

## Uncommon Denominators: Alums defy the odds in business academia

February 25, 2025



*Venessa Melton (BSM '95), left, and Terence Pitre (MBA '94) are doing more than just defying the odds in business academia. As tenured professors and veteran administrators, they're working to expand representation among business school faculty.*

*According to recent statistics from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), African Americans comprise just 3.9% of full-time business faculty members.*

*Freeman School alumni Venessa Melton (BSM '95), professor of marketing in the College of Business at Auburn University at Montgomery, and Terence Pitre (MBA '94), dean of the College of Business Administration at California State University, Stanislaus, are defying those odds. As professors and leaders in higher education,*

*they're working to expand representation in business academia.*

A native of Columbus, Georgia, [Venessa Melton \(BSM '95\)](#) arrived at Tulane in 1991 as a first-generation college student. Initially studying biochemistry, she gravitated to business and majored in marketing, but after taking a class with [Peter Ricchiuti](#) in her final semester, she shifted to finance, landing a post-graduation job selling securities at Prudential Preferred.

“I liked it, but there was something missing,” Melton recalls. “When I started getting my MBA, I realized teaching is what I wanted to do. I called Peter and told him, and he was like, ‘You’ll be great! You’re going to be a rock star!’ He was way more excited than I was.”

After completing her MBA, Melton was admitted to the business PhD program at the University of Alabama, becoming the first African American woman to earn a doctorate in marketing from the university and just the second African American. Melton credits the [PhD Project](#), a national organization dedicated to increasing minority representation in business academia, and the [Southern Regional Education Board \(SREB\)](#) with providing her with the support she needed.

Melton joined Auburn University Montgomery in 2006 as an assistant professor of marketing and five years later was promoted to associate professor and department head. In 2014, she was appointed associate dean of undergraduate programs and in 2017 she became associate dean of academic programs.

“I really loved the ability to implement strategy,” Melton says. “In academia, there are so many barriers to the strategy and so many layers to it. I loved doing that and knowing I had impacted hundreds of students instead of just the students in my classroom.”

After serving as associate dean for five years, Melton was well positioned to seek a deanship, but she opted to return to teaching and research full time.

“I really enjoyed serving in administration, but when it came time to be dean, which I certainly could have pursued, I was never really that excited about it,” she says. “I love teaching. I was kind of like, ‘I’m right here in my wheelhouse, and I want to stay right here.’”

Today, as a tenured full professor of marketing, Melton teaches full time and focuses her research on strategic marketing, customer service and consumer anger, exploring how customer expectations and company responses can create a perfect storm of consumer outrage, particularly in the digital age.

“Usually in business, we only talk about when relationships go well — ‘We’re going to have a relationship with all our customers, and that’s going to be an awesome thing,’” she says. “Well, there is a downside, because I as the consumer now have expectations of the way I’m going to be treated and the service that I’m going to receive, and if you miss that bar, there are consequences.”

And those consequences can be severe. Melton cites a 2009 incident in which two Domino’s Pizza employees uploaded a series of videos to YouTube showing themselves contaminating food. The videos went viral, but Domino’s, hoping to avoid calling more attention to them, failed to respond publicly.

“It just got bigger and bigger online, and that’s kind of the core of consumer anger,” she explains. “The younger generation believes in transparency, so if they have a rant on Twitter or Instagram, then that’s where you need to address it. You need to say something, because otherwise consumers are just left with their angry story and your brand name attached to it.”

With two books and more than a dozen research articles in top journals to her credit, Melton takes her responsibility as an academic role model seriously.

“There’s so much need for students to be able to see themselves in their professors,” she says. “When you can’t see yourself in your professors, it makes it so more difficult to talk to them when you need support or are feeling overwhelmed. Having the support of organizations like the PhD Project and the Southern Regional Education Board was really a game changer for me, and I’m sure for many other people as well.”

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[Terence Pitre \(MBA '94\)](#) was born in New Orleans and grew up in the city's St. Bernard Public Housing Development. To escape poverty, he enlisted in the Navy straight out of high school, and it was there he devised a 10-year plan for his post-military career: Get a bachelor's degree in business, get an MBA in finance, work on Wall Street, and retire by the age of 45.

"That was the plan," Pitre recalls. "I wasn't even thinking about becoming a professor."

After getting out of the Navy, Pitre earned an undergraduate degree in business from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and immediately enrolled in the Freeman School's MBA program. His goal was initially to work in investment banking, but after doing a double concentration in finance and accounting, he ended up getting an offer to work as an accountant for International Paper. Over the next several years, he took on similar roles at Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp. and Kimberly-Clark Corp., but something wasn't right.

"I was making good money, but I wasn't happy," Pitre says. "I hated going to work every day. It got me soul searching, and I started thinking about when I was happy. I realized I was happiest in college. I absolutely loved school, so I thought, 'Well, maybe I should get a job in a university setting.'"

Pitre reached out to former Freeman School instructors for advice, and each of them — [Peter Ricchiuti](#), Paul Spindt and Jeffrey Barach — encouraged him to apply to a doctoral program. Two years later, he was accepted into the accounting PhD program at Michigan State University. He graduated with his doctorate in 2004.

Pitre joined the University of South Carolina as an assistant professor of accounting, and over the next 10 years, he taught at schools including the University of St. Thomas-Minnesota, St. Mary's College of California, California State University - Sacramento, Miami University, and Minnesota State University - Mankato. By the end of that run, he had another realization.

"I decided I wanted to be a dean," he says. "The best way I can explain it is, when I walk into the classroom as a professor, I can pull a lever and help 30 students at a time. As a dean, I could pull a lever and help 1,500 at a time. For me, it was always

about impact.”

In 2022, Pitre realized his goal, becoming dean of the College of Business Administration at California State University, Stanislaus.

As a state school located in the heart of California’s agricultural region, Stanislaus State serves a large Hispanic population, many of whom are first-generation college students whose parents are farm laborers.

“They have ‘field worker’ on their resumes because that is literally what they do to earn money to go to school,” he says. “They’re in the field with their parents picking vegetables in the summer.”

At first glance, Pitre may not appear to have much in common with his students, but over the last several years he’s come to realize that his identity as an African American professor in a predominantly white field makes him a good mentor for his students.

“When you’re a minority as a professor, you understand that people need grace and that grace extends to everyone,” he says.

Pitre recalls a story from early in his career in which a student, a white female, came into his office in tears after failing his first test.

“She kept saying, ‘This doesn’t reflect my work,’” he says. “And it didn’t. She just had a bad day. I told her to just keep doing what she’s doing and that we’d look at her grades at the end of the semester.”

The student ended up getting 100s on her next three tests, and, true to his word, Pitre threw out her first test score and awarded her an A for the semester. Years later, he found out she had been named the university’s top accounting graduate, with straight A's throughout both the undergraduate and master’s programs.

Another student, an Hispanic female, was on the verge of dropping his class after a poor performance on her first test when he he encouraged her to stick it out. She ended up making an A in the class, getting a prestigious internship with the FDIC and eventually turning that opportunity into a full-time job with the agency.

“That never would have happened if I hadn’t been able to put myself in their places and realize that everybody has a bad day.”

Today, at a time when grace and empathy are increasingly viewed with skepticism, Pitre embraces his role as a mentor, advocate and role model for his students.

“There’s an expression that I love that says, ‘If you cannot envision your harvest, you will never plant the seed,’” Pitre says. “You have to help students envision what success can look like so that they will be motivated enough to plant the seed and start that effort. It’s always fun to help people.”