



Education Guide Number 2

Non-Traditional Approaches to Further Education

Most working people find it difficult to further their education due to time and financial constraints. Work and family responsibilities often preclude attending traditional college or noncredit courses that meet once or twice a week at regularly scheduled times. This guide covers other means of taking courses or gaining college credit by:

- Providing information regarding nontraditional methods; and
- Helping you create a plan and an environment to support you as an adult learner.

Returning to School

When adults are asked what they think of when faced with the prospect of returning to school, they often react with one or more of the following:

- I don't have time to attend classes.
- What should I study?
- My work schedule won't fit with classes.
- I would have to go to school forever to get a degree!
- I'm too old to go back to school.

All are legitimate concerns for you as an adult learner. Nontraditional study may help you overcome these barriers.

Why Non-Traditional Study?

Students who pursue traditional study receive college credit by taking classes and passing exams. Those who pursue nontraditional methods of study earn credit in a variety of ways. These methods have real advantages for many adult students since they often:

- Have varied and flexible schedules;
- Document prior learning for credit; and
- Allow a degree to be completed more quickly.

One important thing to remember is that nontraditional study is well suited to independent learners, but less appropriate for students who need a more traditional classroom setting to succeed. If you are not well organized and find that you constantly procrastinate, then non-traditional study is probably not for you.

Non-Traditional Approaches – Course work

Distance Learning – Distance Learning is education pursued at a distance from an institution. It involves significant independent study. You may use phone, regular mail, and/or e-mail to maintain contact with your instructor or tutor. A number of colleges and universities offer distance learning courses. These are full credit-bearing classes where you receive course outlines, assignments, and textbooks at home and complete your work at home on your own schedule. Most distance learning programs have deadlines for registering, as well as course completion. There are usually tutors or instructors available by phone or e-mail for consultation purposes. Some of the most widely used programs are State University of New York (SUNY) Empire State College's Center for Distance Learning, the SUNY Learning Network (online courses), Indiana University, and the University of Phoenix.

Correspondence Courses – Correspondence courses entail work in a home course of study. They are taken at a distance from the institution providing the course work. Such study involves transmitting written and sometimes audio, study materials, and examinations.

These types of courses are very similar to distance learning classes, but usually refer to noncredit courses. Also, correspondence courses can usually be started at any time and have no completion deadlines. Examples of these types of courses are locksmithing and reupholstering. In fact, with the exception of apprenticeships, a correspondence course is now the only way to obtain locksmith training.

Independent Study – Independent Study is an individualized instructional program. The courses require the same amount of work, and you earn the same amount of credit. Also, they are usually graded using the same standards as an on-campus course.

The best known program for independent study is Excelsior College. This institution allows you to "bank" credits towards an associate's or bachelor's degree and provides a range of methods for gaining college credits. The College offers examinations and guided learning experiences that can be used for credit. They also offer advisement services to enrolled students to assist with planning.

Degree Mills – CAUTION! In essence, a degree mill is any person or organization which sells a college degree, usually through the mail. For a fee, these organizations will print you a degree and often a fake transcript, too. John Bear says, in *Bear's Guide to Earning College Degrees Non-traditionally*, "When you deal with a degree mill, it is like putting a time bomb on your resume. It could go off at any time, with dire consequences." Obviously these are places to avoid at all costs!

Non-Traditional Approaches – Earning Credit

Credit-by-Exam Programs – Many colleges can award you credit toward your degree on the basis of scores received through credit-by-examination programs. These programs offer exams in general areas covered during the first two years of college and specific subject areas. Every college has its own policies on accepting credits for exams, so you need to check with your college first before pursuing these programs.

Excelsior College Examinations – Excelsior's examinations provide flexible opportunities for you to demonstrate your college-level knowledge in the arts and sciences, business, education, and nursing. They enable colleges to offer you options such as advanced

placement and exemption from course requirements. They give employers a means to allow employees to earn credit toward job advancement and pursue a college education without interrupting work schedules. These exams are administered at Prometric Testing Centers (formerly Sylvan Technology Centers), www.excelsior.edu/exams.

CLEP – The College-Level Examination Program is a national program of credit-by-examination that allows you to gain recognition for college-level achievement. General Examinations measure familiarity with material covered during the first two years of college to meet general education requirements. Subject Examinations measure knowledge usually acquired in specific college courses. www.collegeboard.com.

DANTES – The DSST (DANTES Subject Standardized Test) Program is a standard credit-by-examination program offering you the opportunity to earn college credit. The DSST Program offers 49 tests in areas somewhat different from CLEP. They cover physical sciences, social sciences, business, applied technologies, foreign languages, and more. See more at www.getcollegecredit.com.

TECEP – The Thomas Edison State College Examination Program offers a wide range of examinations for earning college credit. The examinations are designed to allow you to demonstrate the college-level knowledge you may have gained through your work, independent reading, or other activities. They may help you meet college degree, licensure, certification, or other professional requirements. Descriptions for each exam are listed on the TECEP website. www.tesc.edu click on Academic Programs, then College Catalog.

Evaluation of Prior Learning

Prior Learning is any information, education, or experience that can be documented by using a portfolio, or can be assessed through examination. Unfortunately, time on the job does not automatically translate to college credit. Any experience that you may have must be documented before an institution will grant you credit. The following are ways to document prior learning:

- **Training Program Assessment** – The National Program on Non-collegiate Sponsored Instruction (National [PONSi](http://www.nationalponsi.org)) evaluates courses and training programs sponsored by corporations, unions, and the armed services, and issues program guides that recommend credit for those deemed equivalent to college courses. See more at www.nationalponsi.org.
- **Portfolio Assessment** – Many traditional and nontraditional colleges offer students the opportunity to create a written compilation of prior learning experience. This documentation is usually called a portfolio and can be evaluated by a faculty member to determine if credits can be granted for this experience. This portfolio includes autobiographical information, statements about the type, method and length of your learning experiences, and examples of work completed during those experiences. Some colleges offer a portfolio course that serves as an aid to creating a portfolio for later evaluation.

Barriers to Pursuing Further Education

There are many obstacles that you may encounter upon returning to school. Some may be external, e.g., lack of time, money or support from family, friends, or co-workers. Others are more internal, such as lack of focus or feeling unable to succeed in an academic world. To

counteract these barriers, it is important to find ways of getting support.

Creating Support

Calling on support from family, friends, and co-workers gives you the reassurance that you need when engaged in educational endeavors. Support from study groups or school clubs also helps you stay focused.

It is sometimes helpful to sit down and write a list of barriers that you might encounter. You can then go over the list with family, friends, and co-workers and enlist their help in overcoming the barriers. Creating this supportive atmosphere encourages you to stay with your studies.

Blending

With all the different methods of taking courses and earning credit, many students combine several different strategies in continuing their education. People often blend traditional courses, distance learning classes, exams for credit, and an evaluation of prior learning, to gain a degree. The different methods you use really depend on what you are comfortable doing. One word of caution - make sure that any courses you take from schools other than your degree institution will be transferable to your particular degree program. Check this out before you take the course, not after.

Being an Effective Consumer of Educational Services

There are many things to consider when deciding on education programs. It is important to research options, ask questions, and compare the different methods of pursuing further education. For more information, please refer to *Education Guide No. 1, Part II: Six Steps to Becoming an Effective Consumer of Educational Services*.

Where to Find Additional Information

Bear's Guide to Earning College Degrees Non-traditionally, 12th Edition, John B. Bear & Mariah P. Bear, Ten Speed Press, El Cerrito, CA, 1998.

The Simple Guide to College Admission and Financial Aid: How to Select the Right College, Applying for College Admission, Writing the College Essay, and the Financial Aid Process Made Easy, 2006.

Earn College Credit For What You Know, 4th Edition, Lois Lamdin, Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, May 1997.

Going Back to School: Deciding to Return, M. Diann Cassidy Crisp Publications, Los Altos, CA, 1993.

Lovejoy's College Guide, edited by Charles Straughn and Barbarasue Lovejoy Straughn, MacMillan General Reference, New York, NY, August 1997.

The Official Study Guide for the CLEP Examinations, The College Board, MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, NY, 1999.

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