

The Boston Globe

Babson leadership program for Black women creating ‘a great sisterhood’

The Black Women’s Entrepreneurial Leadership program, started in 2020, has helped 122 entrepreneurs across the country find community and mentorship.

By [Julian E.J. Sorapuru](#)

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Shakenna Williams (center) posed for a group photo with participants in the Black Women’s Entrepreneurial Leadership Program.
JUSTIN KNIGHT

It was the middle of 2020 and “we were living in two pandemics,” as Shakenna Williams put it: There was COVID-19, but also high racial tensions.

Members of senior leadership at Babson College, where Williams works as executive director of the Center for Women’s Entrepreneurial Leadership, asked her how they could better support Black women in the business world. So, Williams said, she called “Black women entrepreneurs from all different levels” together for a roundtable discussion over dinner.

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“We talked about the unique challenges that Black women face with growing and starting a business,” Williams said. Things like imposter syndrome, lack of formal support systems, and scant access to capital.

And that’s how the [Black Women’s Entrepreneurial Leadership program](#) was born. Since October 2020, 122 women from around the country have taken part in the twice-yearly program, receiving mentorship from accomplished Black women entrepreneurs, networking with fellow participants, and learning business growth strategies during weekly Zoom sessions.

Diane Shaddock Austin, cofounder of [Coils to Locs](#), a Boston-based wig company that specializes in textured hair for women of color with medical hair loss, went through the BWEL program in the spring of 2021. Austin was inspired to enter the program because she and her cofounder felt isolated as Black women in entrepreneurship.

“We have access to networks now that we’ve been able to build that we can reach out to for advice or direction or support,” Austin said. “Whereas when we first started, we were pulling our hair out trying to figure out, ‘Well, how do you get people to want to work with you in this way?’”



BWEL alumna Britney Foster (left) and Yanique Shaw had one of their first in-person conversations at CWEL's Women's Day Brunch. JUSTIN KNIGHT

BWEL has paid off for Austin’s business. Before starting the program, her wigs were available in seven hospitals; now they’re in 15. Coils to Locs also recently launched a [direct-to-consumer e-commerce site](#), an idea Austin said her BWEL coach encouraged her to pursue.

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Joy Schaaffe has been a coach (not Austin's) since the program started.

"You put [the participants] in a little cocoon for a short period of time and help to support them with what they just have not had," said Schaaffe, who is the lead faculty at the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program.

Schaaffe, who spent most of her career in the corporate world, said she has learned "to understand what really it is to have a dream and a vision and to persevere on that" from BWEL participants.

Meanwhile, Tamecca Rogers, a 2022 alum of BWEL, started her company, [Inspire Publishing](#), to address an urgent social issue. After explaining George Floyd's killing to her then 8-year-old son, Rogers knew how difficult it was for parents to speak about race. So she wrote children's books with people of color as the main characters, such as one about Black Wall Street in Tulsa, where she lives.

Like many other BWEL participants, Rogers has no connection to Massachusetts. Despite the remote nature of the program, Rogers said her cohort "felt like a great sisterhood" where "you're able to let your guard down." That was important, she said, because "many times we are operating like we're on an island by ourselves, and don't realize we're not [alone]."



Tamecca Rogers (left) connected with her fellow BWEL alumna Tess Gainey at a Babson event. JUSTIN KNIGHT

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For Dominique Miles, BWEL served to enrich Babson's academic curriculum. Miles pursued a master's degree at the college as she went through the BWEL program and said the experience "was like getting two MBAs at the same time."

According to the [Harvard Business Review](#), Black women start businesses at higher rates than white men or women, but their ventures only mature to the five-year mark 3 percent of the time. Considering this, Miles said she appreciated the program's holistic approach that included discussions about maintaining healthy habits, both mental and physical.

As BWEL prepares to welcome its fifth class in October, there is change coming. To differentiate from other programs, the next session will focus on entrepreneurs who have been in business at least two to three years, have achieved at least \$75,000 in annual revenue, and want to operate in the entertainment industry. The upcoming cohort will also have fewer participants, meet over a span of six months compared with 16 weeks, and have more opportunities to meet each other in person.

A [2019 report by American Express](#) found that Black women-owned businesses had an average annual revenue of \$24,000, about \$120,000 less than the average of all women-owned businesses.

Williams said her goal for BWEL is to "close the revenue gap when it comes to Black women entrepreneurs, because not only does it affect their local community, it affects the world." She added that "we can create new jobs here in the United States and also add trillions of dollars to the economy."

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