

THE FRONT OF THE CLASSROOM: ELI JONES

Dean, Texas A&M University Mays Business School and holder of the Peggy Pitman Mays Eminent Scholar Chair in Business.

By
THE PhD PROJECT

A trusted and experienced leader in business and academia, Dr. Eli Jones, the first African-American to serve as dean of three flagship, non-HBCU, business schools, likes to say he is unconscious of his race or color as he runs the Mays Business School at Texas A&M. That is until he steps into a classroom with undergraduates who are underrepresented minorities. Then, he says, “I see smiles on their faces. I see hope.”

Seeing an African-American heading a business school sparks that reaction because, historically, underrepresented minorities have been almost invisible in front of business school classrooms as professors, much less seated in the dean’s office.

That was certainly the case 20 years ago this spring when Jones emerged from four years of arduous doctoral studies with a Ph.D. in hand from the very institution he now heads. Confident and ready to assume the role of assistant professor, he was daunted by the reality there were scant few business professors in the entire U.S. who looked like him.

For the newly degreed Dr. Jones and his African-American peers, that meant: few role models, few potential mentors for students.

And, for minority undergraduates studying business virtually anywhere in the U.S., that too meant few role models and few potential mentors. Research has suggested minority students perform better and succeed more when they have access to role models and mentors with backgrounds similar to theirs. Hence the “smiles and hope” Dr. Jones encounters today when he enters a roomful of undergraduates.

In 1997, the new Dr. Jones found support and inspiration from a still-young organization that was starting its mission to significantly increase the number of African-American, Hispanic American and Native American business professors: The PhD Project.

Formed three years earlier, The PhD Project was already showing results in its goal of attracting more minority business



professionals to become Ph.D.-accredited business professors. Today, the number of minority business professors in the U.S. has more than quadrupled. They are standing in front of classrooms and conducting academic research, nearly everywhere.

But when Dean Jones was entering the academic scene, the scarcity of people who looked like him deprived him of not only role models—but of peers and mentors who could support him in navigating the challenges of earning a doctorate and finding that first faculty position. The PhD Project was attracting new people to academia, but they were then on their own.

As a first-generation college student, he found he had no meaningful guidance: “I love my family but no one—not my sisters, my brother, my parents, my uncles, my aunts,

could say, ‘I can understand what you’re going through.’”

To address that need, Dr. Jones and others became involved in expanding The PhD Project. Five Doctoral Students Associations—one for each business discipline—were formed to help sustain Ph.D. candidates through the challenging process. Today, those groups are responsible for a 90 percent completion rate—unheard of elsewhere in business academia—for its participants.

As for Dr. Jones, he went on to create a highly successful sales program at the University of Houston before becoming Dean, first at Louisiana State University, then at the University of Arkansas. In 2015, the deanship at Texas A&M opened. Perhaps Dr. Jones might not have responded, except for one thing: A&M was where he had earned all three



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of his academic degrees: undergraduate, master's and Ph.D. It was an opportunity to go home, and he jumped at it.

There, at the Mays Business School last year, he saw one of those smiles evoked by his presence on campus. Only this one was different:

"It was on the face of a woman who had been one of my students I taught at the University of Houston—a young woman of color, a first-generation college graduate," he recalls. The woman went on to become a teacher and then an assistant principal, and then a mother. And now, 17 years later, she was dropping off her son to begin his undergraduate studies at A&M. When she learned who the business school dean was, she made sure to drop in and visit.

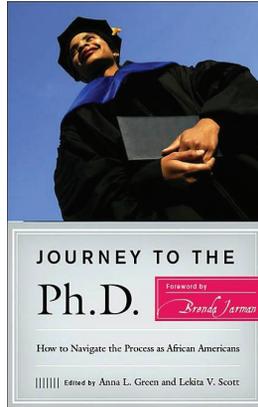
"When we sat down," he recalls, "I saw the same smiling face. She wanted to tell me I had an impact on her life, and now that impact was affecting her children.

"This is the impact of The PhD Project. It is far larger than anyone imagined back in 1997, the year I earned my Ph.D. The PhD Project is now affecting a whole lineage of people. It's not just the people who have graduated from our programs; it's now affecting their children. The ripple effect is far-reaching and impactful.

"I think about how many of us are first-generation college graduates. Many of us are teaching at universities where we are the first minority professor with whom our students have ever interacted closely. Many of us are the first African-American, or Hispanic or Native American to lead a center, department, or college. And for many of us, a number of our students are underrepresented minorities and first-generation students themselves. There are students here coming from farming families. They may have never before interacted with someone on a professional level who looks like them. So, we are indeed affecting society.

These days, there are many more smiles like that of the former student I lunched with, in many more classrooms. While we are disseminating knowledge to the entire class, students of color may be more impacted—and therefore more receptive to learning because of the perceived similarity between themselves and the professor at the front of the classroom.

"We've been given a platform to make a difference every day—in the classroom and in the academy. And I truly believe that the best is yet to come." 



BOOK

"Journey to the Ph.D.: How to Navigate the Process as African Americans"

As a new generation of African Americans completes college, an increasing number of students are aspiring to the Ph.D. as a stepping stone to a career in the academy and to fully participate in shaping our society. Most African Americans are conscious that they are the first in their families to embark on this journey. They are aware they will meet barriers and prejudice, are likely to face isolation and frustration, and find few sources of support along the way.

This book, by twenty-four Black scholars who "have been there," offers a guide to aspiring doctoral students to the formal process and to the personal, emotional and intellectual challenges they are likely to face. The authors come from a wide range of disciplines—from computing, education and literature to science and sociology. Although their experiences and backgrounds are as varied as they are as individuals, their richly diverse chapters cohere into a rounded guide to the issues for those who follow in their footsteps.

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“Cigna values the opportunity to partner with the PhD Project. The importance of maximizing talent for the demands of a changing world is an imperative for businesses. At Cigna, we are excited to contribute to the great work of the PhD project to ensure the diversity of faculty that shapes and develops the talent of the future.”

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We all know the benefits of a diversified workforce—more vibrant communities, a stronger economy, and greater opportunities. The PhD Project is dedicated to increasing minority representation in the business world by supporting African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans and Native Americans in becoming business professors who will mentor and motivate tomorrow’s business leaders.

The PhD Project has already helped create positive change—quadrupling the number of minority business professors in the United States. But there is more work to be done to increase the presence of diverse mentors and influencers.

Each year we bring together the brightest minds in business and academe. Our Annual conference serves as a forum for support and transformation by convening doctoral candidates, business schools, professors, and funders—all in one place. And, our Summer conferences bring together minority doctoral students, faculty members and leading academics to provide resources and support for our students to keep them on the path to their Ph.D.

We invite your organization to join our Sponsors as we continue to explore solutions for increasing diversity in the classroom and in the boardroom. **Contact Bernard J. Milano at 201.307.7662 or bmilano@kpmg.com.**

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