


*"I'm too old to sit  
in a classroom  
with 19 year-olds."*

*"I've been out of the traditional  
learning environment too long  
to go back."*



*"I have too many other things going  
on in my life—work, family, home  
maintenance—to handle school."*

## Addressing the Emotional Barriers of Returning to School

There are real fears that often prevent a promising student from continuing their education. In fact, while more than half of adults express a desire to go back to school, 36% of them are unsure that they'll follow through.\*

But there are adult students who have overcome fear and many life obstacles to return to school, and have actually taught the educational community that the emotion they bring from their busy life/work/school schedule can be translated into a passion for learning.

By considering and accommodating the different learning styles and motivations of the adult student, an educational

institution can transform itself into a more flexible, responsive environment that benefits teachers, students, and eventually, the businesses and communities they serve.

Many adult students find the most responsive learning environment is the "career college," that emphasizes industry-focused expertise, real-world applications, and flexible delivery methods. These educational institutions are well-equipped to welcome the adult learner and are able to diminish the initial fears and challenges that can plague them as they embark on their renewed educational plan.

\*Source: Degrees of Opportunity Study conducted by independent research firm TNS NFO

## IDENTIFYING MOTIVATIONS, FEARS, AND CHALLENGES ADULTS FACE WHEN RETURNING TO SCHOOL

What motivates some students to return to school, while others succumb to their fears? Do differences in educational, social, and personal background play a part?

Research has shown that most adults considering higher education have similar motivations, fears, and challenges/barriers that affect their decision.

### Motivations

Working professionals with full-time jobs and families that return to school share some of the basic motivations of the traditional college student, but also have unique reasons for continuing:

- **Career Advancement.** Many adults pursue higher education in order to avoid stagnant

careers or being surpassed by degreed employees, and to substantiate their skills with a formal degree.

- **Complete a Degree from Years Ago.**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau Survey in 2007, 30% of adults 25 years and older have started college, but do not have a degree.

- **Role Model.** Some adults who return to school do so to set an example for their children, other family members, and co-workers, enforcing the motto "if I can do it, you can do it too."

- **Fully Prepare to Run a Business.** In order to be successful, adults need to be knowledgeable on all aspects of running a business, something that can be achieved through higher education.

- **Meet External Expectations.** Oftentimes, a job will demand that you take a course or earn a degree in order to stay up-to-date with business practices and performance.

- **Learn to Better Serve Others.** Returning to school can help adults learn valuable skills that can be taken away and taught to other co-workers or employees.

- **Escape or Stimulation.** Adults who return to school sometimes do so to stimulate their minds and be challenged in learning something new.

- **Pure Interest.** Some adults return to school for the sake of learning, because they enjoy it.

- **Maintain Social Relationships.** Higher education helps adults socially integrate.

## Economic Climate Redirects Adult Student Behavior— Finding the Right Educational Provider

**While most adult students agree** that educational credentials go a long way in finding and securing employment in tough economic times, they also cite many reasons for deferring their education, including aversion to student loan debt and concerns that the length of time for degree completion will reduce its impact for job security in today's unstable environment.

A recent Eduventures study, conducted to examine the role that the current economy plays in adult educational enrollment, found that:

- 40% of respondents worried about the amount of time their education would take away from their current work schedule
- 30% have a new aversion to debt which may impact their willingness to consider student loans
- 59% are more likely to pursue programs with flexible scheduling
- 43% lack confidence in their employer's ability to support their pursuit of education

The right educational program, however, can address these concerns and offer a pragmatic solution for the adult student facing economic challenges through flexible delivery methods, accelerated degree programs, corporate "cohort" programs, and various payment options.

**Flexible Delivery: Balancing Education and Career.** More educational institutions are offering evening and weekend classes, along with the flexibility of attending onsite, online, or a combination. This blended delivery method helps the working student adjust to changing work schedules as well as job relocations. DeVry University and its Keller Graduate School of Management have over 90 physical locations to accommodate these life changes, and also offer the ability to switch from onsite to online learning or vice versa at any time.

**Career-Focused Degrees from an Accredited School.** Many educational institutions are recognizing the need for adult students to streamline their educational goals to minimize the impact on work and family. These schools offer concentrated sessions and programs that allow students to earn credits that can be used toward multiple degrees or certifications. DeVry University offers eight-week sessions that begin six times per year, making it possible to earn a bachelor's degree in as few as three years. Keller Graduate School of Management offers a program that enables students to earn an MBA while preparing for the CPA exam, saving time and tuition.

**Corporate Tailored Learning Programs:** Some corporations will partner with an educational provider to offer instructor-led learning, where a group of employee learners enter a study program together. These programs are proving to be effective and motivating.\* The Keller Center for Corporate Learning works with many corporations that extend these educational opportunities to their employees, allowing them to better perform their jobs and simultaneously earn credit toward a degree. Often, these programs are accompanied by financial benefits, such as course cost reduction and application fee waivers.

**Payment Options: Take Advantage of All Financial Savings.**

The Eduventures study indicates that only 20% of employers have made changes to their tuition assistance policies due to the economy, with outright elimination of assistance rare. In addition to employer tuition reimbursement, many schools offer other financial incentives and payment plans. DeVry University and its Keller Graduate School of Management offer opportunities for tuition payment deferral, scholarships, and financial aid for those who qualify, as well as financial advisors to help students navigate through these options.

\*In a recent study by Rutgers University, 67% of respondents said that on-the-job training is the most effective method for preparing for the work in which they engage.

## Fears

Adults who are hesitant to attend college are usually held back by their own fears. The most common fears adults face when considering returning to college are:

- I won't fit in/I'm too old to be a student.
- It will be too costly and time-consuming.
- Employers won't take my degree seriously.
- I won't learn anything new or valuable.
- The demands on me will be too great.
- I might lose my dignity.

The reality is that these fears are largely unwarranted. Those concerned with age and dignity will be encouraged to know that the growth rate for American adults entering college is expected to increase to well over 14% by 2016, and that currently, the average adult student is 38.8 years of age. According to U.S. News and World Report, the number of college students 40 to 64 years of age has increased to almost two million in the past decade, a nearly 20% jump. These numbers are expected to climb as the baby boomer generation sees retirement as neither a financial or emotional option.

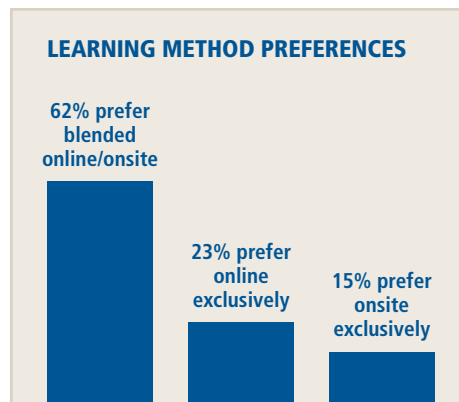
The majority of adult learners are married with children, most of which have experienced the fear of being too old and too overburdened to return to school, but have found ways to overcome these fears. They have had the help of many of today's educational institutions that have worked to create environments in which the adult learner can succeed.

## Challenges/Barriers

In order to return to school, adults need to address the challenges they face, and understand that they are not alone. The most common challenges adults have cited when considering returning to college are:

- Managing commitments and finding time for school.
- Finding money for school.
- Providing for oneself and family while in school.
- Regularly attending classes.

There is ample empirical evidence that suggests that adults who have returned to school have found that once they started and addressed their challenges, they were able to fully commit and enjoy learning.



*Chadwick Martin and Bailey survey results of approximately 2,000 prospective students between the ages of 17 and 39 (NOTE: only 7–8% of respondents are comfortable with an online curriculum at a college with no onsite footprint)*

## HOW EDUCATION PROVIDERS CAN HELP ADULT STUDENTS SUCCEED

Gloria Tufo, mother of three, was working hard to balance career and family. "I knew I had to go back to school to give myself the confidence level, knowledge base, and credentials necessary to remain successful in this competitive market." Gloria added student to her balancing act, and earned a bachelor's degree from DeVry University in 2006, and dual master's degrees from Keller Graduate School of Management in 2008. She credits Keller with teaching her a systematic approach to problem solving and decision making—skills that helped her stay on top of many projects simultaneously.

Teaching pragmatic skills that provide insight into how to streamline decision making and balance multiple projects is one way that a career college can help the busy, adult learner navigate his/her way through to a college degree. Other results-proven aids to adult learning success include offering flexible delivery options, a comfortable learning venue, the value of a credible degree, certification options, faculty support, and financial aid.

## Flexibility and Convenience

Adults returning to school oftentimes doubt their ability to succeed, but "career colleges" offer flexible and convenient course offerings and locations for the working student that will help them to achieve greater success in and out of the workplace. Although it might seem impossible, adult students can balance work, life, and school by making a few sacrifices in their personal life (i.e. go out less frequently, watch less TV, say no, etc.) or enrolling in online courses that allow them

to participate when they are available. In fact, a majority of part-time and full-time adult students favor taking both online and onsite courses for degree completion, seeking schools that offer a seamless integration of both options. More educational institutions are offering multiple onsite, online, and weekend course options to cater to the needs of adult students. This customization of any combination of onsite and online courses works to fit an adult student's lifestyle.

## Diversified Student Base

Because adult students are older, and balancing work, family, and education, they often have trouble relating to the traditional college student with limited life experience. In this traditional setting, adult students may feel ostracized or humiliated, leading to failure in and out of school.

But the reality is that there are more adult students than ever before. The 2000 U.S. Census Bureau reveals that over 47% of college students are 25 years of age or older. Many older students also report that their life/work experience adds a new dimension to the classroom, appreciated by their younger counterparts and the instructors.

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Career colleges are in a position to offer the adult student a more "mixed" student body, with varying numbers of young and old, as well as cultural, economic, and social diversity. These differences among students help the adult learner assimilate into higher education by making them feel more comfortable in their environment. For example, of DeVry University's fall term enrollments for 2007, 67% were 25 years of age or older, and 50% were of ethnic diversity.

## Credibility

Adult students need more flexibility than their younger counterparts so that they can balance their work and school life. Many often believe that this means they must sacrifice reputation or

credibility. But the fact is that there are many “career schools” with many convenient locations and online options that offer accreditation by the most respected educational associations. For example, DeVry University and its Keller Graduate School of Management are accredited by The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (NCA), and many of their degree programs are accredited through various organizations, such as the GAC accreditation from PMI (Project Management Institute) for a Master of Project Management (MPM) and a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration with a Project Management concentration (BSBA). Credibility of an institution will help adult learners select the right school and ensure success within the work force by teaching them the best skills needed to succeed.

### Degree/Certificate Options

Traditional colleges and universities offer degree programs that are heavily concentrated in coursework and degree development; however, these programs often do not present the flexibility and convenience required by adult students. On the other hand, career colleges maintain multiple degree and certificate program options that meet the demands of today’s adult students. Accelerated learning programs are available at career colleges, shortening the length of time to earn a degree. Career college programs focus on real-world application and support the career-oriented focus of the adult student as they seek degrees that can easily be applied to the work force.

DeVry University offers applications and career-oriented, practical undergraduate degree programs

that can be further supplemented by Keller Graduate School of Management’s graduate degree programs. These programs serve as a foundation for adults to achieve success. Degree and certificate programs give adult learners credibility within the work force by training them with the necessary skills to succeed throughout their career and beyond.

## *Degree and certificate programs give adult learners credibility within the work force ...*

### Faculty and Peer Support

Support programs should be available to enable adult students to transition into education and provide an opportunity for involvement within the institution. Peer and faculty support exist within educational institutions to provide the necessary infrastructure for adult students to succeed. Because adults already have established learning styles, a professor must match their style in order to succeed. DeVry University’s Mark “Doc” Miller believes that, “As a teacher, my challenge is to develop a classroom experience that integrates multiple learning stimuli.”

Faculty and staff can coordinate outreach efforts and provide information for adult students. College and university personnel are usually on hand to determine scholarship and grant availability, counsel adult students, create a safe and understanding environment, and express

the positive views of adults returning to higher education including experience, motivation, goals, and success. Faculty and staff must show an interest in understanding the special problems adult students may encounter, including self-doubt, in order to help adults transition into higher education. Published newsletters and articles will provide a great source of information for adult students to see that they are not alone with their fears, challenges, motivations, or even numbers within higher education. Adult students can work together to succeed.

### Financial Assistance

A major concern adult students face is finding the money to pay for school. Because they work full time, an adult student may not qualify for certain scholarships or grants that traditional college students receive, requiring them to take out costly loans to finance their education.

Most scholarships and grants are geared toward the traditional college student—it can be difficult for the adult student to uncover all their options for assistance. But there are federal, state, and private financial assistance programs available to aid qualifying adult students returning to school.

Career colleges can be the perfect fit for adult learners because these schools are typically less expensive than a traditional college when the student is attending school part time and not living on campus. Education can be expensive, but adults must consider the investment they are making for their future and the potential career advancement a degree will provide.

## FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

### Professional Associations

Many professional associations offer scholarship opportunities; a potential adult student needs only to contact an organization representative for details. For example, the Business and Professional Women’s Foundation offers scholarships for members over the age of 25 to finance their higher education.

### National Scholarships

Numerous national scholarship competitions exist to help adults returning to school fund their education. For example, Talbots offers scholarships to adult women working to complete their first undergraduate degree.

### Colleges or Universities

A college or university’s financial aid office can provide an overview of financial assistance opportunities that may be available to an adult learner. For example, the University of Wisconsin offers scholarships for students, ages 25–50 who are pursuing their first undergraduate degree. DeVry University offers the Banco Popular scholarship for 30 qualifying adult students, as well as the Employment Gap Scholarship to help displaced workers retrain for a new career.

### Work

Many companies offer tuition reimbursement plans for their employees who seek to further their knowledge and educational expertise.



“At Keller (Graduate School of Management) I had an incredible staff of professors with years of experience in their field who offered real-world examples and problems for us to explore, debate, and solve. I also had phenomenal peers who brought challenging and intriguing perspectives to the classroom.”

– Stacey Johnson-Williams graduated in 2007 with an MBA from Keller Graduate School of Management

### Current Technology

Adult students have been trained on the most current technology at their job and require education institutions to provide up-to-date technology and information to succeed in and out of the classroom.

In addition to an institution’s technology, education providers should have faculty and staff who are knowledgeable in recent industry developments and have received current certificates in their field. This is an area in which the career school may have an advantage over a traditional four-year college, as their faculty and staff are immersed in the work force and can more easily keep abreast of technological advancements.

### Career Success

To ensure that their educational investment will translate into career success, adult students seek industry-known and credible educational institutions. Oftentimes these schools provide career services, job placement options, and extensive networking capabilities in a variety of industries. For instance, over the last five years, DeVry University graduates have been employed with 96 of the Fortune 100 companies. Schools that define their success through the career success of their graduates offer a better fit for adult students, because these schools specialize in results and tailor their degree programs for real-world careers.

### ENSURING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR THE ADULT LEARNER

Tina Beilke earned a master’s degree from Keller Graduate School of Management while working, raising children, and volunteering. She cites encouragement from family and friends and a stimulating learning environment as her main sources of inspiration, and is especially appreciative of the pragmatic and supportive learning experience that Keller provided. “I liked how Keller gave us real life assignments and challenges. (The classes) were challenging, and the enthusiasm of the instructors was superb. They allowed and welcomed creativity and some even offered their specialized resources after the courses ended. I believe my Keller master’s degree has opened doors for me that would not have otherwise been opened.”

Adult students differ from their younger counterparts, with different motivating factors, fears, and challenges, more life experience, career-orientation, and unique needs for balancing work, life, and education. Those who overcome the fears and obstacles associated with returning to school are more passionate, determined, and committed to education.

As the number of adult learners in our educational institutions rises, more and more potential “mature students” will realize that

they too can improve their career prospects and personal enrichment goals through higher learning. Likewise, higher education and training providers are learning to meet the needs of this specialized group of learners to succeed in school and beyond.

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#### About the Author

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