

Going Back to School – Is it Right for You?

By KATIE MARKEY MCLAUGHLIN



Are you thinking of adding trips to the library and late-night study sessions to your daily routine? Are you looking to log as many hours in the classroom as you do in the office? If so, you're not alone.

College campuses are seeing an influx of adult students, the majority of whom are women. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 64 percent of students aged 30 or older at degree-granting institutions are female, and that percentage is expected to continue growing over the next decade.

Why Women Are Hitting the Books ... Again

Women go back to school for a variety of reasons. Some are just beginning their journey to a degree, some started college but never finished, and others are looking for advanced training to give them a competitive edge in the workplace.

Women in particular have a lot to gain from their caps and gowns. Going back to school can be a necessary step to advancing your career and increasing your income. Gaining new knowledge and skills lays the groundwork for a higher paying job, a higher level position, or even a completely new career path.

Another reason men are outnumbered in continuing education programs is that women see greater value—both personally and professionally—in an educational investment.

A 2011 Pew Research Center survey found that 81 percent of college-educated women rate college as “very useful” in increasing their knowledge and helping them grow intellectually, compared to just 67 percent of men. Similarly, 73 percent of women say college helped them grow and mature as a person, compared to only 64 percent of men.

It is no surprise, then, that some women are motivated to return to school primarily for reasons of personal enrichment—to gain a new skill not related to work, to challenge themselves and stimulate their minds, or to serve as better role models for their children.

Options for Continuing Education

Your options for returning to school will depend on your field, your educational goals, and your other obligations. These factors will help determine what kind of coursework you pursue and whether you attend on a full- or part-time basis.

Here are some options to consider.

Online Programs

Modern technology has transformed education such that you are no longer limited by your geographic location. According to GetEducated.com, a consumer group that publishes online college ratings, the average age of online students is 36, and 60 percent of virtual learners are women.

You can't beat an online program for convenience and flexibility—essentials for busy professional women juggling work, family, and personal responsibilities in addition to their academics. And if you don't want to complete your entire degree from home, many programs offer a blend of in-person and online courses.

Check out: Elizabethtown College's adult degree programs—including an associate's or bachelor's degree in business administration—can be completed exclusively online or through a blend of online and in-person classes.

Certificate Programs

Another option to consider is that of pursuing a certificate rather than a degree. Certificate programs provide specialized training for particular skills, usually in a fraction of the

time—and money—it takes to earn an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree.

Check out: Penn State World Campus's 15 undergraduate and 34 graduate level certificate programs, ranging in discipline from organizational communication to family literacy.

Accelerated Programs

Many women want to go back to school part-time but are intimidated by the number of years it will take to earn their degree. Fortunately today many schools offer accelerated programs to make investing in your education a faster process.

Check out: HACC Lancaster's "Fast Track" evening classes that allow part-time students to earn a Business Studies Associate Degree in as little as half the time the traditional program takes.

Making it Work

Balancing your education with your job, family, and personal responsibilities can be extremely

difficult. Try these six tips to make your return to the classroom successful.

Find the right fit. When it comes to continuing education, there's no one-size-fits-all program. Look for one that provides the flexibility and structure that's best for you.

Enlist support. Explain to your family and friends why school is

important to you, and ask for their help with things like chores, errands, and babysitting.

Ease into it. If you've been out of school for a long time, returning to the books can be jolting. Starting out slowly, with just one or two classes, can make that transition easier.

Set up your study space. It's important to designate the room or

area where you'll do your schoolwork. Doing so will help you separate your academic life from your work and family life, and will remind others not to interrupt you when you're studying.

Get credit for your experience. Many programs will offer academic credit based on your prior education, skills, and knowledge gained on the job.

Know your financial options. As a continuing education student, you could be eligible for special scholarships, federal student loans, institutional grants, employer support, or graduate-level assistantships to help ease your financial burden.

Postsecondary education is no longer limited to those straight out of high school. Adult women in particular are flocking back to the classroom. Whether you're looking to further your career, switch fields, or just learn something new, going back to school might be the right decision for you. **BV**

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