

Top 7 Reasons to Go Back to School

by Donald Asher

Thinking about going back to school? You're not alone. In fact, students "returning" to school now outnumber first-time students. If you're a so-called "nontraditional" student, you may find a lot more people like you in college and university programs.

"Traditional age students, 18-22, are no longer the majority of students in the higher education system in this country," says Bob Wiltenburg, president of the University Continuing Education Association based in Washington, D.C. Wiltenburg, who is also dean of Washington University in St. Louis's University College, jokes, "In fact, we have a new saying, 'No adult left behind.'"

Why are adults returning to school in greater numbers than ever in history? Well, according to the experts, here's why:

A 'trigger event' sparks interest in education

Specialists like Bob Wiltenburg spend a lot of time trying to understand the motivation of adult students, and they say trigger events are a critical factor in the decision to return to school.

Trigger events include a wide range of developments in a person's personal or professional life, for example: you get a divorce; you get a new spouse or significant other with different opinions about education; your kids graduate from high school or college, freeing up time or money for you to pursue your own interests; you get passed over for a promotion at work; you get a new, more encouraging boss; you get a new boss you hate; there are real or threatened layoffs at work, or a looming merger; you get a new, more challenging work assignment; your job changes under you, becoming more and more complex, even if your title stays the same; you retire; a parent dies, to whom you'd promised to 'some day' finish that degree; or you begin to think about the march of generations.

Thus, trigger events may include:

- Divorce
- A new romance
- Your kids graduate from high school or college
- You get passed over for a promotion
- You get a new boss
- There are layoffs, or a pending merger, at work
- Your job gets more complex
- A parent dies
- You retire

Also, says Wiltenburg, "Americans have this strong sense that every generation has to improve on the prior one, and that you must do your part to advance the family." So setting an example for your children and grandchildren is also a major motivation that may be triggered by anything from a child's graduation to something someone says in passing.

The trigger event doesn't create the interest in education; it merely serves as the catalyst for introspection and exploration of an interest that was already there. Following are the main motivations that drive education-seekers, once the trigger event occurs.

Returning students are about equally motivated by continued personal growth and career development issues. In fact, they may not be separate goals, even in students who cite one or the other as their primary aspiration.

For example, says Wiltenburg, "Studies show that pursuing a master's degree improves your performance at work even if your new degree has nothing specifically to do with what your work assignments are."

So even those students who go back to school for purely personal reasons may find unexpected benefits in their work lives. In no particular order, here are some of the main reasons students go back to school:

Career advancement, or career insurance, or to update workplace credentials

The work world is more and more complex, and keeping up with your job may require continuing education at any age. Also, if there is going to be a recession, or a reduction in workforce in your industry or within your employer, you have to ask yourself if your credentials are in order.

You may be the world's best at whatever you do, but let's face it: If you find yourself in the job market, credentials matter a lot. If you have plateaued in your career, recent education may be the key to advancement, proving to employers that you have more to give.

Jim Redens of Oakland, Calif., falls into this category. He was stuck in a job with no advancement potential until he returned to school for an associate's degree.

"I ran a machine that printed 5000 T-shirts a day," he says, "ripping the glue off of each shirt and putting it onto a conveyor belt, and it was destroying my back."

After his degree, he got a new, management-track, job. "I don't think the degree itself necessarily helped me so much as what I learned in getting the degree. I'm a million times more confident." So far he's been promoted once and earned three raises in his first year in the new job.

Personal development, intellectual enrichment, or self fulfillment

If you have always wanted to learn more about Shakespeare, or the Middle Ages, or local geology, or theoretical physics, then going back to school makes perfect sense. As mentioned above, pursuing these interests may have hidden benefits for your career anyway.

Education leads to a richer experience of life, no matter the topic. When I was young for fifteen minutes it was fashionable to tell your parents you weren't going to go to college. My father, a design engineer, was driving down the freeway trying to convince me of the folly of my ways.

"Do you see that bridge," he asked me, pointing to an overpass. "Sure," I said, the typical insolent teenager. "Well, you see something different than I see. You see an overpass, and I see stress analyses, load factors, and fifty-year cycles of planned obsolescence. So I am getting more out of life than you are, and it's because of my education." He was right, of course.

Transition to a new career

If you want to explore a career interest while you remain in the career you have, a little exploratory education can be the key. You don't necessarily need a new degree. Sometimes even a few classes can establish whether you have a sincere interest in the new field, and can get employers to take you seriously. Career switchers are particularly benefited by exploring new directions in the classroom before committing to a new job.

This was the tack taken by Christine Lee, who took a breather from her existing career to explore other options. After years of success in financial services assignments on Wall Street, in San Francisco, and Taiwan, she took a wide range of courses outside of her comfort zone, to see what might lead to a second career.

"I had always been interested in the liberal arts, in fine arts, but I spent most of my career focused on the business side of things. I never had a chance to explore these areas," she says.

"I was apprehensive in the beginning, not sure I would be able to do the work. I'm a smart person, sure, but it's been awhile since I've been in a classroom environment. Everyone around me was much younger. I wondered, 'Would they talk to me? Would they include me in study groups?' Those were the concerns I had."

She found herself accepted by students twenty years her junior, and a class in architecture led to an interest in a new career in green building.

Stimulation in retirement

More and more retired people are returning to school for mental stimulation, and this is sure to be a burgeoning area of continuing education. Cutting edge programs are now having some elders teach other elders. Bob Wiltenburg has such a program at Wash U., and he jokingly says of it, "We have a 55 and older lifelong learning institute, using a peer learning model. It's the perfect program. The students don't want grades. The faculty doesn't need tenure, and the parents never call."

Finish a bachelor's degree, or an advanced degree

If you're sitting on an unfulfilled ambition to complete a degree, then of course that would be a major motivation, and would need little further explanation. There are a full range of full-time and part-time options.

Test waters *before* returning to complete a degree program

Before signing up for that degree program, educators recommend testing your interest by taking a few classes, especially if you have not been a full-time student in some time. By the way, a few recent good grades can make up for old bad grades, in case that is an issue.

Social contact and stimulation

Academics who study motivation toward education found that many students are not motivated by the content of study at all, rather they are interested in social contact with interesting people. So if you're interested in meeting smart, engaged, interesting people, school is a great place to meet them.

How do you get started? Jim Redens, who revitalized his career by returning to school, suggests taking a single class. Take a class you'll enjoy, and build your confidence from there. Good luck!

BIO:

Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker specializing in careers and higher education. Some of his books of note include *Graduate Admissions Essays* (the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process), *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*, *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent*, and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why*. He welcomes your comments and queries at don@donaldasher.com. His web site is www.donaldasher.com. © 2010 Asher Associates.