

It's Taken 5 Decades to Get the Ph.D. Her Abusive Professor Denied Her

In 1967, a dream was derailed. But it never died.

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Marilyn WebbCredit...Kate Way for The New York Times

By **Nicholas Kristof**

When Marilyn Webb asked a distinguished male professor to serve on her dissertation committee at the University of Chicago, he said he would do so only if he could go to her apartment and give her baths.

So she asked another prominent professor, this one an expert in moral development. He pinned her against the wall, kissed her forcefully and “began slobbering all over my face,” she recalled, adding, “He told me it was quid pro quo.”

Webb pushed him off, walked out and had a good cry. “The fact that they saw me as just a sexual being and a sexual object was so stunning to me, it just shattered me,” she said. “I didn’t even have the confidence to get angry. I was just so hurt.”

She had deeply admired both professors and had spent three years completing coursework and preliminary exams for her Ph.D. in educational psychology. But this was 1967.

“There was no word for sexual harassment, there was no language for this, there was no Title IX, no administrator to report it to,” Webb told me. “I felt shame as if I had done something wrong, and there was no recourse. So I left.”

Webb dropped out of the Ph.D. program and moved to Washington to become an activist in the nascent women’s movement. She founded a feminist newspaper, *Off Our Backs*, then a college women’s studies program, wrote books and magazine articles and served as editor in chief of *Psychology Today*. She became an expert on death and dying and co-chair of the journalism program at Knox College in Illinois. “I’ve had a great life,” Webb said.

But when the #MeToo movement gained traction, Webb thought about how her academic career had been cut short. As a 75th birthday present to herself in October 2017, she wrote to the president of the University of Chicago, Robert Zimmer, laid out what had happened, and asked him if the university could correct this injustice.

The two professors were dead, but Zimmer discussed the issue with colleagues who investigated, reviewed Webb’s work and found her story credible. The university formed a dissertation committee — two white women and a black man, reflecting how universities have changed — and agreed that Webb would submit as a dissertation a book she had written, but with a new theoretical framework.

She did so, and next month at the age of 76, she will receive her Ph.D. at the University of Chicago graduation ceremonies.

“For a university, academic integrity is the most important thing,” Zimmer explained. “If mistakes have been made, they need to be corrected.”

Amanda Woodward, the dean of social sciences who will hand Webb the diploma, wasn’t even born when Webb arrived at Chicago to begin work on her doctorate. “This is a victory,” Woodward told me. “It’s a sad comment on the way things were in the past, but such a victory for her to come back.”

Dr. Webb, as she will shortly be, is thrilled. “The culture changed,” she said.

Gender discrimination was not, of course, only about sexual harassment or assault. The University of Chicago is granting another long-delayed Ph.D., to [Cheryl Dembe](#), who was completing her doctorate in 1971 when her research adviser died unexpectedly. She could not find another — because she was female, the university acknowledges — and so had to drop out with a master’s.

A faculty committee reviewed Dembe's work as a doctoral student and was impressed; it resembled contemporaneous work at Cornell University that later won a Nobel Prize. So Dembe, too, will be awarded a Ph.D.

I love these stories that end in triumph, but they should prod us to reflect. Half a century ago, we were largely blind to sexual harassment and gender discrimination, so talented women were pushed out — not just from doctoral programs but from every institution and workplace. Discrimination against gays was similarly invisible because, like sexual harassment, it was hard to talk about. Everybody lost.

So what are we still blind to today? What groups of people drop unnoticed out of Ph.D. tracks in 2019 — or out of journalism or investment banks or technology companies (or were never there to begin with)?

Race, gender and L.G.B.T. status get more attention now, but I suspect there's little notice of the absence of undocumented immigrants, trans people and those with mental health challenges or other disabilities. The largest group of all that falls through the cracks is probably made up of those from poor, chaotic or working-class backgrounds. Children from the top 1 percent are [77 times more likely](#) to attend an Ivy college than kids from the bottom 20 percent.

“Graduate students from low-income backgrounds are a group at risk that we aren't really noticing,” suggests Kathleen Cagney, a University of Chicago sociologist who led Webb's dissertation committee.

So, yes, there's genuine and exciting progress, and I'm cheering Dr. Webb and Dr. Dembe. Hooray for them and for the University of Chicago! But let's learn from that experience and try to avoid other kinds of myopia that lead people even today to drop out and never fully deploy their talents — for then we all lose.

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Nicholas Kristof has been a columnist for The Times since 2001. He has won two Pulitzer Prizes, for his coverage of China and of the genocide in Darfur. You can sign up for his free, twice-weekly [email newsletter](#) and follow him on [Instagram](#).