

The much-needed pioneer spirit: the story of a woman who paves the way and strengthens other steps

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Introduction: The other side of the window

The year is 2022, the 21st century. The struggle for racial and gender equality exists in all society's agendas. Thus, in this context, I witness the exciting event of the election of the first woman to assume the head of the Department of Accounting and Actuarial Science at FEA-USP in São Paulo. Sometimes, I asked myself when this would finally happen, considering that in other departments, as is the case of administration and economics departments, women had already taken this position in the last century, at least 25 years ago.

I must congratulate Professor Mara Jane Contrera Malacrida for another achievement in her life journey! A feisty warrior and pioneer in this feat and many others that she will tell here herself.

I met Mara when she was my undergraduate student in 1998. At the time, the good student she was, she soon stood out and began to show interest in gaining other experiences beyond the classroom. For this reason, I invited her to develop a scientific initiation project and work as a teaching assistant in accounting training courses. Since then, her experience in the academic milieu – a very rich experience that I believe should be offered to all willing students – awakened her desire to teach.

Later, she attended the Master's and Doctoral programs and became a highly qualified consultant and professor at the Department of Accounting and Actuarial Science at FEA-USP.

She was invited to serve as financial director at USP, the largest university in Latin America, which is much more than the position of CFO in any multinational company. Additionally, she was the first woman at USP to hold this position.

The battle is challenging, and the path has many obstacles. I witnessed tears, indignation, and frustration along the way, some of which we experienced together. Many nights were dedicated to working, to the detriment of obligations still classified as feminine, such as taking care of the home and children and making the groceries, among the many tasks society still expects us to do. And living with that feeling of guilt that is always on the back of our minds, especially when our pursuits are obstructed, and it happens many times. And when we find such impediments unfair, we even reconsider whether we are on the right path. We always need to prove that we are capable to ourselves and others and more capable than men because, after all, most of the time, our competence is judged predominantly by the male gender. This context has indeed changed, but we still need to go much further in this regard.

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Today, we are professional colleagues and friends. The fact that I have gained a true professional friend makes me very happy. We can share doubts about our personal lives, children, clothing, trips, and also other matters, such as accounting standards, class content and exercises, and so many professional challenges arising in our daily routine.

I am very proud to witness and accompany the progression of that undergraduate student of mine from 20 years ago and see her transformation into a very accomplished professional, one with whom no one can find any fault. I also cannot miss the opportunity to mention that my choice for the teaching career is worth it due to the “Maras” I met along the way and who are certainly shining with their choices, just as, in a few years, Professor Mara will also feel highly gratified by her choice, if she does not already experience such a feeling.

Next, Professor Mara tells a bit of her story, which, like so many others, can motivate you not to give up on your ideals, however distant they may currently appear.

“People do not fail; they give up.” (Henry Ford)

Brief life account: the mirror’s other side

I was born and raised in a small town in the interior of São Paulo, Brazil, called Fernando Prestes. Daughter of a farmer (and amateur musician by talent) and a primary school teacher mother, I lived in the countryside until I was 14 years old on a farm that belonged to my grandfather, and it still belongs to my family. I have always liked to study, though I had to wait until I turned seven before I could go to school. The reason is that studies in the rural school close to where we lived were only initiated in the old first grade for those who had completed seven years of age or for those who would complete seven until mid-year. Since my birthday is in February, I entered school when I was seven years old. I would go to school with my mother and older brother. I attended this rural school until the third grade, together with my younger brother and a cousin. All the remaining years I attended at the town’s headquarters. And we depended on the school transportation provided by the city hall, which would transport the students who lived in the rural area. The road would be all muddy on rainy days, but going to school was an incredible experience!

I am the only woman among four children, and from a tender age, I would help my mother with the house chores, tasks considered “womanly.” My brothers, cousins, and I would help my parents in the fields during school vacations. Despite the hard and tiring work, my parents always protected and cared for us. We did not feel exploited, and none of us carry any trauma from that time. Working in the fields to help my parents contributed to my character in the most positive way. There was a dam where we lived with very clean water (a beautiful spring of water), which was our entertainment. Every day after work, we would swim. There, we learned to swing using the trunk (stem) of a banana tree.

This hard and tiring work spurred me to study even more. Although it was positive for my development as a human being, working in the fields was not something I envisioned for my future. I have always been a good student, always pushed myself further, and always wanted to get the best grades! Despite being a good student, I was never very quiet in the classroom. I got good grades, but I was part of the “noisy group”, which, from time to time, caused my mother, who was a teacher at the same school, to stress. As the town was small and there was only one school, the students in a class would go all the way from the first grade to high school. Rich and poor went to the same school, which taught me how to deal with diversity.

When I turned 14, my parents built a house in the urban area, where they still live today, and we moved to the city. From then on, the school was closer to my home, an eight-block walk. Hence, I was allowed to attend school since the high school in Fernando Prestes was only taught in the evening, and no transportation was available for students in the rural area.

Concomitantly with high school, I studied the former teaching profession (due to my mother's will). The teaching course, now extinct, was an alternative to high school, which allowed recent graduates to teach children attending between the first and fourth grades. At that time, teaching children was also considered a feminine activity, so we were all women in the class. Although I started the teaching course to fulfill my mother's wish, I became very interested in teaching techniques, which are still valuable for me today, as I opted for a career as a university professor. From 15 to 17 years old, I studied in the afternoon (teaching course) and in the evening (high school), and I also helped my mother with the housework since I was the other woman at home. I have always been very dedicated and honored to receive several academic achievement awards during my lifetime, and I had a dream of going to university.

When I finished high school, I took Fuvest [the competitive exam to enter university] for the first time and entered the Chemistry program at the USP at Ribeirão Preto; however, I dropped out. As a science, Chemistry is beautiful, but I could not see myself doing it my whole life. Today, after so many years, I learned that giving up quickly what one does not want is very valuable in the future. Time is scarce, and it only makes sense to apply it to what truly matters and interests us. I took Fuvest again the following year and found that I was pregnant with my first child, which made me postpone my studies, but not give up. I married at 20, and we are still married after 27 years. I went back to school after the birth of my son and with a family to look after. Hence, things got a little more complicated, but I had a lot of support from my family, and, most importantly, I never got hung up on the difficulties but on my goals.

Later, I took Fuvest again; this time, I was confident, I wanted Accounting Sciences. I recall my husband's face when I told him I was going to study Accounting after having started the Chemistry program and taking the entrance exam the year before for Literature. Perhaps it seemed to everyone that I would give up yet another program, but I was convinced in my heart. As I mentioned, we lived in the countryside, and my father was a farmer with little formal education, despite his immense wisdom in life. As a girl, I remember helping him with the accounts, inventory (of course, we did not use that name), and production yield. Without even knowing it, I already had a "proto-accountant" within me. It was an immense joy when I was accepted into the Accounting Sciences program at FEA/USP, and such bliss remains alive.

In my first semester, I took an Introductory Accounting course with João Domiraci Paccetz, the best professor anyone could have. Anyone who knows him understands precisely what I am talking about; impossible not to be enchanted with Accounting after having classes with him. Today we are more than colleagues in the Accounting and Actuarial Sciences Department. Professor Joãozinho, as he is affectionately called, is an exceptional friend and a great inspiration!

Professor Joãozinho created a legion of Accounting fans – a subject that some may consider uninspiring but which, when taught by him, becomes heaven, believe me. What a difference in the lives of young students to have mentors like Professor Joãozinho! Today I have the honor of being one of those responsible for the Introductory Accounting program (together with Professor Joãozinho) because I know that, in these initial courses, it is possible to awaken a passion for Accounting, as happened to me in 1997. I completely identified myself with the program, and I am proud to say that I AM AN ACCOUNTANT AND A PROFESSOR!

During the undergraduate program, I started scientific initiation with Professor Marina Mitiyo Yamamoto, a great friend, and supporter of my career. It was when I decided I would pursue a Master's degree. I attended the five-year undergraduate program in the evening and graduated with the highest weighted average of all graduates in 2001! I am very proud of such a feat! I was already the mother of two boys, and believe me, many people were surprised. They thought, "How was it possible to be a mother and the best student?"

In addition to deciding to pursue a Master's degree, I also decided to have a second child. I started my Master's program in 2002 when I was the mother of a 1-year-old baby. I recall as if it were today when I told Professor Marina (later my Master's and doctoral advisor) that I was going to have my second child and that he would grow up while I was studying. She spontaneously asked if I was "crazy." Today, the memories of that time bring me a good laugh during the countless conversations with my friend Marina. Even so, after the storm passed, I can say that she was right. Nonetheless, I obtained my Master's degree in 2004. It was exhausting, but I did it.

Given the stressful experience of the Master's program, I decided not to pursue a doctoral degree. However, it was the turn of a great friend of mine to convince me to keep going. Thus, Gerlando, now a professor at the University of Illinois in the United States, and I decided to study together for the selection process and apply for the doctorate. In addition, my love for Accounting also spoke louder. It worked, and off we went! Doctoral Program's Class 2006. Modesty aside, I can say that we were part of one of the best classes the department ever had. Many of us became professors at USP or other leading institutions in Brazil and worldwide.

I became a professor at FEA in 2010 after participating in two contests and being successful in the second one, held in September 2009. During this journey, I made friends who were important to me to overcome life's mishaps and get here.

Two years later, I became the Accounting and Actuarial Sciences program's vice coordinator and increasingly engaged in academic and administrative activities. In 2016, I assumed the Presidency of the Undergraduate Committee at FEA and, as such, became part of the USP Undergraduate Council, which allowed me to expand my knowledge and my friendships at the university. During that time, I had the opportunity to participate in important decisions that would impact many people's lives, such as, for example, the adoption of quotas by the University of São Paulo in 2018!

To my surprise, in 2018, I was invited by the then Vice-President, Professor Antonio Carlos Hernandez, to take over the board of directors of the Department of Finance at USP. Given such a responsibility, I stayed for a few months as his advisor. Then I took over as Financial Director in May 2019, a position I still occupy as I was invited to remain as the head of the Finance Department by the new Presidency that began in January 2022. During the period I held the advisor position, we worked to improve the mechanisms related to student permanence (even more critical due to inclusion processes).

As the head of the Finance Department, I had the opportunity to begin "giving back" to USP some of the knowledge I gained there since I joined as a student in 1997. It had been 22 years! The Finance Department is responsible for consolidating USP's entire budget, controlling financial resources, and accounting and preparing the university's financial statements; that is, I perform activities related to my professional training. I have made many friends in this new challenge. I say "challenge" because USP is equivalent to a large company with around 20,000 employees, 100,000 students, and a budget of approximately R\$8 billion (in 2022).

I was the first female professor in the history of the University of São Paulo to take over the Department of Finance. As with large private companies, USP is governed by an absolute majority of men. Gradually, I appropriated this environment, carried out the activities with great dedication and determination, and was recognized for my work. There is still a long way to go and, at this point, my focus is on implementing a new accounting system (based on the new accounting standards applied to the public sector), generating savings with the purchase of electricity (through *Mercado Livre*) and improving processes to increase our efficiency and agility. As the financial director, I needed to show that I had the knowledge and competence to assume the position despite not being a full professor. Even though the role is related to my training, many people thought I was too young to exercise it.

In 2020, many challenges were imposed on teaching and the university's finances in the context of the pandemic. Nonetheless, little by little, all challenges were overcome. In 2022, I decided, together with Professor Bruno Meirelles Salotti, to run for the head of the Department of Accounting and Actuarial Science. New challenges and, once again, the first female professor to assume the head of the Department of Accounting and Actuarial Science at FEA/USP after 76 years of history!

My journey thus far was not easy, but it has been very enriching! The university, like society, still feeds stereotypes of what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a mother, and, finally, what is not usual. Breaking these stereotypes is part of my life. During my academic career, I often proved that I was as or more competent than certain men (professors or otherwise). It was like that when I was a student, when I became a mother (as if it were impossible for someone to be a mother and a student simultaneously!), and when I joined USP as a professor. With my work and dedication, and recognition by students for the excellence of my teaching, I gained credibility to take on key disciplines at the undergraduate level and, finally, at the graduate level.

I am very grateful to the University of São Paulo, where I joined in 1997, and took my undergraduate, Master, and doctoral degrees. My husband and my eldest son also graduated from FEA/USP and my youngest son, who would say, is an undergraduate student in the Accounting course at FEA. Being a woman, I am convinced that life has imposed more obstacles on me, but I never surrendered. I hope this inspires other women. It takes resilience and determination to change the world. Inertia is what is normal, and I have always positioned myself as a force against it. I feel accomplished and recognized in my work as the head of the Accounting Department and as director of the Finance Department at USP. Even so, the classroom is irreplaceable, and it is there when I am in contact with my students, where I feel fully professionally fulfilled. Teaching Accounting to incoming students makes me very happy!

I am content with the choices I have made throughout my life, and I feel personally and professionally accomplished! It was not easy, but I say it was worth it!