

“It’s Never Too Late”

Nontraditional student reaches goal

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Sokhna Aw '18 '19G always dreamed of going to college in America. Now, 19 years after she first arrived, the Senegal native has realized the rewards of that goal for the third time.

A graduate of the [Peter Paul College of Business and Economics](#), Aw spend three years at Montgomery College in Maryland, where she earned an associate degree. In May, Aw followed her 2018 bachelor’s degree from Paul with a [master’s in accounting](#). Come October she will begin work at the Boston location of PricewaterhouseCoopers, a global networking firm headquartered in London.

And all because she trusted her intuition.

“I knew there would be more opportunities in the United States and that I’d get support, especially as a nontraditional student,” Aw says. “If I had wanted to go to college in Senegal as an older student, I’m not sure that would have happened. I don’t know if we’re there yet in Africa.”

Aw comes from a middle-class family. Her father was a driver for the Embassy of Senegal in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo RDC). Her mother had a knack for selling things, adding to the family income. In 2000, her uncle, who was living here, persuaded Aw’s father to let her come to the U.S. She brought with her the desire to go back to school.

The new resident got a job at an Au Bon Pan in Maryland. It was near the community college and the students she saw on their way to class fed that desire. But they were younger. Aw felt she might be too old. A few years later she was working at Nordstrom’s where the clientele she got to know suggested she go to college.

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“They said, ‘you’re smart, you should go to college.’ I thought maybe it was a sign,” Aw says.

So she went to talk to the admissions counselor at Montgomery College and was encouraged to go as far as she could, even for a Ph.D. Aw’s sister is a nurse so she decided to follow suit and became a certified nursing assistant after she received her associate degree. A job at a wound care center soon followed but Aw learned quickly it wasn’t for her.

“It made me too emotional,” Aw says. “I realized continuing on to be a nurse would be a waste of time, and that I needed to change my major. I knew I had an intuition for business, but I wasn’t sure in what area.”

She followed that intuition, anyway, and decided to major in business administration. When she took her first accounting class, she “fell in love.”

“I said, ‘this is it. This is what I want to do,’” says Aw, who in addition to English, is fluent in French and Wolof, her mother’s native tongue.

Aw eventually moved to Maine and transferred to the state university. Another move finally brought her to New Hampshire, and UNH.

Coming to New England, Aw knew there would be little diversity. “My worry was that I could pass a black person and then not know when I’d see another one. That was my main concern; that and being a Muslim who sometimes is fully covered.” And, being a nontraditional student who was, on average, more than 10 years older than the other students. But Aw says the faculty at UNH helped her through.

“The support I got from faculty was really amazing. They encourage you, let you know they are there for you. It was really incredible,” Aw says. "The journey was long, but here I am with my master's degree. Someday, I want to go back to Senegal and maybe be that person who tells women, 'it's never too late; you're not too old. You can do it.' If you educate women, society will succeed."

Find out where a degree from [Paul College](#) can take you.

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