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 career or pursue a promotion? 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 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 increases 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 certainly 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.

IS COLLEGE WORTH THE INVESTMENT?

That brings you to the next important question to consider: Is college worth the investment?

There are many ways to put a value on a college degree. Along with credentials, students can get a wealth of new knowledge, sharper critical thinking skills, work experience, networking opportunities and exposure to a world of new ideas and perspectives. Having that degree in hand can help get you in the
door and provide you with the confidence you need to land an opportunity.

But for all these benefits, does having a degree help graduates earn more money over the course of their working lives? Is getting a degree still worth the time and money? A recent study by the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics supports the long-held notion that a college education is a good investment in your future, as illustrated in the graph below.

![Earnings and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment](image)


Ultimately, you get out of your career and your life what you put into it. Still, it’s hard to deny the data. Workers with a bachelor’s degree earn a whopping 70% more than workers with a high school diploma, with a median salary of $1,108 per week versus $651 a week. Add a master’s degree, and the median salary rises to $1,329 per week. That’s just over double than those surveyed with only a high school diploma.

Additionally, high school grads experience nearly twice the unemployment (at 7.5 percent) of those who hold a bachelor’s degree (4 percent). Unemployment continues to decrease with every increase in education level.

**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 the best option.

Online universities offer several obvious advantages, but as with brick-and-mortar institutions, the amount of options out there can make choosing the right one 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 a regionally accredited online university. Next, consider these four factors.

**What Resources Are Available to Students?**

Joanne M. Deck, a former online educator and a career coach for Nurture You, recommends that prospective students make use of the research tools at their disposal.

“Students will want to thoroughly explore the school’s website, press releases and social media pages. They should make sure there is an accessible technology help desk and student tutorials for learning the school’s online platform,” she says. “They should also talk to advisement and counseling to see what resources are available for choosing a major, transferring credits, acclimating to school, and being connected as an online student. If the student...”
can’t find this information easily from the school, that’s a red flag right there.”

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, as Deck suggests, 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.

How Can You Work With Faculty?

In addition to credentials, accessibility of both instructors and administration plays a central role. “With little to no face-to-face interaction, [find out] how much and how often outside of the online classroom will faculty be available for mentoring, brainstorming and academic nurturing,” says Rosemary Hook, a career management consultant at Austin-based Hook the Talent, Inc. “It’s tough enough to get through college in a traditional classroom, and it takes serious discipline to complete online courses unless you have dedicated faculty.”

In an online degree program, a majority of 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 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. You want to find a program that encourages you to stay engaged and motivated, says educational consultant Susan Fitzell. “If you are a self-starter and watching boring media and doing assignment after assignment is your thing, great,” Fitzell says. “However, most of us learn from more engaging and diverse instruction. Look for online schools that use a variety of strategies including live interactive discussion, visual media, information delivery that goes beyond monotone lecture, frequent feedback on assignments and instructors with reasonable availability.”

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 left you bored and confused. You want to make sure you’re finding the school that excites and engages you in a way that will help you succeed.

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