



Top Ten Tips on How to Choose the Best Adult Degree Program

Books—check, car keys—check, backpack—say what? Hey, going back to school is not just for kids anymore.

If the closest you've come to a college campus in the last 10 years is a highway sign, you'll be surprised...maybe even shocked... to learn that adults are returning to school in record numbers to finish a Bachelor's degree or earn a Master's degree. And why? Job advancement and personal fulfillment top the list, but add career changes, "it's now or never," and "because I don't want my kids to be smarter than me," and you have a pretty good Top Five list.

If you've been putting off continuing your education because you think you are too busy, too old or too broke, you'll find plenty of other adults cracking the books and getting into "going back to school." Believe it or not, nearly half of all college students are now over age twenty-five, according to the College Board's Office of Adult Learning.

Does This Sound Like You?

Adults going back to school typically work full-time jobs, have children, and have many other heavy demands on their time and attention. The average adult student is now around 34-years-old, works full-time and needs a degree to enhance his or her career options.

Combining schoolwork with life's other obligations may seem difficult, but it's not impossible. Far from it! Each year colleges celebrate the graduation of adults who went back to school to complete a Bachelor's degree or earn a Master's or Doctorate—all while they work.

Motivation—Getting You Back to the Classroom

Why should you take the time to complete your degree when you are already employed and busy with work and life? It's a good question. Many people feel they have gotten along quite well without that "piece of paper," but if you check the want ads or consult with human resources departments, you will find that most professional and administrative positions now require at least a Bachelor's, if not a Master's degree.

Employees who have years on the job are finding out that maybe, just maybe, not having a degree is holding them back from advancement. Employers are demanding education in all types of jobs. Many adults return to college after their career advancement has been stalled by the lack of a degree and they're tired of watching others—probably with less experience but more education—leapfrog over them. After all, degree requirements are not just for the new kid on the block.

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And if that is not enough motivation, check this out:

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, with the following degrees, here's how much you can expect to make in your lifetime:

High School Diploma	\$1,100,000
Bachelor's Degree	\$2,100,000
Master's Degree	\$2,500,000
Doctorate	\$4,400,000

When you hear “Learn more, Earn more” that is not just a bumper sticker. According to the Federal Government’s Occupational Outlook, the more education you have, the more money you earn per year and over your lifetime. Even if you are planning to retire in ten years, if your retirement pay is based on your highest earning years, you too may want to think about the benefit of earning a degree. *Now that’s motivation!*

Why You Haven’t—Yet

So you want to finish your degree or earn a higher degree, but you really don’t know how to figure out which school is best for you. So many schools and so many choices. But, like going to the supermarket, too many choices can be confusing. Since education is much more expensive than toothpaste, you want to make the choice that is right for you.

Top Ten Tips to Choosing the Best Adult Degree Program for you

Many adult Bachelor’s degree programs are offered by private and public colleges and universities. Many also offer Master’s degrees designed for working adults. The appeal of these programs is that they can be completed while you continue to work and earn. They are designed for your schedule and can be completed years faster than if you attend other colleges or universities by taking one or two courses each semester. Because you complete your degree sooner, you reap the benefits of a degree sooner—and more job opportunities with higher pay.

1 Think and Research

First, think about what you like to do and research what kinds of careers require those kinds of skills. Once you know a possible career path, you can narrow down the type of program you want to take and investigate only the schools that have that program. The Internet is a wonderful source for research on colleges.

2 Type of Format

Decide which type of learning format will work best for you. You can choose from schools that allow you to take courses at your own pace, taking more or fewer classes depending on your work schedule. There are schools that have set programs and guaranteed classes that allow you to complete your studies in a set timeframe. Or take online classes without ever having to leave home. Each school has different offerings so

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once you know which format works best for your needs and lifestyle, you can narrow your choices to those schools that meet your requirements.

3 Regional Accreditation

Most adult programs have the all-important REGIONAL ACCREDITATION but you need to be sure. Ask the school what their regional accreditation is. Schools can have many accreditations but regional accreditation is critical because it means work you complete there will transfer to other regionally accredited schools. California schools should be accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Schools headquartered outside of California may have a different regional accreditation such as the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges.

4 Create a Short List of Schools to Check Out

So now you have a short list of schools that are regionally accredited and have the program and the format you want. Now it's time to ask around about the school. Ask your family, friends, and co-workers. Ask your employer and your HR department and anyone else you can think of about the schools you are considering. Remember, reputation counts, so where you earn your degree is a reflection on you. If a school you are considering is poorly perceived by your "committee," then you may want to scratch it from your list.

5 Make an Appointment

Make an appointment to visit the schools you are considering. All schools have regular open houses or information sessions. Most also offer free academic advising. Get a feel for the environment. Are the classrooms comfortable and well-appointed with audio visual equipment? Is there a library? Are there computers available for student use? Is there a break room or place nearby to get something to eat? Since you will be spending time and money there, you want to make sure you are comfortable with the surroundings.

6 Critique Professional Staff

Does the staff appear professional? Do they give you clear and specific answers to your questions? Do they create a customized degree plan for you that discloses all the courses you will need to take to get your degree, the time it will take and all the charges you can expect to pay to earn your degree, or do they speak in generalities? Ask about the education and experience level of the instructors. This will be important when deciding the quality of the degree program.

7 Talk with Current Students and Alumni

Ask for the opportunity to talk with current students, alumni or to visit a class. Do you like what you see and hear? Don't forget to ask if there is any downside. It is always good to know the whole story before making a decision.

8 Financial Aid Advising

Are you given information and assistance in obtaining grants, scholarships and loans? What about financial aid and loan processing? Is the school a direct lender? Not having to find your own loan is a time-saver. Having financial aid available will take the pressure off of the "cost of a degree" and put it on the quality of the program which you are looking at.

9 Ongoing Support

Ongoing support is a very important criterion when selecting a school. Ask what kind of ongoing support is provided during and after your program, including career development assistance.

10 Affordability

Finally, consider price. Most people put price at the top of the list but the investment of a degree program should only be one consideration when making a decision to get your degree. Affordability of a school should only be considered after you have satisfied Tips 1-9. Like a cheap piece of clothing, a low cost education may not serve you well in the long term. Be sure to ask, "What is the total cost of earning my degree?" Some adult colleges gloss over the costs with an overly optimistic estimate of what it will take to complete your work. Don't forget to include the cost of books! Consider price only after having done your research and you will be able to make a decision based on value—that is—what you get in return for your money. You may find that even a program that may cost more, you get more, and it will be worth more to you when you are finished. Think of it as an investment in your future. Priceless!

Going back to school as an adult can be a surprisingly fulfilling experience, allowing you to move forward in your personal and professional life. Achieving this long postponed goal will bring the benefits of increased self-esteem and wider career options.

If completing your education is a dream that you've been postponing, then don't delay, do your homework now and find that school that works for you!

USF offers Bachelor's completion and Master's degree programs for working adults. We will be happy to meet with you if you would like to learn more about our educational opportunities. Call 1-866-GOTOUSF to get more information on how to Learn More, Earn More. Or visit our website at www.usfca.edu/regions.

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