A Professor’s Perspective on 50 Years

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In 2015, members of the Annenberg School for Communication’s 1965 graduating class met in Philadelphia for their 50th reunion. This was only the fifth graduating class in the School’s short history; there had never before been a reunion of this kind and none since. After serving on the University’s 1964 reunion committee, Anne Klein chaired this Annenberg reunion.

I was most impressed by how many of these graduates made the considerable effort to come from all over the country to this event. To feel connected to one’s alma mater after pursuing different professional paths says something about the importance of attending the University of Pennsylvania. But what motivated their loyalty?

I happened to join the Annenberg School as a research assistant and began my teaching career at the same time as these students enrolled in its Master of Arts in Communication program. The School was new, and this was an exciting time for all of us. The School has become more academic since and the world of media has changed quite radically, which made me most curious as to what happened to the graduates after they completed their education. I was looking forward seeing them again and hearing their stories.

During this reunion of the ASC Class of 1965, someone recovered a 1965 Life Magazine article about U.S. graduate education, largely because it mentioned the Annenberg School in passing. Under the headline of “The Great Grad School Gold Rush” the article claimed that the current population of graduate students was growing merely because of the increasing availability of funds for education. It went on to report that most graduate students were so comfortable that they didn’t see the need to do anything else. What a putdown of graduate education and everything we hoped to accomplish! But worse, when flipping through the pages of that issue of Life Magazine, almost all women looked like fashion models whose sole purpose was to make products and services appear attractive.
These were the popular stereotypes that educated women faced. The opportunity to see in print what the 1960s public celebrated made me aware that we all live in the present and that it takes images of the past to disclose what we blindly accepted then.

In the 1960s, academic education was far from an established path to jobs for graduates. A Master of Arts degree in Communication was quite unknown and graduates with such a degree had to struggle to explain their acquired competencies. Many had to start at jobs far below what they had studied for and yearned to excel in. For women graduates, double difficulties awaited them. Not only had they dared to choose an academic education—often against advice of family members—but also they faced unbelievable gender prejudices, harassment, and disrespect. The experiences these graduates shared were plainly shocking by contemporary standards. Glass ceilings were barely above crawl spaces.

The stories published in *On the Cusp – The Women of Penn ’64* reveal the unbelievable preconceptions women faced after leaving the University. Not that academic life was entirely free of gender issues. The University had a Dean of Women. Despite her conservative advice for women to seek jobs in nursing and teaching, most schools did not merely provide a safe haven to explore prescribed subjects; instead they encouraged women to think outside the box. In 1965, one third of Annenberg graduates were women. They were welcomed and excelled without discrimination. The University was led by two remarkable woman presidents, the current one even more outstanding than the first. Penn admitted the brightest students and provided an education that expanded women’s aspirations beyond expectations and gave them the strength to pursue them against existing odds.

The Penn Class of 1964 had only 385 women graduates. These few women alumni developed their own companies, sat on corporate boards, held professorships at important universities, and made significant contributions. To share their stories and reflect on how they managed to persist in this changing world is what brought both Penn and Annenberg graduates together after 50 years and gave birth to the idea of this book.

As a critical communication scholar that I have become since, I was most eager to learn what these women took away from their alma mater, and what enabled them to unstoppably create not only novel paths in pursuit of their own missions but also the spaces for other women to go even further. Meeting again after fifty years, it became clear what a remarkable group of graduates—especially of women—they were, what they grew from the seeds that the University had planted in their lives, and what their stories can encourage us to dare to do today.