

# Should You Go Back to School? A Guide for Women<sup>1</sup>

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If you are a woman who has been out of high school or college for a few or many years, you may be thinking about going back to school full- or part-time. You may be going back for your undergraduate or graduate degree to improve your economic situation, open up career choices, or start a new career.

If you have ever told yourself...

*"I'm too old, I'll be the only part-time student, I cannot do this while working full time, I'll be the only student who has children, and I'll be the only single parent..."*

...then you should know, according to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2002, approximately 75% of American college students were nontraditional. This means that they were older (age 25+), took time off after high school before entering college, obtained a GED or other non-traditional high school diploma, were working full time, were married and/or had children, or attended school part-time. Women account for the majority (around 60%) of all students older than 29 years. Between 1970 and 2000, women went from being the minority (42%) to the majority (56%) of the U.S. undergraduate population (Freeman, 2004). The change is even greater at the graduate school level. From 1970 to 2000 women again showed dramatic increases in representation, going from 39% of the population to 58% of the graduate school population (Freeman, 2004).

## What are the advantages of going back to school?

Research shows there are many potential rewards for women who go back to school (Bradburn, Moen, & Dempster-McClain, 1995; Butler & Deprez, 2002). The following is a list of just some of these possibilities:

- Can lead to personal growth from the academic accomplishments, such as increases in self-esteem and self-confidence
- Can stimulate their minds with intellectually challenging work
- Can help with starting a new career
- Can help some women get off public assistance and become financially independent. For some women it can help them become financially independent from family, a partner, or a spouse. This can be very important for women who are trying to get out of abusive relationships.
- Can help women gain career advancement or occupational prestige. Education can help women become authorities in their fields (Felmlee, 1988).
- Can lead to better job security and a higher quality work life; can also include better job benefits, such as health insurance and retirement plans

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- Can allow them to serve as better role models for their children, and increase the likelihood that their children will obtain a higher education
- Can lead to an increase in income—probably the number one reason why most women go back to school.

The economic implications of women obtaining a higher level of education are enormous. In 2003, women who had some college coursework earned an average of 57% more than those women who did not finish high school, while those with a bachelor's degree earned an average of 182% more than those who did not graduate from high school. These studies show that women's earnings and income increase dramatically when they have college degrees.

## What can be some of the drawbacks of going back to school?

Although there appear to be many benefits, particularly financial benefits, other issues need to be considered by women when making the decision about whether or not to go back to school. Some things that women should consider are:

- If you have children, who will take care of them while you are at school? (Sosulski, Cunningham, & Sellers, 2006).
- Do you currently have the skills that you need to succeed in school? (Johnson & Robson, 1999).
- Are you ready to deal with the stresses and challenges of schoolwork? (Johnson & Robson, 1999).
- Can you manage the time and energy it takes to balance schoolwork and other responsibilities, such as family life or work commitments? Some women have difficulty managing the many responsibilities (Johnson & Robson, 1999).
- If you go back to school, will you have enough time to do the other things that are important to you, such as spending time with friends, family, and hobbies? (Jones-DeWeever, 2005).
- Will there be a big enough payoff for you in terms of job satisfaction and/or increase in income to make it worth your while? Some studies have shown that higher education did not necessarily have a hugely positive effect on women's careers. The payoff in job satisfaction from

increased education was modest on average (Glenn & Weaver, 1982).

- How will you pay for your education? Paying for school is the number one factor that deters women from pursuing higher education. Women report lack of financial resources, the high cost of college, and lack of information on financial aid to be the main factors that kept them from going to college (DYG Inc. & Lake Snell Perry and Associates, 1999).

## How could you pay for your college education?

Many people are under the false impression that college tuition costs more than \$20,000 a year. There are 3,600 colleges and universities in the United States, but in 2002-2003, only a small percentage (around 200) had tuition costs of \$20,000 or more. The majority of undergraduates pay less than \$8,000 per year for tuition (American Council on Education, 2007).

However, \$8,000 is still a lot of money; therefore, it is important to know what financial aid resources and scholarships are available to you. You can go to the website <http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=CIP1> for financial aid and scholarship information provided by the American Council on Education (ACE). There are hundreds of scholarships available for non-traditional students, and many more aimed at any student regardless of whether they are traditional or non-traditional. Apply for scholarships/grants well in advance of the start of school (at least six months ahead of time).

One of the federal programs available is the Federal Pell Grant, which is based on financial need as well as other factors (e.g. school costs). Another program is the Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG). There are also institutional grants provided by colleges, such as merit awards. Go to <http://studentaid.ed.gov> for more information.

If you are applying to graduate school, remember to find out if there are any available teaching, research, or other graduate assistantships. They usually require that you work for a professor for 10–20 hours per week. In addition to a small salary or stipend, assistantships will sometimes come with partial or full tuition reimbursement; however, every university differs in the type of programs available.

## What factors will help you succeed as a student and cope with the transition?

Research has shown that having a realistic view of what to expect when going back to college reduces anxiety (Johnson & Robson, 1999). Having contact with the university and speaking with other students in the program can help you have a more realistic view of what the program will be like. Attending orientations, welcome weekends, and open house events can also contribute to a smoother transition.

For low-income single mothers in particular, obtaining support from fellow students, family members, professors, and university services helps contribute to success in school (Van Stone, Nelson, & Niemann, 1994). Other important factors are level of knowledge and skills prior to entering, self-discipline in performing schoolwork, ability to put forth effort, personal ambition, and self-confidence (Van Stone, Nelson, & Niemann, 1994). Overall, getting as much knowledge about the program as you can prior to starting, and spending some time planning how you will manage the additional demands on your finances and your time will help you to be more successful if you choose to go back to school.

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