

Returning to College: Remember Your Why

If you're thinking about going back to college after an extended leave, you may have some hesitations. While every student has their own reasons for leaving school, the most common concerns include financial issues, lack of clear direction, individual learning styles, or simply not being able to take on the class load or time commitment.

You know the benefits of college, but you also know first-hand that finishing your degree can be a challenge. It may feel hard to see yourself as a "traditional" college student. Colleges and universities are now better equipped than ever to serve the needs of returning students with career and academic advisors at their disposal to assist them in achieving their goals.

The assistance available to help you successfully transition to a degree completion program can also help your life in various ways. The well-documented benefits of finishing your degree aren't just limited to career advancement or improved salary potential. You're also likely to experience increased self-esteem due to having accomplished a goal. Complete your degree and you might be inspired to attempt other pursuits you'd previously set aside.

How to Return to School

The process to re-enroll in a college or university involves several steps, but it doesn't need to be daunting. If you're serious about returning to school, follow these steps to make the process as seamless as possible.

Find Your "Why"

Understanding your reasons for leaving school and weighing them against your decision to return is an important first step. This process of discovering your "why" can help you succeed as you return to the classroom. It determines the reasons why you left in the first place and how you can change your approach to avoid these same pitfalls. There are tons of resources available such as school counselors and advisors who may be able to help you stay on track. Find your motivation. Whatever your reason, keep it at the top of your mind when you choose your major or degree program.

Choose a New School or Return to a Previous One

You have two options when you decide to go back to school: return to the school where you began your studies or apply to somewhere new. Some colleges allow prior students to return without reapplying. If you'd like to continue your education at a college or university you previously attended, make sure to check with the admission office. In some cases, the school may have been part of the reason you left in the first place. If that's the case, find a school that offers the program or course catalog you want to pursue. Try to learn as much as you can about the school such as curriculum, teaching styles, remote or in-person learning options. If you're putting in the effort to return to school, you want to make sure you choose an institution that aligns with your needs and your learning style.

Find a Schedule or Format That Works for You

In addition to finding a university that offers the program you're looking for, you also want to find a place where you can fit your education into your lifestyle and vice versa. For instance, you may be working full-time or supporting a family. Look for schools that offer online options and a flexible class schedule. Whichever university you choose, make sure you do your due diligence to determine if you'll be able to attend school while working.

Check Your Academic Standing

Depending on your previous performance, you may need to take some time to improve your academic standing. You may have left behind some bad grades or perhaps were placed on academic probation (when a college places students on probation for immediate action when grades are dropping or may be close to failing out). If this applies to you, it doesn't mean that you can't get back into school and succeed. You may just need to retake a couple classes or talk to an admissions counselor about your options. Some schools require you to apply for academic renewal, where previous classes are not considered as part of your cumulative GPA. With this strategy, you may need to retake certain classes in order to earn better grades. Academic standing rules vary from school to school, so make sure you understand any requirements needed from you.

Get Your Transcripts

If you're applying at a new school, you will need to provide your transcripts. Regardless of how long you have been out of school; you will be able to request access to your academic records from a school you have previously attended. In most cases, you can request your transcripts online or request a digital transcript.

Apply for Financial Aid

If necessary, look into financial aid options to help you cover some of the costs of going back to school. If you're taking online classes or commuting to school, you'll save money on room and board and on-campus expenses. Financial aid can help cover other expenses like tuition, course credits, books and materials, and more. You will need to make sure that you complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as you may be eligible for federal grants and loans even if you were ineligible during your prior college years. If you're not interested in taking out loans, you will still need to complete the FAFSA.

If you have student loans from earlier college work, check their status. Loan companies usually require payments starting six months after you leave college, so if you have been making payments or qualifies deferral, your loans might be in good standing. If you have not been paying, your student loans that are in default may prevent you from getting more financial aid. Once you return to school, you may be able to make payments on your student loans until you graduate.

Different scholarships and funding options are available to adult learners, like tuition help offered as a job benefit. Your company's human resource department can help you find out whether your company offers partial or full tuition aid. If you plan to change or leave jobs, you might look specifically for places that offer this benefit. Universities sometimes

offer tuition discounts for employees and their family members. You might find tuition help through the G.I. Bill or related programs if you or a family member has served in the military.

There are tons of scholarship opportunities available to adult learners like TN Reconnect. Check out this informational video below. If you would like more information or would like to apply for TN Reconnect [click the link](https://youtu.be/4WCOR9txFDs). <https://youtu.be/4WCOR9txFDs>

You will also need to apply for any and all scholarships that your school may offer as well as visit our website for any new and updated national scholarships. Our Education Opportunity Center (EOC) program also has some resources that you can find [at this link](https://www.trio-dcea.org/eocscholarships) <https://www.trio-dcea.org/eocscholarships>

If you're concerned that you don't have enough time or money to complete your degree, or are worried about juggling your many responsibilities, there are various ways to overcome these challenges. Here are some things to consider:

Think About Enrolling in an Online Degree Program

Online degree programs offer the flexibility not found in a traditional classroom setting. Since there isn't a designated class time, you can complete coursework on your own time table as defined in the course syllabus. Check to see if your prior institution offers any online degree programs. If they do not offer such programs, search online for accredited schools that do. Self-paced learning, faster completion times, and the ability to work around your current job and family commitments make online degree programs a great option for adult learners.

Ask About Tuition Reimbursement Programs

Your employer might help with funding your degree. Some offer tuition reimbursement as a recruiting benefit, hoping to attract and retain employees by adding this perk to the benefits package. Contact your human resources department to see if your employer has a program to help pay for the cost of finishing your degree. Program eligibility requirements vary, so it's important to learn about these details before enrolling in classes. A tuition reimbursement program could mean up to \$5,250 a year (or more) towards your tuition bill. If you use the reimbursement wisely, you could reduce the cost of returning to college. For example, instead of taking four classes per semester and having to pay for one out-of-pocket, you might consider only taking three and having your semester fully funded by your employer's program. It may mean completing your remaining coursework over a longer period, but in the end, you could end up paying less for your degree. You do not repay the funds received from tuition reimbursement programs; however, be prepared to pay for your tuition upfront. You can also alleviate your financial concerns about returning to school by combining institutional scholarships, grants, and personal saving with tuition reimbursement programs.

Maintain Part-Time Enrollment

Many students prefer to enroll part-time during their first semester to help ease back into college. Get in touch with the admissions office and review the school's catalog to confirm the minimum course load requirement for half-time students. Some federal student aid programs require at least half-time enrollment to maintain eligibility. If you were overwhelmed while you

were in school before, it's important to avoid falling into the same patterns this time around. And don't be discouraged if you feel your progress is too slow- if you have 16 semester hours left to complete your degree, you could be done in less than a year.

Build a Support System

You may be hesitant to return to school, and that's understandable. Once you return, you may continue to have doubts about your ability to finish your degree. Form a team of family, friends, and co-workers who will help encourage your progress along the way.

Maximize Your Transfer Credit

Your prior education can reduce the time to finish your degree. You don't need to start from scratch unless you failed all of your prior coursework. Ask about the school's transfer credit policy which may require you to submit official transcripts from your former institutions. Transfer credit is an excellent way to take advantage of the time you've already spent in college and save money at the same time.

Take Advantage of Student Services

Meet with a student service advisor at your prospective school so they can help you design a tailored degree plan. Your personal and career goals can be used to better customize which classes should make up your degree, when to take them, and how this will fit with your current work and family commitments. This might mean enrolling in summer or half-term courses to finish your degree quickly. Student services departments are there to help all students complete their degrees as scheduled.

Returning to school to finish your degree is a monumental decision to make and it is understandable that you might be nervous about taking that leap. But it is important to remember that a bachelor's degree is within your reach. Remember that you are not alone in this journey. Reach out to your Upward Bound Specialist or hit the "Contact Us" button at the top of the page. We are here to help make your dreams and goals a possibility!