

Part I: Choosing to Continue Your Education

At one time or another in your work life, you may have considered returning to school. Continuing 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 to further your 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 determine your goals for 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 an advanced degree.

Change of occupation – You may want to transition to a completely different occupation with 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 you 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 may 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. What are my interests and strengths in relation to my job?
2. Is there another career that would further utilize my strengths and satisfy my interests?
3. What kind of career would support my values and lifestyle?
4. Have I explored career options to find an optimal match between me and a career?
5. Have I established clear career goals based on the above information?
6. Do I have a plan for achieving those goals?
7. Do I understand how continuing my education will help me obtain my goals?
8. Is there time in my schedule to devote to classes, reading, studying, and homework?

Once you have evaluated yourself and your goals, you are ready to identify the educational services you need and how best to obtain them.

Helpful Websites for Career Information:

- www.careerzone.ny.gov (NYS Department of Labor)
- www.cs.ny.gov (NYS Department of Civil Service)
- www.dol.gov (U.S. Department of Labor)
- www.onetcenter.org (O-Net Resource Center)

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

To get the best return on your investment when continuing your education, it is important to see yourself as a consumer of educational services. You wouldn't purchase a new car without doing some research; you need to use a similar approach when selecting a college. 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. Using today's technology, especially an Internet search, you can find information on just about anything. Start with a Google search, and you will find more sources to locate the information you need.

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 in their school. Remember, you are the customer here. You are purchasing educational services, and educational services are costly. 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

*Contact the Career Mobility Office for information on career ladders, transfers, and promotions within New York State Service at (800) 553-1322.

In developing your plan, you may also want to look at labor market information for your chosen occupation and geographic area. The U.S. Department of Labor (www.dol.gov) and O-NET Resource Center (www.onetcenter.org) are resources that contain information on job projections, as well as salary ranges for occupations in specific career fields. These references are available in libraries or online.

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. This is called Informational Interviewing (See Educational Guide #6). You may also want to explore the websites listed on page 2 under Helpful Websites for Career Information (there are hundreds of resources online and in libraries for this type of research; only a few are listed here). Some 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 achieve your goals. Explore this before you start visiting or researching specific schools, so that you don't spend valuable time gathering information about schools that don't meet your needs.

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

- 1. Short-term training** – Such training may consist of a single course or a series of courses, typically offered on a non-credit 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 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). See the Partnership’s Skills for Success courses and on-line learning courses. These programs are free to New York State CSEA-represented employees. Go to www.nyscseapartnership.org for more information. The Governor’s Office of Employee Relations (GOER) also offers courses to meet the ongoing training and professional needs of NYS employees. Information on courses and training can be found on the GOER website at www.goer.ny.gov.
- 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 may be credit bearing or non-credit bearing. Online learning certificate programs are also available through the Partnership; visit www.nyscseapartnership.org.
- 3. Associate’s degree** – An associate’s degree is earned through a two-year college program (approximately 60 college credits) offered in a particular subject area. Community colleges, two-year SUNY colleges, and private schools grant the vast majority of associate’s degrees, but some four-year colleges and universities offer associate degree programs as well. There are many colleges offering associate degrees online too.
- 4. Bachelor’s degree** – A bachelor’s or baccalaureate degree is a four-year college degree (approximately 120 college credits) offered in a particular subject area by a college or university. Colleges and universities are the only institutions that can award a bachelor’s degree; however associate’s degrees and credit courses completed at community colleges and other two year colleges may be transferred and applied towards some of the requirements for this type of degree. It is important to know that the decision to accept credits, for transfer, is made by the college you are applying to for a bachelor’s degree. Inquire about the number of credits that will transfer prior to committing to a particular college. Some colleges accept more transfer credits than others. As mentioned previously, there are numerous colleges offering bachelor’s degrees online.
- 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 offer combined bachelor’s and master’s degree programs. Some colleges offer online advanced degrees; however you should explore these carefully. Many advanced degree programs, and some undergraduate programs, require some sort of experiential learning (internships, practicums). You want to be certain that there is a way to achieve this experience, especially if you are considering an online degree.

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 and the NYS & CSEA Partnership for

Education and Training.

If you are seeking a two-year, four-year, or advanced degree program, you may want to explore 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.

A good place to begin your search for schools is with the schools that participate with the Partnership's Tuition Benefits Program. To see a list of participating voucher schools, visit www.nyscespartnership.org.

When exploring colleges, remember that it may not be necessary to do all of 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 extension sites 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
- Credits awarded by taking specific exams for credit (for example CLEP)

You can find out more information about Exams for Credit from the Partnership's *Education Guide 3: Credit By Examination*.

Utilizing nontraditional approaches for earning credits expands your choices of colleges to schools outside of your geographic area. 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 the Partnership's *Education Guide 2: Non-Traditional Approaches to Further Education*.

Helpful websites for college information:

- The College Board (www.collegeboard.org)
- Peterson's Guides to Colleges and Universities (www.petersons.com)
- SUNY (www.suny.edu)
- Open SUNY (www.open.suny.edu) for online SUNY courses
- Degree Search (www.degreesearch.org)

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. Gather any transcripts from colleges where you have previously taken courses. Ask the college advisor or registrar, at the school you are applying, about which of your previous courses will be accepted as transfer credits. You will also want to know about admissions criteria, tuition and other costs, financial aid, academic courses/majors, and scheduling options. Gather information from each school you are considering to evaluate and compare schools and programs. See the evaluation checklist in Step 5 below for additional suggestions.

Identify sources of information – Much of the information you will need is provided by the schools you are exploring (college websites, and written publications such as brochures and catalogs). It is also important to meet the college's admissions counselors, and possibly

department chairpersons and faculty members for specific information on an academic program. Keep in mind that these individuals are trying to sell you on their college. Current students' and graduates of the program are other sources of information that you may not find in the college's written materials. Each of these groups offers a unique perspective and can provide helpful information on which to base a decision. You should also research objective information about a college (materials that are not produced by the college) through an Internet search. Objective information may be found at www.niche.com and www.studentreviews.com.

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. Consult the college's website under the heading of Tuition and Fees to learn the cost of attending each college. You will also want to explore the types of financial aid and scholarships available. Compare the total cost of attending with the amount of scholarships and financial aid (federal and state) offered to you. Look at the total out of pocket cost you are expected to pay at each school. Visit the financial aid office to discuss aid options and eligibility criteria. See the following websites for more information: www.finaid.org; www.fafsa.ed.gov; and www.studentaid.ed.gov. Also, consult the *Partnership's Education Guide 5: Scholarships*.
- 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. Look on the college's website or catalog for student/faculty ratio.
- 3. Preparation for work** – Some programs emphasize preparing students for jobs rather than focusing exclusively on academics. Explore programs that include experiential learning such as internships, co-ops, or practicum components. You may be able to gain valuable work experience and networking contacts in conjunction with your academic work. This information should be on the college's website under co-ops, internships, practicums, or school-to-work programs. You may also want to do an Internet search for colleges with internships and co-op opportunities. The U.S. News and World Report (www.usnews.com) will have this information as well.
- 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. Look under Career Planning, on the college's website, for this information or talk to the Director of this office. A question to ask is the percentage of students who find related employment within six months of graduation. You can also do an Internet search to find information on a college's placement rate. A website with this kind of information is Business Insider (www.businessinsider.com/best-colleges).
- 5. Focus on adult learners** – There are an increasing number of programs that are specifically designed to meet the needs of the adult learner. Such programs offer a variety of instructional methods that recognize the different ways that adults learn and may earn college credit for their knowledge (see *Partnership's Education Guide 3: Credit-By-Examination* for more information). Research shows that factors important to adult learners are Triple A: affordability, accessibility, acceleration. Affordability: are you being

charged only for what you need? Adults don't need charges for a "college experience," look for reduced activity fees; Accessibility: look for limited barriers to enrollment including flexible scheduling and services available outside the hours of 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.; Acceleration: creative and flexible scheduling, and acceptance of transfer credits from degrees started years ago and credits by exam, to make time in school as short as possible. For adults considering a traditional college (brick and mortar), you may want to look in the college catalog for Student Activities/Clubs for non-traditional students. This may help in feeling connected to the college while studying among the traditional age learners.

- 6. Course scheduling** – Many working adults find it difficult to attend daytime classes. There are "worker friendly" programs that offer flexible schedules, evening or weekend classes, distance learning, online learning, hybrid courses, mini-semester, and independent study options. Some of the most widely used distance learning programs are SUNY Empire State College's Center for Distance Learning (www.esc.edu) and the Open SUNY online courses (www.open.suny.edu). Excelsior College (www.excelsior.edu) also offers alternative ways to earn college credit for adult students.
- 7. Attitude of students toward program** – Talking to 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. Contact the college's Admission or Alumni Offices for names of graduates who are willing to speak with prospective students. You can also do an Internet search on a college and look for comments from former students. Specific websites for this information are Student Review (www.studentsreview.com) and Niche Rankings (www.niche.com). This may yield different feedback than what you hear from alumni who are recommended by the college.
- 8. Reputation of school** – Talking to local employers or job supervisors may yield useful information about the value of the school or program in the local area. An Internet search of the school for comments and reviews from former students or employers may provide information that you won't find on the college's website or in their catalog. Two websites that provide independent reviews are U.S. News Best Colleges (www.colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com) and America's Top College List - Forbes (www.forbes.com).

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 may be a good choice for you. Finally, if you are considering a traditional college, you should visit the college in person. A college may have all the right things on paper, but may not feel right 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, advisors, 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. Schools want you to be a satisfied customer, and you have the right to expect quality services.

Speak up – There may be times when you are not satisfied with the service you receive. When that occurs, be assertive about expressing your needs. Start with the individual or department where the conflict began, and try to resolve the situation. If it is not resolved there, you may need to go to a Dean or other appropriate college administrator. Most organizations welcome feedback on how they can better serve their customers and will work with you to resolve the issue.

Where to Find Additional Information

- America’s Best Colleges List - Forbes (www.forbes.com)
- Open Education Database (www.oedb.org)
- Peterson’s Two-Year Colleges 2017 (www.petersons.com)
- Peterson’s Four-Year Colleges 2017 (www.petersons.com)
- Profiles of American Colleges 2017 (Barron’s Profiles of American Colleges)
- U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook (www.bls.gov/ooh)
- Best Colleges (www.bestcolleges.com)