



Education Guide Number 1

Returning to Learning: Guide to Sound Decision Making

Part I: Choosing to Continue Your Education

At one time or another in your work life, you may have considered returning to school. Deciding to continue your education is a major decision that requires a significant commitment of your time and money. This guide will help you examine your reasons for considering further education, as well as help you take charge of finding the right educational services for you.

Getting Started

The responsibility for managing your career belongs to you. Sound career management begins with a career plan. As you think about and research your own personal career plan, you'll be able to decide whether or not additional education is needed to achieve your goals.

The reasons for wanting to acquire additional education are varied: to learn new skills, secure a promotion or transfer, complete a degree started many years ago, or transition to a completely new career. Ask yourself the following questions to help you pin down what you hope to accomplish by continuing your education:

1. What are my career goals?
2. What are my reasons for wanting to continue my education?
3. What do I need to know in order to make sound educational decisions?
4. Where do I go to find out about educational options and alternatives?

Identify Goals

It is important that you have clearly formulated goals before you begin to consider courses and programs of study at specific schools. Take the time to think about and identify your specific career goals:

Career advancement – You may want to move to a higher-level position or to a higher paying job that has specific educational requirements: training courses, certifications, or even an advanced degree.

Change of occupation – You may want to transition to a completely different occupation, which could have specific educational requirements, including completion of training programs, certifications, and degrees.

Skill enhancement – In a dynamic workplace, jobs are constantly changing, requiring you to learn new skills or update existing skills.

Keep pace with change – Technology is always changing, and the amount of information bombarding everyone requires that employees keep up with the latest developments.

Job satisfaction – Whether you are motivated by the opportunity for a salary increase, want to work on a new type of project, or get excited by the idea of learning something new that you can use back on the job, continuing your education can result in increased job satisfaction. This is an important goal that is often overlooked in career planning.

Know Yourself

Think about your interests, values, motivations, skills, and lifestyle as you work at identifying your career goals. Take some time to honestly answer the following questions about yourself:

1. Am I clear about my career goals?
2. Do I have a specific plan for achieving my career goals?
3. Do I understand how continuing my education can help me to achieve those goals?
4. Can I find the time in my busy schedule to do the reading, studying, and homework that may be part of a continuing education program?

Once you know yourself and your goals, you are ready to identify what educational services you need and how best to obtain them.

Helpful web sites for career information:

www.nycareerzone.org	NYS Department of Labor
www.cs.state.ny.gov	NYS Department of Civil Service
www.dol.gov	U.S. Department of Labor
www.careervoyages.gov	U.S. Department of Education <i>and</i> U.S. Department of Labor

Part II. Six Steps to Becoming an Effective Consumer of Educational Services

To get the best return on your investment in continuing your education, it is important to see yourself as a consumer of educational services. If you follow the six steps outlined in this guide, you will be well on your way to making sound educational choices and getting the best value for your education dollars.

Step 1 – Assume Responsibility for Your Education

Be proactive – Assume responsibility for the decisions you will make. Seek out the information you need to make the decisions that are right for you; don't wait for others to provide it.

Ask informed questions – As you investigate schools and programs, you will talk with a variety of people to gain information. These contacts will include not only representatives of educational institutions, but also alumni, co-workers, friends, and family members. The information you receive from these people is only as good as the questions you ask. For each meeting, prepare an agenda that includes all the questions you have about a particular school, program, or course of study.

Don't allow others to make decisions for you – In your discussions, you will encounter different opinions and advice, as well as people who are trying to “sell” you on a particular school or program. In the end, you must make the choices that are right for you.

Don't be intimidated – You may find yourself feeling overwhelmed by the large number of schools, programs, and courses of study that are now widely available. You may also feel intimidated as you talk to admissions officers and others whose job it is to get you to enroll. Remember, **you are the customer here**. You are purchasing educational services, and educational services are expensive. If you see yourself in the role of a customer buying services, you are less likely to be intimidated by others.

Step 2 – Develop a Clear Career Plan

Establish career goals - Review the career goals you have already identified and clarify them further if needed. Your specific goals may include one or more of the following:

- Acquisition of new skills or upgrade of existing skills
- Transfer within the Civil Service system
- Promotion within your current title series
- Employment in the private sector in a similar position
- Transition to a new career
- Employment after retirement

In developing your plan, you will also want to look at labor market information for your chosen occupation and geographic area, in addition to information about salaries in different positions and industries. Talk with people already doing the kind of work you are considering.

Determine educational requirements - Once you have established your career goals, the next step is to determine the educational requirements needed to achieve them. You can gather this information from others currently performing this type of work as well as from written materials about jobs and job requirements available from the resources listed below in “*Where to Find Additional Information.*” Such requirements might include completing specific credit or noncredit courses or completing a college degree program. Certain occupations also require special licensing or certification that can only be obtained through accredited programs of study.

Step 3 – Identify Options Consistent With Your Plan

If you know your goal and the educational requirements to achieve it, the next step is to identify the different types of programs that can help you. Do this before you start visiting or even researching specific schools, so that you won't spend valuable time gathering information about schools that don't offer programs of study designed to meet your needs.

Most programs and courses of study can be grouped into one of five major categories:

1. **Short-term training** – Such training generally consists of a single course, typically offered on a noncredit basis, through a high school continuing education program or Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES). New York State also offers a variety of training courses for State employees. Contact your supervisor or agency’s human resources office for specific course offerings that may meet your needs. Short-term training is a sound approach when your goal is to acquire new skills (e.g., an introductory finance course) or upgrade existing skills (e.g., a course to learn the latest version of a software package).
2. **Certificate program** – A certificate program generally requires participants to complete a series of courses focused on a particular topic, such as accounting or secretarial skills. Certificate programs are offered through high school continuing education programs, BOCES, community colleges, and occasionally by four-year colleges and universities. Upon completing the program, students receive a certificate attesting to their proficiency in the subject area. Certificate programs are usually offered on a noncredit basis.
3. **Associate’s degree** – An associate’s degree is earned through a two-year program (approximately 60 college credits) offered in a particular subject area. Community colleges grant the vast majority of associate’s degrees, but some four-year colleges and universities offer associate degree programs as well.
4. **Bachelor’s degree** – A bachelor’s or baccalaureate degree is a four-year degree (approximately 120 college credits) offered in a particular subject area by a college or university. Although colleges and universities are the only institutions that can award a bachelor’s degree, associate’s degree and credit courses completed at community colleges can often be transferred and used to meet some of the requirements for this type of degree.
5. **Advanced degree** – Advanced degrees, including masters, professional, and doctoral degrees, are awarded only by colleges and universities. Generally, completion of a bachelor’s degree program is required for admission to advanced degree programs, although some schools now offer combined bachelor’s-master’s degree programs.

Once you have identified the type of program you need, you are ready to begin gathering information about different schools. If a *short-term training* or a *certificate program* is needed, start by investigating high school continuing education programs, BOCES, and community college offerings, as well as business and trade schools. Such programs are generally affordable, and can provide an excellent value for your education dollars.

If you are seeking a *two-year, four-year, or advanced degree* program, check out the State University of New York (SUNY) schools and community colleges located near you. They are typically less expensive than most private colleges and universities, and several have been named to the various “best value” lists that evaluate college programs. Don’t assume that you must take all your course work on campus. Many schools offer a variety of ways to obtain college credit. Some of the nontraditional approaches to course work include:

- Courses offered at extended campus locations as well as the main campus
- Credits awarded for prior learning
- Credits awarded for workshops or training provided by your employer
- Distance learning or online courses
- Independent and self-study courses

The increase in the number of nontraditional ways to earn credits means that you do not need to limit your search to a school geographically close to you. There are a number of schools that allow you to earn a bachelor's or even advanced degrees without ever visiting the campus! You may want to read *Education Guide Number 2: Non-traditional Approaches to Further Education*.

Helpful web sites for college information:

www.collegeboard.com

The College Board

www.petersons.com

Peterson's Guides to Colleges and Universities

www.sln.suny.edu

SUNY Learning Network

Step 4 – Gather Information About Options

Decide what questions to ask – If you have followed this step-by-step guide, you are ready to begin gathering information about the different schools you have identified. Before you start calling the admissions offices, take some time to make a list of questions. Get together any transcripts if you have previously taken courses at other colleges. Certainly you will want to know about admissions criteria, tuition and other costs, financial aid, and course content and scheduling. Ask questions to gather other information to evaluate and compare each school and program. See the evaluation checklist in Step 5 below for additional suggestions.

Identify sources of information – Most of the information you need and want will come from the school offering the courses you are interested in. Meet admissions officers and counselors and review published materials, including course catalogs and descriptions. You may also wish to talk with the department chairperson, faculty members, current students, and graduates of the program you are researching. Each of these groups offers a unique perspective and can provide helpful information on which to base a decision.

Step 5 – Evaluate Options and Make an Informed Decision

Use an evaluation checklist – As you gather information about various schools, evaluate each option according to each of the following:

1. **Costs and financial aid** – Costs vary greatly, and you cannot assume that more expensive means better. Although private four-year schools are usually more expensive, they typically offer more financial aid than other types of institutions. A visit to the financial aid office to discuss aid options and eligibility criteria is a must.
2. **Student-to-faculty ratio** – The higher the number, the larger your classes are likely to be. This can limit the amount of personal attention you receive from instructors.
3. **Preparation for work** – Some programs emphasize preparing students for jobs rather than focusing exclusively on academics. Check out programs that include

internship, co-op, or practicum components. You may be able to gain valuable work experience and networking contacts in conjunction with your academic work.

4. **Placement rate of graduates** – Schools and programs that focus on preparing students for jobs publicize their success in placing graduates. This placement rate is an important indicator of how employers value the program.
5. **Focus on adult learners** – There is an increasing number of programs that are specifically designed to meet the needs of the adult learner. Such programs offer a variety of instructional methodologies that recognize the different ways that adults learn.
6. **Course scheduling** – Most working adults find it difficult to attend daytime classes. Look for “worker friendly” programs that offer flexible schedules, evening or weekend classes, distance learning, online learning, and independent study options.
7. **Attitude of students toward program** – Talking to some current students or program graduates can give you valuable insight into a program of study. A lack of enthusiasm should serve as a “red flag” in your evaluation process.
8. **Reputation of school** – Talking to area employers can yield useful information about the value of the school or program in the marketplace.

After you have completed the evaluation checklist for each school you are considering, go back and compare the results to the career goals and educational requirements you identified in Step 2. A school that meets all or most of the checklist requirements and offers a program or course of study that meets your identified educational requirements is the right choice for you!

Step 6 – Continue to Be an Informed Consumer

Periodically assess your progress – By now you have established specific educational goals you want to achieve and a timetable for achieving them. At least twice a year, set aside some time to evaluate the progress you are making. Are you satisfied with your course work? Are you getting the support you need from your instructors and counselors? Are you on track with your timetable for completion? And, most importantly, does your program of study continue to support your career goals?

Expect quality services – You remain a “customer” for as long as you remain a student. As schools face more competition in attracting students, many are adopting a more customer-centered focus. They want you to be a satisfied customer, and you have the right to expect quality services.

Speak up – There will most certainly be times when you are not satisfied with the service you receive. When that occurs, say so! Start with the individual or department that is causing the difficulty, and take your complaint to higher authorities if it is not resolved. Most organizations welcome feedback on how they can better serve their customers and will work with you to resolve the situation.

Where to Find Additional Information

The Gourman Report: A Rating of Undergraduate Programs in American & International Universities, 10th Edition, Jack Gourman, National Education Standards, Los Angeles, CA, 1997.

Barron's Profiles of American Colleges 2011, 29th Edition, Barron's Educational Series, Hauppauge, NY, 2003.

Bear's Guide to Earning College Degrees by Distance Learning 25th Anniversary, 14th Edition, John B. Bear and Mariah Bear, 10 Speed Press, El Cerrito, CA, 1998.

The Electronic University: A Guide to Distance Learning Programs, National University Continuing Education Association.

Independent Study Catalog, 7th Edition, Peterson's Guides, Inc., Princeton, NJ, 1998.

Occupational Outlook Handbook, U.S. Department of Labor, 2010-11.

Peterson's Guides to Colleges and Universities, Peterson's Guides, Inc., Princeton, NJ.
www.petersons.com

Development of this guide was jointly funded through the negotiated agreement between the State of New York and the Civil Service Employees Association, Inc. and the negotiated agreement between the State of New York and the Public Employees Federation, AFL-CIO. Program administration and additional funding are provided by the Governor's Office of Employee Relations.



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