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My Turn: The Return of Older Women to College

by William C. Levin

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One September afternoon last year I ruffled the edges of my first stack of assignments for a course in quantitative research methods. Most appeared to be of the competent-but-uninspired variety. After all, how could I expect students to get passionate about measures of central tendency and variability? However, without my even having to read them, a few bore the unmistakable look of fanatic preparation. I pulled one out. It was done on a word processor and everything that could be precisely centered was. Answers were highlighted in yellow marker and underlined, while calculations were set off in a tasteful and unobtrusive tan. Everything was correct.

What is your guess about the type of person who would produce such work? I must admit, at the risk of being revealed as a stereotyper, that I immediately assumed this assignment was done by a female student over the age of thirty. At Bridgewater, a growing proportion of our students are older than the traditional eighteen to twenty-one year olds, and they are usually my best students.

For a few years I have been working with Jack Levin of Northeastern University to understand the phenomenon of educational "late-bloomers," individuals who drop out of the educational system for some period of time, then return after the delay to finish school well after the normal age at which society expects graduation. To study how these "late-bloomers" came to re-enter the educational system I drew a random sample of full-time enrolled Bridgewater State students who were over the age of thirty, eventually completing intensive interviews with twenty-eight individuals. These people were, with very few exceptions, from homes of modest incomes and little history of college education among parents or siblings. My preliminary analysis of the interviews suggests a pattern of experience among these students which is both heartening and maddening.

Almost all my respondents told me that they were prevented from going to college by some combination of family and financial problems. More than half said that they never considered college to be a realistic possibility, even though their grades were high enough to get into a liberal arts college of some sort. About a third reported that they were told that the family could not afford to send more than one child to college, and that the oldest male would be the one to go. In about a quarter of the interviews, the story was that the parents or the high school guidance counselor (sometimes both) told them that females who wanted to go on to education beyond high school should go to secretarial or health training programs, such as nursing or medical technology. This was often the expectation even when the young woman's high school grades were at honors levels.

Many of the women in my sample also said they did not consider continuing their education after high school because they wanted to get married. In some cases, the desire to get married immediately after high school was less a result of love than the need to get out of the house. Given that college attendance rarely provided a way "out" for these young women, marriage seemed a reasonable route to independence. Ironically, such early marriages provided a number of women with their path to college, though the trip was delayed by some years.

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It appears, so far, that there are three main ways in which these women have returned to the education which they almost always referred to in their interviews as "interrupted." Roughly a fifth have, for twenty-or-so years, raised children and run a home. With the last of the children off to college, they have the energy, interest, and resources to return to college. Though they often resume school with some lack of confidence, they typically report that a few high grades are enough to convince them that they are more than bright enough to do the work.

The second, much larger group of women have faced problems in their marriages or careers (sometimes both) and have returned to school as an important element in a determined effort to "start over." Given the high rate of divorce among American women who marry young, it is not surprising that

many of these women found themselves single and with children to support but without satisfying means to make a living. Some were forced to move back in with parents and, taking advantage of the day care help from their parents and various tuition support programs, they were able to finally go to college. Others, though their marriages remained solid, never felt satisfied with their jobs as secretaries, nurses, or lab technicians. They came to question, and often resent, the limitations imposed on them when they were young, and have returned to their educations despite losses of seniority and, sometimes, high salaries to fulfill a potential they see as having been wasted.

Whatever the path these women followed that brings them to full time enrollment at Bridgewater, they have too much to prove, too many difficult experiences behind them, and too much

to gain to take less than full advantage of what college can provide. They say that they love going to school, especially in comparison with what they had done before, and that they love showing their "A" papers to the husband they helped put through college or the son whose college grades are not as good as Mom's.

The forces which deliver students to our classrooms vary over the years. At its base is the relatively predictable flow of students who follow the normative expectation of high school, then college, then a job. But the more episodic populations like the post-war veterans taking advantage of G.I. Bills of Rights, the immigrants who are let into America in the wake of political and economic currents, and the women discussed above deliver to our classrooms the challenging and rewarding students who spice and elevate the level of our educational discourse. ■

Community satisfaction is thus not only a series of quantifiable elements that are articulated by the residents of one town or city, they are also the results of the personal perceptions that the residents have of themselves in relation to their neighbors, friends, and family members. In John Bardo's view, symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective that can unlock many of the doors to understanding ourselves.

One of Dr. Bardo's current research projects draws on the colleges developing a positive institutional image,' and, 'How can institutions of higher learning maximize their level of satisfaction?' A volume published by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and edited by Dr. Bardo, addresses a broad range of issues relating to how public colleges and universities can stake out a unique role in higher

education and respond better to the changing character of student life and community needs. Dr. Bardo's most recently published papers discuss marketing principles in public higher education. His extensive experience in determining how communities can provide the proper setting for personal satisfaction should prove useful in his studies of academia. Dr. Bardo hopes to be able to propose new ways of enhancing self-image, creating dynamic vibrant learning environments, and developing centers of education that contribute to the general character of satisfaction in towns or cities where colleges and universities are located.

Dr. Bardo has found that a number of the satisfaction variables that strengthen the academic climate are present at Bridgewater State. He has found a culture of caring and shared values among the

college faculty, and was pleasantly surprised to find little evidence of faculty divisiveness. Despite the onslaught of economic woes and the general uncertainty that has gripped the college, Dr. Bardo is gratified to see that the level of community spirit appears to be high at Bridgewater.

Bridgewater's new academic vice-president has clearly been successful in balancing the roles of administrator and scholar. During these difficult times, it is gratifying to know that the academic life of the college has been entrusted to a man whose research has focused on defining the qualities that make institutions better places for living and learning. We wish Dr. Bardo well and hope that his tenure as academic vice-president will lead to a time in which Bridgewater maximizes its level of satisfaction. ■