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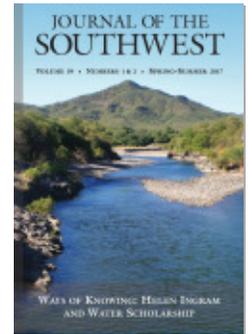
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To Be Underestimated Can Be a Good Thing

HELEN M. INGRAM

The curse of low expectations often diminishes women's lives. Growing up in the 1950s, as I did, young women were presented with only two options for their futures: Become wives, mothers, and helpmates to their husbands; stay single and pursue a career. My saintly mother was my role model for the first option. I believed that she worked way too hard, neglected herself, and got too little credit. The second path was clearly not preferable because giving up on romance was difficult, and jobs open to women were usually not high status.

The only thing that I was really good at was school. I adored politics, but I never got elected to anything, not even in Rainbow Girls, a Masonic-sponsored secret society with lots of offices to fill. I knew of few successful female politicians. The handful of women elected to Congress tended to be the widows of congressmen. Other women in politics were like my mother, dedicated, but under-appreciated precinct officials and party convention delegates. Both my grandmother and mother were teachers before they were married, and teaching credentials were considered "fallback" insurance. My decision to teach politics seemed a way to vicariously stay politically involved while pleasing my parents.

My ambition and intellectual ability were clearly underestimated in my family's choice of a tiny, all girls, junior college for me, and reflected their vast overestimation of my likelihood of getting into trouble unless closely supervised. While I was not part of the discussion, I do remember that I was pleased to be going to someplace out of state. As my daughters recount in their essay, the school was a poor fit, but subjected me to very useful life lessons. How fine it felt to be at the top of the class, and later on when academic expectations got higher, mine rose as well. Fitting in got a lot less important to me as I survived being profoundly unpopular among my junior college classmates. Having no social status to lose among my peers relieved me from fears that my ideas and opinions would be badly received. If invisibility was the price of acceptance, I was not willing then, or now, to pay it.

There is a school of thought among conservative feminists that “affirmative action” is more damaging than beneficial to women who are advanced on the basis of gender. My own experience suggests that whatever the rules say, being female always matters. As my daughters write, I had to “talk” my way into the graduate program at Columbia University as an exceptional female worth the trouble. That stigma never went away. A male colleague and I took a first-year seminar together. He never did the reading in preparation for class discussion, but I explained the literature to him during long walks we took before class. When my male friend got a better grade in the class than I did, I decided to congratulate myself on being a better teacher than our professor. Further, my slavishness about getting the best grades dimmed, and I learned to rely more on the opinions of a network of critical colleagues. When entering the job market, the males in my graduate program were benefited by personal calls to recruitment committee chairs from their advisers. Newly married with a small baby, I am sure my adviser did not believe I would ever be a credit to him. He told me to set up a file in the placement office to which he would write a general letter. I was a “walk-on” to my first academic job at the University of New Mexico (UNM). It was there that I began water resources research, a subject matter choice any political science mentor would have vetoed. It was also at UNM that Dorothy Cline, an astute commentator on New Mexico politics, the only other woman in the department, smoothed the way for me. She might have seen me as a threat but never treated me as such. Ever since, I have tried to pass along this generosity.

At UNM my teaching load was heavy and my publications list very short. I applied and received a matching grant from the New Mexico Water Resources Research Center that provided travel money and a class load reduction. My previous husband was lobbying against the dams in the Grand Canyon for the Sierra Club and I discovered that Morris K. Udall, the main congressional actor on the issue, had donated his papers to the University of Arizona Library. Again, being underestimated paid off. Senator Clinton Anderson’s legislative assistant was embarrassed when he spilled coffee all over me during my interview with him at his Senate office. After stating, “You are just a school teacher, right?,” he told me many details about the process of legislating the Colorado River Basin Act that I could not find in the Sierra Club’s or Congressman Udall’s files. My focus in this early research was on the politics of water resources, but I noticed that there were consistent losers in the process: Native Americans and the environment. Equity became a prominent

theme in my work. Standard political science studies power and slights fairness, and water resources scholarship and practice favor physical science and rationality over communicative and symbolic meanings. I am sure that my familiarity with marginalization made me sensitive and also bold.

My being a woman was all that mattered when I joined the all-white male political science department at the University of Arizona in early 1970s. After a decade of affirmative action pressures, and late in the recruitment season with a couple of positions to spare, the department hired me along with a Latino scholar of political behavior. My clear record as a critical scholar dedicated to public policy research in natural resources was not examined and debated, and therefore never accepted by the department, with the exception of a few close colleagues, Lawrence Scaff and Jeanne Clark. The lessons I had learned surviving a poor fit in junior college resurfaced. My own experience taught me how to appeal to bright undergraduates and to help neglected and dispirited graduate students. Because so few in the political science department shared my interests, I welcomed students from other departments, particularly geography, history, anthropology, and engineering. Crossing boundaries was a lot more rewarding than staying in my place, and I pursued joint appointments in engineering, business, and law. I expect breadth got me appointed acting director of the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy in the mid-1980s. I became a candidate for the permanent directorship after several years of failed searches, and against the advice of the university president, who told me, "You must understand we are looking for someone really good." When I got appointed, I figured that had to be me.

Being generally underestimated created a strong bond among University of Arizona women faculty, who banded together as a group and demanded change from the public universities' governing Board of Regents. The female dean of the College of Education told me that ranking faculty on the basis of salary from the top, she had to count down to forty before she encountered a female. The collective fight for salary equity created bonds that have lasted decades, including friendships with the late Mary Dole and Laurel Wilkening, who was later instrumental in my invitation to become an endowed chair at the University of California at Irvine. Serving with Anne Schneider at Arizona State University on the Arizona Board of Regents Women's Commission cemented a successful collaboration that still continues.

It has been twenty years since I have felt professionally underestimated, and I am humbled and intimidated by encountering mainly the opposite. In academic life, recognition often comes long after the point when a scholar is in desperate need for reinforcement. I know from experience that “late bloomers” are usually mythical, and that people with great potential are frequently neglected in favor of those with pedigree who fit preconceived models of success. I am grateful to have been taught through experience that students and junior colleagues can thrive when given respect and encouragement. I have never thought of myself as the director of a research team or group in which other people work to advance my reputation. I am acutely aware of the arduous and consuming challenges of an academic career, and the notion that a young colleague would divert their attention to serve my own research is wrong. As an interpretive and critical scholar, I believe it is better to be involved in doing my own interviews and collecting my own data. I have learned more from my junior associates and collaborators than I have imparted. Like my seminar partner in graduate school at Columbia, I have relied heavily on others to tell me about new and exciting ideas and approaches. I have been greatly helped by criticism and advice from a wide network of colleagues to whom I have circulated work in progress. Had I been strongly mentored in graduate school and by senior colleagues once I started teaching, I probably would have been advised to stay closer to the standard academic script. Consequently, I avoid directional advice, and instead encourage self-confidence, risk-taking, pursuing subjects and questions one cares about, and above all persistence and hard work.

Deciding when an academic career has been successful is a tricky business. I have talked sufficiently with eminent scholars in my field to know that even people at the top of the game believe that they could have done more or that their work should have been better recognized. Certainly, a lengthy vitae does not assure success. I remember a senior colleague in political science warning me, “When will you stop the outpouring of that tacky water resources stuff and publish something of real importance?” Obviously, exceeding early low expectations is a great pleasure to me, but hardly a trustworthy measuring stick. The publication of this special issue of the *Journal of the Southwest* signals that I have arrived. How else could I have attracted as editor of this volume the dedication and time of so great a talent as Margaret Wilder, from whom I have learned so much? How else would wonderful scholars be willing to contribute their fine research to this collection? What better reward for a career well spent than the loving tribute of my daughters? ❖