

Blackballed  
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At the end of 1971, I was finishing my sophomore year in college. When I began attending the University of Wyoming, I declared myself as an Art major. After a single class in art, in which my work looked amateur next to the high school junior who had joined for the summer class, I changed my major to English. Over the course of the next year, I would change it to Geography, until I learned more than maps were involved; to Business, where I discovered I would have to excel in math (at which I was frankly terrible); to Botany, until I realized that my love of drawing was insufficient when it came to memorizing the extensive taxonomy of vascular plants; and finally to Education, where I found myself in a class of freshmen who also thought they wanted to teach. I assumed I would teach English or Home Economics, so I was diligently taking those classes as well.

What I didn't know was that this class was designed to weed out those who were not deemed to be teaching material. I found the class quite interesting. It explored various methods of teaching and looked at school systems around the world. Since I was in Wyoming, a great deal of time was spent on the methods used in the various large and small towns in the state. I had grown up in the Denver Public School system, and when I compared my education with that of my fellow students who had grown up in Wyoming, I was quite appalled by the limits of what I had learned.

Of course, having outsmarted the powers that be in my high school, I had managed to skip American literature and thus was exposed to *The Scarlet Letter*, which everyone else had read. I also missed out of several other classics, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, and the poetry of Walt Whitman. Instead I had taken Creative Writing, which has served me well later in life. My only exposure to Shakespeare had been the history play *Julius Caesar*. I was surprised to learn most Wyoming students had already read *Romeo and Juliet*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Comedy of Errors*. I was at least familiar with that particular comedy because the drama class had performed it during my sophomore year when there was a set of identical twins in the senior class.

As we neared the end of the Fall semester in UW's Education Survey class, we were assigned a final project, in which we were to write a proposal detailing what each of us considered to be the best education system we could imagine. Already better at writing than taking tests, I was thrilled to be able to expound on my version of the best school system I could visualize. Using what I had learned in the class, I designed a system which combined a British type with the existing Wyoming version, drawing on the best of both systems. My system included tracking students according to their interests and abilities, which would then direct them toward higher education or apprenticeship.

The semester ended without the members of the class having our papers returned to us. Instead we were each instructed to make an appointment with our advisor, who would go over our papers with us, and we would receive our grades at that time. I can still see my advisor in my mind's eye, and even though we had a friendship outside of the class, with him providing a home for my dog until I moved

out of the dorm, I cannot recall his name.

What I do remember clearly is the day I went to his office for our meeting. He led me across the hall to a small conference room, where I was invited to sit and wait. Then, one by one, three men walked into the room. As they introduced themselves to me, I learned that one was the principal of the University School, one was the Supervising Professor of Student Teaching, and one was the Dean of the College of Education. My advisor walked in behind them, and I was faced with four men in suits who sat down around the table with me.

There was no small talk. I was not handed my paper, which was to be discussed at this meeting. Instead I watched as my paper was torn in half in front of me, and I was given an unexpected verdict. “You are a very intelligent young woman,” I was told by the Principal, “and you will certainly go far in your life, but you will never teach in the State of Wyoming.”

As I widened my eyes and raised my eyebrows, the Dean spoke. “Your ideas are not in keeping with Wyoming values. We are a very conservative state, and we would never consider incorporating your suggestion of tracking students into careers. Frankly, we find that concept repugnant.”

Finally, the Student Teaching Supervisor had his say. “You may take as many courses in Education as you like,” he told me, “but you will never be allowed to Student Teach, and you will never be certified. We suggest you consider a different career.”

With that the three men filed out, leaving me alone with my advisor. I had not been given a chance to ask questions of those authorities. Instead, my advisor sat with me while I turned it all over in my head. Finally, I knew what I needed to ask.

“Can they do that?” I asked. “What does this really mean?”

Quietly, the kind man answered me. “It means you have been blackballed by the College of Education. Your name has been placed on a list that prohibits you from signing up to student teach, and without that experience, you won’t be given a teaching certificate or a degree in Education. As the Dean said, you should consider another career.”

Blackballed. I had already been fired from a job for lying about why I missed work, and a couple years later I would be fired from another job for being pregnant. And so began my working life in which I had many jobs but no career. Until now, when I embrace the life of being a writer and sharing my gift with others—a teacher and editor without a certificate or a degree, just lots and lots of experience.