

Facing Your Fears as an Adult Returning to School

by Matt McAllister

In case you hadn't noticed, career colleges aren't just for learning a vocational trade anymore. Nowadays, career colleges can help you obtain a Bachelor's, Master's, or even Doctorate Degree in just about any field of study, or they can even help you simply brush up on skills you might already have on your way to earning a certification or Associate's Degree. So while some career schools might still specialize in vocational trades like auto body repair, masonry or hair styling, the majority of today's career colleges are designed to help working professionals meet their career objectives.

Prompted by an inviting and growing selection of career and online colleges, more adults are returning to school than ever before. Whether you're seeking to advance your current career and education, break into a whole new field, or just enjoy studying something you've always wanted to, going back to school can be enjoyable and rewarding.

And yet, many potential students who could clearly benefit from enrollment at a career college are hesitant to do so. The reason? In too many cases, they are being held back by nothing other than their own fear.

The First Step is Admitting It

Let's begin by getting everything out on the table. Some reservations commonly heard from working adults who are considering a return to college include the concerns that:

They won't fit in
It's too expensive
There isn't enough time in the day
It will take forever to complete a degree
Employers won't view the degree (or certification) as credible
The coursework won't be valuable or useful

In reality, just about any student who has attended a career college--whether online or on-campus--will tell you that there really isn't anything to fear in a return to school. While they may have once had the same fears as you do now, they learned very quickly that those fears were actually unwarranted.

By taking each fear one by one, we can begin to understand what these current students now know and how glad they are that they didn't let their fears hold them back.

I'm Afraid I Won't Fit In

It is common for a person in their thirties or forties to worry that they'll stick out like a sore thumb in a classroom filled with "kids" from the ages of 18 to 25. However, recent information from the Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Education states that adult students are the fastest growing educational demographic, revealing that 40% of college students are now 25 or older. Further information from the National Center for Education Statistics points out that students age 35 and older rose from 823,00 in 1970 to nearly 3 million by 2001.

If you're still worried about fitting in to the classroom as an adult, a few facts that might help allay your concerns include:

With online learning, you'll be working on a more individual basis and won't have to worry about 'standing out' in a physical classroom; Many colleges, traditional or otherwise, have seen a spike in their 'older' students, and it's likely you won't be the tiny minority that you expect; and Many older adults actually find it rejuvenating and refreshing to be in a classroom environment with a younger group that is eager to learn.

I'm Afraid It Will Be Too Expensive

Tuition?books?it all adds up. And many potential students get scared off by the investment it requires to earn their degree. But the key to overcoming this fear is to consider it as just that: an investment in your future. Think long term instead of short term. In almost every case, the career advancement you will get after earning your degree will easily make up for the upfront costs of attending school. Besides, many career colleges--especially those online--may be more affordable than you realize. Do your homework and weigh the long-term benefits before deciding not to enroll in a school for this reason.

I'm Afraid It Will Take Up Too Much Time

For the busy working adult, the notion of taking on any additional endeavors can be downright stifling. It's not always easy balancing work with personal life, and adding school on top of all your other responsibilities might seem virtually impossible.

And yet, it's not. You'd be amazed at how much extra time you can squeeze into a day. Sure, there will be some sacrifices you'll have to make, but if you just try watching a little less television, say, or letting your friends know that you won't be able to make that barbecue next weekend, you'll be amazed at how much time you can free up. Just remember to keep your eye on the prize, and your sacrifices will all seem worthwhile.

One good option for students who might have a hard time committing to a schedule is to enroll in online courses that are "asynchronous." The asynchronous learning model works a bit like email in that you can access the coursework, instructor's lessons and classmates comments at your convenience, then respond whenever you are able. There are no set classes for you to attend, no specific schedules that might conflict with the rest of your day, and, because you'll be taking classes online, no commute time for you to worry about.

I'm Afraid It Will Take Forever To Complete My Degree

Traditionally, a Bachelor's Degree takes up to four years to complete, a Master's Degree requires at least two years, and a Doctorate Degree can take up to eight years or more. That's all fine and good for someone who can dedicate themselves to being a full time student, but for those who can only commit to part-time status, those timelines might appear too far off the horizon.

But the facts of the matter are that most degree programs at today's career colleges are based on accelerated learning, meaning that most degrees take less time to complete than traditional learning environments. Coursework is based on shorter semesters--typically five weeks--and delivering a quality education as rapidly as possible without sacrificing the student's ability to learn and absorb the material. In some cases you can even earn your degree in less than a year!

I'm Afraid That Employers Won't Take My Degree Seriously

Because their degree won't be coming from some top-name university like Harvard or Yale, some would-be students decide that it's not worth getting a degree from a school that employer's won't view as credible.

In reality, however, most employers today do view degrees from career colleges as not only credible, but oftentimes on par with their more traditional counterparts. It wasn't that long ago that many HR professionals may have viewed career colleges--particularly online career colleges--as carrying less weight than traditional colleges, but as the online education space evolves and faculty members and curriculums at online schools catches up with those at traditional schools, more and more HR executives are realizing the validity of degrees earned online or through career colleges. In fact, to some, an online degree represents a certain career ambition, technological prowess and commitment to seeing something through to the end on behalf of the applicant.

I'm Afraid I Won't Learn Anything New Or Valuable

Many potential students are fearful of the fact that their trouble to go out and earn their degree might be all for naught--that the classes won't teach them anything they hadn't learned already in their professional experiences.

As anyone who has ever taken so much as a single class at a career college or online school will tell you, however, this perception couldn't be further from the truth. Classes at any accredited university are taught by qualified experts with lots of experience in their chosen field, while you will also be surrounded by classmates who bring their own, unique experiences to share. Whether the "classroom" is physical or virtual, you will learn more than you ever imagined from those around you.

Another point to consider is that most career colleges are centered around a team learning approach, in which students learn not only from their instructors, but from other students as well. With this approach, you'll engage in dialogues with other students who have much to share from their own work experiences, and you'll gain valuable lessons that you can take back and immediately apply to your own work.

Why Make The Move?

In today's modern learning environment, with numerous career and online schools focused entirely on their educational needs, adults have nothing to fear in a return to school - and so much to gain. Here are some of the main reasons more adults than ever are going back to school:

Career advancement or transition. If you're not currently working at the job of your dreams, nothing can change that faster than a more advanced degree and additional expertise.

To complete a degree from years ago. Plenty of first-time college students leave before they earn a degree, and a return to college is a supremely satisfying way to take care of that unfinished business.

To set an example for their children. What better way to encourage your growing children to pursue a college education than getting one of your own?

To fully prepare for running their own business. Whether you're interested in opening a B&B or your own accounting firm, the perfect college program is available online or on-campus.

Returning to school is a big step, but it shouldn't be an overwhelming one. For those who plan the move properly and take aim on getting all they can out of life, it can be the best decision they ever make.

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