

Most working people find it difficult to further their education due to time and financial constraints. Work and family responsibilities often prevent attending traditional college or 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?
- Classes won't fit with my work schedule.
- I'd 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 email to maintain contact with your instructor or tutor. Most of these courses are

online. 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 may be tutors or instructors available by phone or email 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 (www.esc.edu) and the Open SUNY (www.open.suny.edu) online courses and degrees. You can also go to the website of the college of your choice to see if they offer online courses and degrees. Additional Internet sources for information about online degree programs are listed on the last page of this guide.

Independent Study – Independent Study is an individualized instructional program. The courses require the same amount of work as traditional college courses, and you earn the same amount of credit. The courses are usually graded using the same standards as an on-campus course. Independent Study courses are typically arranged between the student and the instructor.

A well known private program for independent study is Excelsior College (www.excelsior.edu). 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. Excelsior College offers examinations and guided learning experiences that can be used for credit. It also offers 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's 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! You can get more information on Degree Mills by visiting www.geteducated.com/college-degree-mills.

Non-Traditional Approaches – Earning Credit

Credit-by-Examination 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 in specific subject areas. Every college has its own policies on accepting credits for exams, so it is essential that you speak with an advisor or the registrar at your college to find out which credit by exam programs are accepted, before you sign up for any exams. You wouldn't want to go through the effort of studying and passing an exam, only to find out that your college does not accept credit by exam programs. The following is a list of some of the established credit-by-examination programs for you to explore once you have discussed this with your college advisor.

- Excelsior College Examinations (www.excelsior.edu)
- CLEP – College-Level Examination Program (www.collegeboard.org)
- DSST – Formerly DANTES Subject Standardized Test (www.getcollegedcredit.com)
- TECEP – The Thomas Edison State College Examination Program (www.tesc.edu)

You can find more descriptive information about these exams from the Partnership's *Education Guide Number 3: Credit-By-Examination Programs*.

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. 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 College Credit Recommendation Service 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.nationalccrs.org.
- **Portfolio Assessment** – Many traditional and non-traditional colleges offer students the opportunity to create a written compilation of prior learning experience. This documentation is usually called a portfolio and may be evaluated by a faculty member to determine if credits can be granted for prior learning. The portfolio may include 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 you may encounter upon returning to school. Some may be external, such as lack of time, money, or support from family, friends, or supervisors. 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. Many colleges have support groups specifically for adult students. Your academic advisor is another resource as well as the college's Counseling Center. The Partnership also has advisors who are available to advise and support you through the process of continuing your education. You can contact Partnership Advisors at (800) 253-4332.

It is sometimes helpful to sit down and write a list of barriers that you might encounter. You can review the list with family, friends, co-workers, or a Partnership advisor 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 earn a degree. The different methods you use 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 transfer to your particular college and degree program. Research this before you take the courses, 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 the Partnership's Education Guide No. 1 Returning to Learning: Guide to Sound Decision Making.

Internet Sources for Non-Traditional Education

- www.degreesearch.org
- www.earnmydegree.com
- www.educationconnection.com
- www.elearners.com
- www.getdegrees.com
- www.geteducated.com
- www.oedb.org
- www.onlineschools.org
- www.yourdegree.com