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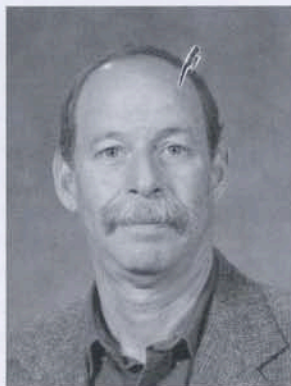
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SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE: EDUCATIONAL LATE-BLOOMING IN AMERICA

BY WILLIAM C. LEVIN

...tale of persistence in the face of obstacles. Eventually Louise managed to collect her diploma, grinning at the burst of applause and shouts of "go mom" from the middle of the audience. Behind her accomplishment was a story of early marriage after high school, part-time office work, divorce, broken-down cars, studying in the bathtub after the kids were asleep and a hundred other details of chance and choice that she willingly spilled out into my tape recorder.

HOW THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

To learn something about how older students manage to return to their educations after years away, I drew two random samples of thirty students each from lists of students over the age of thirty who were enrolled full-time as undergraduate students at Bridgewater State College. I then wrote and called them to ask if they would be interested in talking to me about their educational histories for my study of older college students. Over a period of three years I have conducted fifty eight interviews, forty eight of them females with an average age of thirty six. Interviews were done in my office at the college and were tape-recorded and transcribed. All subjects were guaranteed anonymity, and all were told that the purpose of my study was to learn something about the factors that influence both the way people leave and return to their educations.

A MODEL FOR STUDYING EDUCATIONAL LATE-BLOOMING

During the interviewing I did of older students I came to recognize that there are many types of forces that can both separate people from educational achievement and can bring them back even years later. After some months of reading, listening, taking notes and talking to friends and colleagues (and, to no small degree, to myself), I decided on a fairly simple and general model for categorizing these forces. I'll call these forces internal versus external and positive versus negative. Here are the brief

On a Saturday morning in May of 1998 three children, two girls and a teenaged boy, sat on their mother's bed watching her try on a long, black robe and flat, tasseled hat. They teased her about the hat and took pictures of her posed before her computer desk and shelves of texts. Then they piled into their 1979 Toyota Corolla and drove together to her college graduation. Louise took her place in the line of graduating seniors and began to inch towards the stage and her diploma. She searched the seats to see if her kids were behaving ("No fighting today, *please*"), and overheard an exchange between the two students just in front of her in line. "Well, it's finally here," one said to the other. "Yeah. What a haul," came the response. They looked like teenagers to Louise, not much older than her son. "Haul,

indeed," she thought. "Try twenty-six years, beginning in my senior year of high school."

The story of this woman's journey to college graduation turned out to be a great deal richer and more complex than a simple tale of persistence in the face of obstacles.

A few months before her graduation I interviewed Louise as part of my research on educational "late-bloomers." Louise is not her real name—I've made up names for all the people in this article to maintain their anonymity and the photographs accompanying this article are not of the people I studied. The story of this woman's journey to college graduation turned out to be a great deal richer and more complex than a simple

descriptions of the categories of forces I have decided to use in summarizing the stories of our educational late-bloomers.

1) *Internal forces* are those that we generally think of as characteristics of individuals. People differ in their beliefs, willingness and ability to work hard, talent for academic work, belief in the value of education, confidence and so on. These characteristics are components of the internal makeup of people. For example, many of the women I interviewed believed deeply by age eighteen that education was their best chance for success and happiness, while many others believed that their best chance was to marry men who would provide for them.

2) *External forces* influence the lives of the individuals and are rooted in their environments. People grow up and live in all sorts of families and communities. These differ in many ways, such as in opportunities for work, wealth, safety, education, family and social support, transportation and an infinite range of other conditions. For example, several of the people I interviewed told me that they simply couldn't afford to go to college right after high school. It was too important to make some money right away. By contrast, one woman recalled that money was no barrier to her, but that her

mother was chronically ill and that she was the family member who wound up taking care of her.

3) *Positive forces* are the ones that make educational accomplishment possible. For example, think of a person who is confident that she can do the work in school, intellectually able, ambitious to succeed, healthy, supported by family, wealthy enough to pay tuition and forego earnings while in school and living in a town that has built an excellent school system. Such positive factors were often part of the stories my subjects told about their return to school, even after many years of absence.

4) *Negative forces* make educational accomplishment less likely. A person can grow up in a family and community in which education is denigrated and inferior, she may lack the money to pay for college, have little confidence in her abilities or intellectual preparation and have no experience of the benefits of education. These were the sorts of things that subjects in my study cited as reasons for their failure to even consider continuing with their educations after high school.

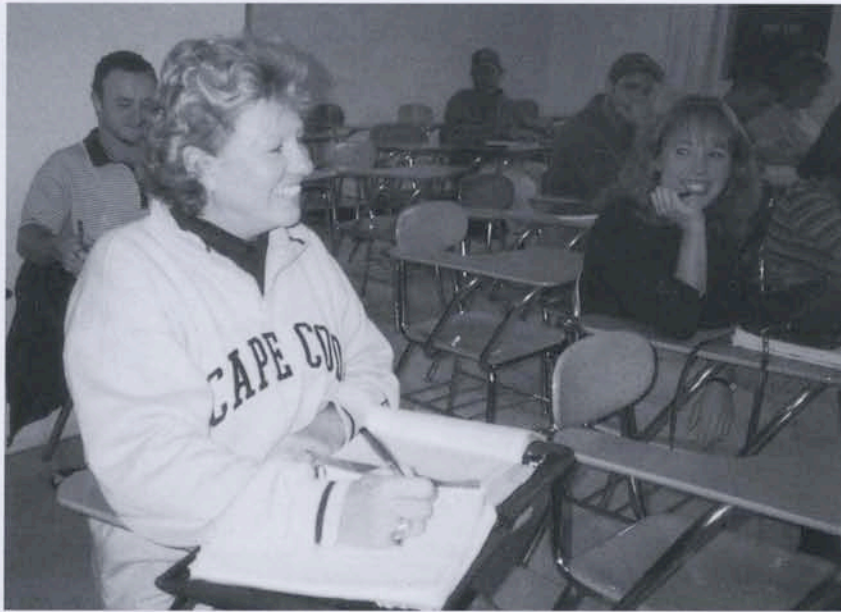
Putting together these factors, the dimensions of internal versus external, and positive versus negative forces create a useful analytical model as follows.

I'll be the first to admit that this model is hardly rocket science. It certainly does not, by itself, make sense of the rich and individual stories told by the people I interviewed. But it does have the virtue of making it possible to see patterns in the stories they told. To show how the model works, let me go to the specific narratives. I'll choose just two stories, those of Louise and Fay, and quote from them to illustrate how the forces seem to me to have worked on the educational history of these late-bloomers.

LOUISE

Let's start with the woman whose story began this article. Louise was raised in a family in which a combination of negative external conditions for educational achievement were in place from her birth. Neither of her parents had gone to college. In fact, they told Louise that they had been high school sweethearts and couldn't wait to leave school to get married and start a family. Louise remembered that they wanted her to finish high school, but that they repeatedly said that "C's are good enough; just don't get pregnant before you finish high school." Two older brothers had left high school for jobs as auto mechanics and there was no encouragement from teachers or school guidance counselors for her to go to college. "I was a major party girl," she said. "I actually got good grades, mostly B's, but nobody in my group of friends even talked about going to college. So I never thought of it. Now I know that other kids with grades like mine got to go." Louise also said that she came to believe that she was "not college material." That is, growing up in the kind of family and school that did not value education highly (in fact, education was sometimes ridiculed in her family), eventu-

| SOURCE OF INFLUENCE ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT | | | |
|---|----------|---|--|
| DIRECTIONAL INFLUENCE ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT | POSITIVE | INTERNAL | EXTERNAL |
| | | Positive internal forces that create the likelihood of educational achievement, such as belief in one's ability and in education as a route to success and happiness | Positive external forces that create the likelihood of educational achievement, such as growing up in a well-to-do family and community in which education is well-funded and highly regarded |
| | NEGATIVE | Negative internal forces that diminish the likelihood of educational achievement, such as ill health, a belief that one is not able to do the work or that education does not pay | Negative external forces that diminish the likelihood of educational achievement, such as growing up in poverty and attending bad schools in which the struggle for daily survival swamps any possibilities for academic preparation for college |
| | | | |



ally led to her developing the negative internal characteristics that contributed to her decision to stop her education after high school. Notice that I have just switched from emphasizing the external characteristics that influenced her decision not to go to college (e.g. her family history and its attitudes toward college), to internal factors that led in this direction (e.g. her beliefs about her own ability to do college work).

I think Louise's story is a good example of the way a mix of negative external factors led her to get married right after high school graduation (to her high school sweetheart) when it is clear that had she grown up in other circumstances she almost certainly would have gone to college. I should add that internally she believed that she was not college material and that early marriage would make her happiest. However I think it was the external factors that should be emphasized. Once she was married and had children, the external conditions for continuing her education were almost entirely negative. Her husband was working two jobs and, when the children were old enough, Louise began to work part-time herself. This was made possible by the fact that she lived just down the block from her

parents, and her mother was a willing baby-sitter. There was neither time nor money for college, and since they had left high school, there was virtually no contact with anyone who could suggest that further education would be a good idea. In the nearly sixty interviews I did I would say that this pattern of early marriage, children and need to make money appeared more often than any other as a path away from higher education. This was especially true for the female subjects, but also occurred in one of the stories told by a male.

"I actually got good grades, mostly B's, but nobody in my group of friends even talked about going to college. So I never thought of it. Now I know that other kids with grades like mine got to go."

Once Louise started to talk about how she managed to return to her education, the influence of external factors became even clearer. A few years into their marriage Louise's husband started his own business. He worked longer hours and Louise tried to help by working more hours at her part-time office

job, and by helping with her husband's office paperwork. "When the business failed our marriage fell apart too," she told me. "I kind of knew things were going bad for us, but we didn't seem to be able to do anything about it." The youngest of their three children was only five at the time and Louise couldn't afford to pay the mortgage on their house, so (very reluctantly) she moved in with her parents. She started working full-time in the office where she had been working part-time. Not only did she find that she was good at the bookkeeping she was doing, she was also given increased responsibilities by her office manager. She also liked the work and the sense of accomplishment it gave her. Her company had a program that paid for employees to take courses that would help them do their jobs better.

"At first I didn't want to bother, but one of my friends at work said she was going to take one, so I signed up too. For some reason the courses seemed easy to me. I got 'A's,' and I actually loved doing the work. I couldn't believe I was doing so well, and from there it was an easy step to take some courses at the community college. I saw an ad for night courses in my paper and got my friend to go too. It felt so comfortable there. There were women my age with kids at home, women who never went to college after high school. We could talk to the teachers if we had trouble, and they would let you make up work if things went wrong at home or at work. I used to go into my upstairs bathroom to run a hot tub and study to get away from the kids watching TV. And the school was just around the corner from my house, and thank God my mother was there to take care of the kids when I was at work or school. Then I just came here to Bridgewater part-time because the courses would just transfer right over. I never looked back. It took me twenty six years to get my degree, but I'm graduating with honors this May."

FAY

On the surface Fay's story may seem to be much like Louise's. Like Louise, Fay got married right after high school to her long-time boyfriend, had three children and did not get to finish college for almost twenty five years. But their stories are very different in the way the internal and external forces acted to create Fay's educational late-blooming. As with all my interviews I began by asking Fay to tell me the story of how she came to be a college student after some years away from school. The very first thing she said to me was that "I always wanted to go to college. I loved school right from the beginning. I knew I'd get back to school one day." Her attitude toward college could not have been more different from Louise's. Fay grew up in a family in which higher education was not only valued, but assumed to be central to the futures of all the children. She remembered clearly how her parents told each of the children that they were "expected to do their school work before any other responsibility, and that whatever it took to get them to the best college they could get into, the family would do."

"I always wanted to go to college. I loved school right from the beginning. I knew I'd get back to school one day."

It was also clear that Fay's family practiced what they preached. Both parents had gone to college (her father had a graduate degree as well), and there were almost no members of the extended family who had not attended and finished college. The family had chosen to live in a certain Boston suburb specifically because it was known for its good school system, and Fay's older brothers had both gone on to



prestigious colleges after high school. She was a very good student in high school, earning even higher grades than her older brothers. So her parents were more than slightly upset when she announced that she was pregnant. She would not be going to college and would marry her boyfriend right away. (I can't quote in a family journal what Fay reported that her father said when she broke the news.) "I told my parents that I was going to have my baby because they taught me to be a good Catholic and, besides, I loved Ed and he was away at college three hours away and I didn't want him to meet someone else and fall in love with her. I told them I'd get to college eventually, but that I wanted to support Ed and raise my child and that there was nothing they could do about it." So, she did.

For eight years she worked at a range of jobs helping her husband get through college and law school. They also had two more children. Once Ed started earning some money they moved back near Boston and Fay stopped working and focused on raising the kids. Fay never stopped taking college courses. "The courses were all over the place," she said. "History, lit, classics, astronomy. I didn't care where they were leading. I just like books and

school. And as soon as the youngest was off to college I told Ed that it was my turn." She chose to go to Bridgewater because it was easy to drive to and seemed to have more older students on the campus than the other local schools she had visited, and she took her time deciding on a major because "I was having so much fun I didn't want to finish too fast. Ed has to do some cooking and house work now," she laughed.

To compare the stories told by Louise and Fay, just line up the internal and external forces and decide what the key ingredients were in both their leaving and returning to school. When Fay was young the forces all seemed to work in the direction of an uninterrupted move to college after high school. The important positive external forces for higher education included 1) living in a family that valued and supported education, 2) attending a good high school and 3) having the resources to afford a college education. (None of these were the case in Louise's youth.) Among the positive internal forces that should have led Fay to go to college right away included 1) strong belief in the value of education and 2) a taste and talent for academic work. (Again, Louise was the opposite.)

But as Fay graduated from high school there were some strong negative forces tipping the scales against her attending college. When Fay became pregnant she had to deal with her deeply held religious beliefs about the sanctity of life and her love for her boyfriend. Fay's pregnancy in her senior year of high school was the strongest factor in her decision not to go to college. So the balance of forces, though they seemed aligned to send Fay right to college, were tipped at the last moment, though not forever.

When Fay was in a position to return to college, the same forces that seemed to have her on track for a higher education when she was young, came into play. She had the money, the love of education, the talent and taste for it and, now, she had the time and the support of her husband. Such "empty nest" returns to school appeared in about twenty percent of the stories I heard from female subjects in my study.



A BALANCE OF FORCES

Americans love stories about people who overcome obstacles to achieve notable success. In fact, rooted deep in our culture is an abiding faith that no life can have gone so wrong that it cannot be improved. The alcoholic, having hit rock bottom, can always take the twelve-step path to sobriety. Our most enduring fictional heroes make the journey from humble (or, even better, desperate) origins to spectacular success. For example, just before the turn of the twentieth century an American minister named Horatio Alger wrote over 100 novels in each of which a young hero rises from poverty to wealth by a combination of hard work, frugality, strength of character and a powerful wave of luck. Our favorite film heroes are common citizens who have been wronged, or simply ignored, by the rich and powerful but who prevail in the end. Think of Jimmy Stewart's Harry Bailey in *"It's a Wonderful Life,"* and every reincarnation of Sylvester Stallone's character Rocky Balboa. And in one of the most endearing acts of faith that failure can be reversed, New England fans return to Fenway Park every April.

Our faith in the ability of the ordinary schlub to overcome the odds simply because he or she has the internal fortitude and talent to do so is an endearing American trait. However, my research with these older students suggests it is also something of a pipedream. In fact, if we give external forces their due, we would be in a much better position to accomplish the goal of the "life-turnaround," such as in educational late-blooming. Here is what I mean. For every bright kid who goes to college despite the fact that he or she has grown up in poverty, there are thousands who succumb to those forces in the environment that make higher education unlikely. It is wrong to focus on the exceptional cases of success against the odds when a close look at what creates those odds would be so much more productive.

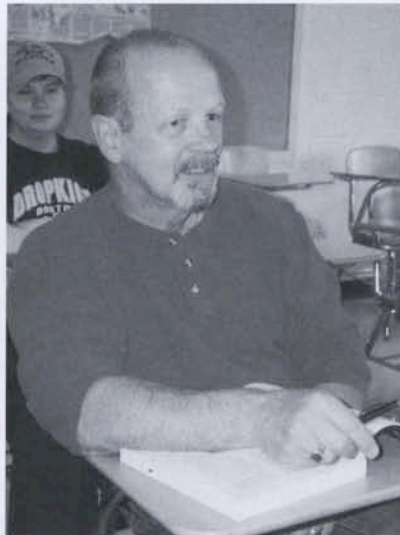
I like to illustrate the relative impacts of internal and external forces on our lives by the following metaphor. Imagine two middle-aged men who are rowing a boat across a bay. Fred was born with superior physical talents. He has also worked hard to become a good swimmer. Raymond was born with

Americans love stories about people who overcome obstacles to achieve notable success.

much less native physical ability and, instead of exercising, has spent his life on a sofa trying to set a record for the consumption of Cheese Doodles and Twinkies. When the boat overturns (Ray's fault, since he was reaching awkwardly for a bag of potato chips at the time) try to figure the likelihood that either will survive. I contend that if you think first about Fred's superior physique and conditioning, you might well be (excuse me) missing the boat. I believe the first question you should ask is about the conditions of the bay. If the tide is running strong, there is a heavy wind, the water is only 40 degrees Fahrenheit and the shore is 4 miles away, the circumstances in which they find themselves will, clearly, overwhelm the difference between them as individuals. Both will certainly drown in these conditions. Fred would probably survive longer, but that would not be the lead to the newspaper story the next day. On the other hand, if they were close to shore in three feet of warm water when the boat capsized, the differences between them would also be unimportant. If conditions on the bay were at just the level in which the differences between them would allow Fred to survive but kill Ray we would be justified in attributing success and failure to individual characteristics. But I contend that such conditions are rare.

I am not suggesting that we stop trying to be the best people we can be, nor that we cannot make a difference in our lives by trying harder and improving our individual characteristics. Rather, I am suggesting that we Americans do not pay adequate attention to the great forces that surround us.

In the case of educational careers, we can continue to celebrate those who overcome the odds to return to school largely by reason of their persistence. However, there is a great deal more potential in creating the external conditions in which educational late-blooming is likely to occur. For example, after World War II the United States instituted a well-funded program called the "G.I. Bill of Rights," an important component of which was financial and institutional support for returning soldiers to go to college. When I started teaching at Bridgewater in the early 1970's my older students were overwhelmingly male, Viet Nam veterans who were taking advantage of the still-active G.I. Bill of Rights. Another example of an external force that has enabled educational late-blooming is that welfare policy that (until its recent demise in an era of



welfare roll reduction) allowed a parent on public assistance to attend college as a condition of her continued assistance. The program established conditions in which women would be a great deal more likely to attend college than would otherwise be the case. There were women in my interview sample who told me they knew other women who had started school that way and were forced to drop out when the program ended. Even simple conditions such as the provision of day-care

on campus or public transportation can make the difference in an ability to return to school. (One woman in my sample said she started attending Bridgewater mainly because a bus route to the school had been created.) The creation of an association of older students and the scheduling of classes to accommodate the lives of working adults and parents are further examples of conditions that would encourage educational late-blooming.

I am not the grump who hates those heart-warming rags-to-riches stories that make us all think that if it can happen to her, it can happen to me. I, also, dream of winning the lottery. I just don't want us to make educational policy on the basis of rewarding those who overcome the odds. There are much more powerful forces we can tap.

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Illustration by Tim Longo