”

LISTEN: Erika James talks about how to be a prepared leader on the [How She Does It Podcast](#). Listen wherever you stream your favorite podcasts.

EXERCISE THAT LEADERSHIP MUSCLE

Erika James started at The Wharton School in the summer of 2020 — the early days of the COVID-19. During a virtual town hall, she had to tell students that the upcoming school year would be remote. And it was hard for everyone, including James.

“What I said in that moment was, ‘I know that I’m new here and this is not the news that you wanted to hear, and it’s certainly not the first conversation that I wanted to have with any of you,’” she told them. “And you don’t know my track record, but I need to ask you something that I have no right to ask you. I need you to trust me.”

The vulnerability immediately shifted the conversation. While folks were still upset about the circumstances, students changed their town. They did, in fact, trust her to make sure the learning environment was still great, despite the circumstances.

“I felt the weight of the job in that moment,” she says “But I also felt like I at least gave them something to hope for.”

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