



Is it Time to Go Back to School?

A RESOURCE GUIDE



Taking the plunge to go back to college is never an easy decision. It's common to be plagued with feelings of self-doubt or to worry about juggling the rigors of daily life with the demands of being a student, especially if you're already working full time.

But when is the right time to get started?

- Start by asking yourself why you want to go back to college. Is it to help advance your current education? Do you want to explore a new career entirely? Or do you just need to "check the box"? Knowing what you want and why makes the decision-making process clearer.
- Next, ask yourself if a degree is the best way to achieve your goals. Is your niche in the business world more dependent on real-world experience? Often, today's employers are looking for a combination of experience and education, the latter of which might come by way of a paying job, an internship or a volunteer position.
- If you already have a bachelor's degree and are considering a master's degree, research the requirements for your field. Do most of the job postings say an advanced degree is preferred, or even required? There are some cases in which an advanced degree may increase your marketability, even if it isn't a necessity.

- Maybe you've considered opening your own business. That's a major venture, one with a lot of potential pitfalls. By-the-books knowledge can help pave the way to success and help you spot and avoid potential failure, as well as filling in the blanks between what you already know and what you need to learn to be successful. Perhaps your background is in human resources but you need to learn about finance. Maybe you've got the numbers down but need to build up your background in marketing.

If your answers to the questions above point to going back to college as your best path to getting where you want to be, there's one more point to consider – how will going back to school fit into your life? The good news is that if your schedule is already pressed for time, a variety of options exist with the flexibility to fit within the demands of your life, from part-time programs to fully online universities.

FINDING A UNIVERSITY THAT FITS YOUR LIFE: WHAT TO LOOK FOR

For many students considering going back to school amid a full schedule that might already include work, family and other obligations, the opportunity online universities offer to pursue a degree "anytime, anywhere" can prove to be a great option.

Online universities offer several advantages, but as with brick-and-mortar institutions, the amount of options out there can make choosing the right one for you seem impossible. When you're looking at a sea of names on a computer



screen, distinguishing one from the other takes a bit of work. However, putting the time and effort into deciding which school is right for you can make a world of difference in your educational experience.

The first thing to do is make sure you choose an accredited online university. Next, consider these four factors.

What Resources Are Available to Students?

Do your research to see what resources the school has to offer its students. Explore the school's website and social media pages to learn more about the tools available to students. Talk to advisors to make sure there is an accessible technology help desk and student tutorials, resources are available for help choosing a major, transferring credits, acclimating to the school, and being a part of a greater student community.

What Do Students and Alumni Think?

One advantage of the rise of social media networks is the ability to hear firsthand stories from current students and alumni. When you visit a school's social sites, see what conversations are happening there. Are students praising their time there? Are alumni encouraging students to attend their alma mater? Feel free to post questions and be an active participant on their pages to find answers to the questions you can only get from graduates and students.

Can You Work With Faculty and Staff?

In addition to credentials, accessibility of both instructors and administration may play a central role. Find out how often faculty are available for mentoring, brainstorming and academic nurturing outside of the online

classroom. Without in-person time, it's important to know that you can develop a relationship to receive support and guidance. In an online degree program, most students might have jobs that keep them busy during normal business hours or family obligations that comprise much of their time. If a student needs to troubleshoot a technical error with the software the class is using, is there someone available or an online manual to help? If the student has questions for the instructor, can he or she receive a timely response before the next lesson? A quality online program should have the options and resources students need.

What's Your Motivation?

Of course, the most important factor is the one within your control: your own commitment. Look for a program that encourages you to stay engaged and motivated. Look for an online school that has live interactive discussions, visual media, frequent feedback on assignments and instructors with availability to help keep students engaged.

Remember, even in today's online world, the technology may have changed, but the necessary dedication and commitment to your education hasn't. As a young student, you probably had teachers who made you want to show up to class and learn every day, while others may have left you bored and confused. You want to make sure you're finding a school that excites and engages you in a way that is designed to help you succeed.

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