

## Letters to My Sisters in Engineering

**Brittany Wilkins**

Successfully Inspiring Engineers

Softcover \$12.99 (177pp)

978-1-73586-470-9

*Letters to My Sisters in Engineering brims with hard-won, practical guidance for aspiring young women in STEM.*

Based on the lessons she learned on the way to becoming a successful engineer, Brittany Wilkins's inspiring memoir and career guide *Letters to My Sisters in Engineering* encourages young Black women to take an interest in STEM careers.

Wilkins, now an industrial engineer, covers both her successes and her failures in her book. She does so with the belief that other women, especially Black women and first-generation college attendees, can learn from her mistakes. Her anecdotes alternate with checklists of strategies, as on how to find a mentor, that other young Black women can use to avoid the pitfalls that Wilkins experienced as a young Black working-class woman.

The book is organized into three chronological parts. The first, "My Journey to Success in STEM," is suspenseful and inspirational, pairing Wilkins's close calls as a student with concrete, forward-looking advice. The second, "Entering Corporate America," discusses her transition from college to the workforce with an outsider-now-insider's wisdom about corporate culture. The final part, "Developing the Engineer Within," takes a holistic approach, covering how an established engineer's awareness of her own values, mindset, and willingness to learn impacted Wilkins's career for a lifetime.

Explanations of cultural assumptions are woven throughout the book. As a Black woman entering the engineering profession, Wilkins experienced the combined effects of racism and misogyny in a field dominated by white men. Ample statistics about the limited presence of women in general and of Black women in particular in STEM jobs are cited; these are objective demonstrations of the isolation that Wilkins and others have experienced. Going beyond those statistics, the book includes analyses of how, for centuries, systemic racism and misogyny have impacted textbooks and other images available to young people, keeping the history of scientists and mathematicians who were Black, women, or both hidden from view. The book includes a short version of this hidden history and a reading list.

Wilkins's analyses of the history of Black women in engineering extend into an analysis of the future of the profession. Citing numerous sources, she makes a compelling argument for how cultural diversity in engineering could ensure that the United States stays internationally competitive and builds better communities at home and away.

Though it is at its best when it's relating personal anecdotes, the prose is always accessible. There are some tired expressions included, though, as with the encouragement to "be the driver of your own car." And some paragraphs contain too many ideas or end up reading like boilerplate advice for habits like giving PowerPoint presentations. Some guidance is embedded in text; other guidance is framed in the format of lists set off by white space.

Despite the challenges that Black and first-generation women in STEM face, the book maintains an upbeat, generous, and encouraging tone that's informed by positive language, direct addresses to the audience, and occasional humor. Wilkins's personal ethic also contributes to the book's tone. Arguing that advancement in a profession is meaningless

unless one is “reaching back to help others,” she models a view of career success that encompasses higher purposes than professional status and economic gain.

Brimming with hard-won, practical guidance for aspiring young women, *Letters to My Sisters in Engineering* combines memoir elements and career advice into a single inspiring package.

MICHELE SHARPE (November 16, 2022)

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