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Prepare for your new education!

We have compiled a list of questions to help create a dialogue between you and your enrollment counselor. Don’t be afraid to ask questions, this is a big decision and having all the facts ahead of time will help you make the right decision.

Here is our list of the questions to ask your school representative. Be sure to write down the answers so you can compare your options.

Finance Questions

Does your school offer financial aid?

Can you assist me in finding financial aid?

How many of your students currently have financial aid?

What is the cost per credit?

Do you have an application fee?
If I cannot complete my courses due to personal obligations, can I start up again at a later date? If yes, what sort of fees will I incur at that time? Will I need to apply again?

Do you have any arrangements with computer companies to get an educational discount for a new computer?

If I fail a course, how much will it be to retake the course?

Curriculum Questions

How do teachers share their instructions with the class? Is it through a recorded lecture, or is it live?

Are there group projects?

How do students communicate with each other? Is it through email, chat, or something else?

What happens if I miss a class?

How many classes can I miss?

What happens if I miss an exam?

Are your classes all taught in English?

Can I transfer credits? What is the process for that?

Do I get an academic advisor if I take a Master’s degree or Doctoral degree?
How long does it take the average person to complete a Bachelor’s degree at your school?

How are tests and exams given?

Do you have a GPA system?

Who grades your assignments?

Can you get in touch with the professor to discuss a grade or comments on your work?

Do you have times to meet with the professors regularly?

How many of the professors have PhDs?

Is there an online demo of what a course is like?

What sort of software will I need to buy to take these courses?

Can I see a list of courses in the degree?

Can I see information on some of the professors that teach these courses?

Student Body Questions

Do you have any alumni directories?

What is the gender and age breakdown of your school?
Do your students join any clubs or organizations while they are enrolled?

What is your attrition rate?

**Life and Work Balance Questions**

How many hours a week should I expect to study to complete my degree on time?

Can I keep my job and study at the same time?

Do you have a lot of parents in your school that are working?

I went to school a long time ago, will I be able to keep up?

Are there some people who are not cut out for online education?

Are there students at your school that I can talk to and get their testimonials?

**Resource Questions**

What kind of computer and Internet connection will I need?

Do you have an online library?

Do you have any other special data services such as Lexis Nexis?

If the school is campus-based, do you have a physical library?
Do you have any fitness facilities?

Do you have meeting rooms for group meetings?

Does your school have its own intranet?

Does your school offer any type of tech support?

Career Placement Services Questions

What kind of jobs do people usually get once they have completed the degree?

What are the average starting salaries for these jobs?

Are there any companies that do not recognize a degree from your school?

Do you help people find jobs after they finish their degree? If so, how?

Accreditation Questions

Is your school accredited? By whom?

How and where can I double check your accreditation?

What does your school’s accreditation mean?

Once again, congratulations on taking the first step to a new life. A new education can be incredibly rewarding. Good luck!
Top 10 Questions Every Student Should Ask Their Admissions Advisor

It doesn’t matter who you are or where you apply: college applications are stressful. According to the New York Times, it isn’t uncommon for college applicants to lose sleep, get headaches, or even become depressed throughout the process. Relax. Scheduling an appointment with a school’s admissions counselor can provide valuable insight into the application process and put your admissions chances in perspective, reducing needless worry. Use our top 10 questions to ask your admissions advisor as a guide.

Top 10 Must-Ask Questions for Your Admissions Counselor

1. What do you look for in an applicant?
This is a very basic but important question. All campus-based and online colleges have their own selection criteria, and while they may not be willing to divulge too much information, you can certainly get a feel for what accomplishments they value. Ask about the relative ranking of things like grades, standardized test scores, AP coursework, and extracurricular activities.

2. How and when should I apply?
Knowing how and when to apply is essential information as most schools don’t accept late or incomplete applications. Be sure to ask what additional submissions are recommended, including standardized test scores, admissions essays, and letters of recommendation.

3. When can I expect a decision?
Knowing how and when you’ll receive your admissions decision can save you weeks of needless torment.

4. What is the average high school GPA of students at your school?
Knowing how your GPA stacks up against the average student can give you a sense of your chances for admission and how competitive the academic environment will be upon enrollment.
5. What is the average SAT or ACT score of students at your school, and how important is it?
As with GPA, average test scores are an indication of admissions criteria and academic competitiveness. Be sure to ask what standardized tests they prefer and how important these scores are, particularly if you have excellent grades but don’t excel in test taking.

6. How much does it cost to attend your school?
School is a priceless investment in yourself, but that doesn’t mean it always fits your budget. Be sure to ask for the cumulative cost of admission—additional fees, housing, and other expenses add up.

7. Is financial aid available?
Financial aid can make college a reality for students who otherwise could not attend. Be sure to have your admissions advisor specify which types of aid are available, including grants, scholarships, and government or private loans. Also ask how and when to apply.

8. What is your student-to-faculty ratio?
Smaller class sizes reduce competition for your professor’s time, which can impact the quality of your education overall.

9. What are your minimum technology requirements?
This question is particularly important for those attending online degree programs who rely on their computers for attendance, but even campus-based schools typically have technology recommendations, which can add to your overall expense.

10. How do online students interact with teachers and students?
Whether you’re applying to online colleges or campus-based schools that offer some online courses, understanding how you attend class, submit work, receive feedback, and interact with your peers is essential for determining whether your learning style is well-suited for online degree programs.
Make It Easy!

3 programs to streamline the college applications process
Students applying to college may look at the piles of applications, stacks of college brochures and heaps of confusing financial aid forms and wish college applications came with an easy button.

While there’s no magic button that turns applying to college into a stress-free process, a number of new tools can help students and parents keep track of it all. Consider these three programs to help you every step of the way.

1. College Navigator
Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, College Navigator is a free, online tool designed to help students search for schools and compare options.

Using College Navigator, you can input basic information about the kind of schools you are looking to attend, including degree level, location and available programs. More advanced search options allow you to filter by tuition rate, admission selectivity and the availability of flexible learning options.

You can use the My Favorites feature to create side-by-side comparisons of schools based on criteria such as cost, financial aid, graduation rate and more. There’s also a tuition calculator that allows you to estimate how rising tuition rates may affect the total cost of your degree.

College Navigator also offers links to other government resources for college students. You can access information about the following resources:

- Federal financial aid
- Career information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics
- College Affordability and Transparency Center

An app for that: College Guide is a free app for iPad that helps students compare colleges based on many of the same criteria offered by College Navigator.

2. Evernote
Once you’ve narrowed down the list of schools you’ll apply to, admission checklists can help keep you organized through every step of the process. Although some schools offer online calendars for applicants, free online tools like Evernote can also help you keep things organized. This downloadable tool can be accessed from any computer with an Internet connection, so you can access and edit your college application notes whenever you need to.

Evernote offers its users the ability to:
- Type and store notes
- File screenshots or other images
- Scan and store important documents
- Add tags to notes or separate into different notebooks
- Search notes for keywords
- Create schedules, agendas, or checklists with all your information
- Record voice messages
Soon-to-be college students can use Evernote to create
virtual notebooks for each school, organize important
deadlines and track key documents such as transcripts,
test stores and recommendations.

Premium accounts are available for $5 a month and offer
more options, including PDF searching and bigger upload
capacity.

**An app for that:** Schedule Planner PRO HD for iPad
is $0.99 and offers a calendar with organization and
color-coded tasks for each day, along with a planning
interface.

### 3. StudyMinder

Dealing with paperwork and staying organized doesn’t
stop once you are enrolled in college. Students need to
keep up with deadlines for tuition payments, stay on top
of class assignments and test dates, and look ahead to
next term’s enrollment or financial aid applications.

StudyMinder is a software package
that includes a calendar screen that
you can use to organize important
deadlines and schedule study time.
Pop-up reminders alert you when
deadlines are looming, and you
can check off assignments once
you’ve finish them.

StudyMinder offers additional
features that may be particularly
helpful for busy students:

- Alerts when your assignments
  are late

- Alerts when you haven’t
  scheduled study time to
  complete all your recorded
  assignments

- A GPA calculator and progress tracker for each
class

- Assignment organization capabilities that let you
  list assignments by type, difficulty, time required,
  status and more

You can test-drive StudyMinder for free for 30 days, but
then it costs $29.95 to keep the program. Additionally, a
flash card system can be added to your package for an
additional $14.95. The flash card software allows you
to organize cards by degree of difficulty and get hints to
difficult questions.

**An app for that:** School Buddy Free is an iPad app for
student homework organization. School Buddy allows you
to set reminders, track due dates and make quick notes
about courses and assignments.

Technology offers a host of ways to keep up to speed on
the college admission process. Savvy students will use
the tools available online and on
college websites to not only help
choose colleges, but to also stay
organized and on top of
their educations.
How to choose a career-focused education

The current one-size-fits-all U.S. education system is failing to prepare millions of young adults for career success. That’s the conclusion of a recently-published study by the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. Moreover, students themselves understand the importance of a career-focused college education and make it a high priority, according to a recent AP-Viacom poll.

**Start Here...**

Do you want your post-high school education to be more career-focused?

Yes! How else will I get a job after I graduate?

Do you know which career you want to pursue?

No idea.

Are you ready to plunge right back into school?

No.

Do you want a 2-year or a 4-year college?

Yes indeed!

4-year.

2-year.

Go to liberal arts school.

Not quite.
Go to a vocational school.
Half of the 14 million jobs will go to people with associate’s degrees or certificates. What’s more, 27% of these people earn more than the average bachelor’s degree recipient.

Customize your degree program.
Create a customized degree program that allows you to explore new and emerging technologies that might not yet be a specialty.

Choose a college with internship requirements.
Some schools place an emphasis on long-term career-related internships and apprenticeships.

Work while you’re in school.
Working while you’re in school helps you get your feet wet and keeps money in your pocket.

Take a year off.
The ‘gap year’ is a way to gain meaningful experiences through travel or public service. Plus, you’ll return to school with a stronger focus on education.

What’s more important to you: class time or work experience?

Are you willing to work without pay?

Sure. Gotta start somewhere.

Not a chance.

Class time.

Work experience.

Not quite.
Shannon Christensen’s first trip to college ended in a roadblock. She started an art program with high hopes, but her journey ended when meeting a new boyfriend meant she started to neglect her studies and skipped too much class. By the time Christensen would head back to school, she had eight children, a 2,500 square foot expansion planned on the house, and a busy life that involved family, church and raising her growing brood. Still, she made the choice to hit the books again, as part of her quest to build a better future for herself and her family.
Going beyond the paycheck

Christensen is just one of thousands of women who made the choice to go back to school later in life, to not only boost her earning potential, but to enrich her life and shape her career path. The U.S. Department of Education reports that, in 2009, 15.3 percent of all U.S. women aged 25 to 29 years were enrolled in an education program, while 9.3 percent of women aged 30 to 34 were pursuing at least some schooling. While the thought of hitting the books after a long hiatus might make even the most seasoned working mom start to sweat, the enriching benefits of going back to class can often outweigh the costs.

5 ways education can enrich your life

Considering the stress and strain of balancing family, work, school and life, you may be surprised to find the life-changing benefits of returning to college as an adult:

1. Opportunities to build relationships with instructors:
In Christensen’s experience, returning to school as an older student came with extra respect from professors who valued her life experience. “Teachers usually appreciate adult learners because we have experience and insight,” she said. “We tend to write more in-depth papers that the instructors are more interested in reading.”

2. Discovering that you can do it:
For students like Christensen, the fear of repeating past failure can be a motivating factor. Remembering how she balanced child care, home improvement, church life and school, Christensen wonders how she made it through four years of higher education. “I was tired,” she admits. “I started out on my own strength but finished with the help of others.”

Antoine Lane, a corporate trainer and life coach at Training Lanes went back to school at 28 to earn a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree and a two-year advanced certificate, all with honors. He remembers being nervous about two things: “Am I actually smart enough to be in college?” and “Will I be able to keep up?” he remembers. In the end, the very act of answering these questions added drive to his education and his career future. Getting an education offers you a rare chance to both take some control over your future and build your confidence while you’re at it.
3. Learning the value of your current knowledge: If you lost your rose-colored glasses years ago, you could be better off in education. “[Younger students are] innocently ignorant about the realities of the marketplace,” says Lane. When you go into an education with experience in the workforce, you might realize for the first time how important your journey has been so far.

4. Becoming a member of an exclusive club: Cap-and-gown is the new black. With 20.1 million women over the age of 25 holding a bachelor’s degree, according to the U.S. Department of Education, older women may find it easier to compete in the workforce with an education.

5. Enjoying the power of options: It makes sense that a college degree could lead to higher earnings, but unemployment rates also drop significantly for those with more education. In 2010, the unemployment rate for workers with a high school diploma was a whopping 10.3 percent, while the rate for those with a bachelor’s degree dropped to 5.4 percent. Decreasing your odds of unemployment means increasing your chances at a fulfilling job.

Non-traditional education for a non-traditional student
Of course, not all training programs are created equal. Check out a few popular options, with specific benefits to non-traditional students:

- Certification/coursework: Explore higher education without committing to a full degree program.

- Hybrid online/on-campus training: Get the best of both worlds, with flexible online schooling and face-to-face campus education.

- Night/weekend classes: Build your schoolwork around a full-time work schedule with online or campus-based courses at uncommon times.

Taking the plunge and loving the results
Higher education offers a unique opportunity: dedicate yourself to something for a few years, and enjoy the results for a lifetime. Today, Shannon Christensen works as an artist, author and family advocate—all areas of her life which were touched by her choice to return to school. Her studio, The Art of Family, has been featured on television, she has spoken at international arts banquets, and has been featured in magazines. Another enrichment came in her personal life, when she married the man behind her leaving school the first time around. They just celebrated their 29th anniversary. Sometimes, it’s the roadblocks in life that lead to the better path.

And it seems the answer to the question of which students learn best online may well be almost all of them.
Are some students better suited for online learning than others?

Imagine mornings without a mad dash to the bus stop. Or if you are an adult learner, picture yourself having a relaxing evening with your family instead of inhaling dinner in your car while you rush from work to campus.

If these seem like appealing day-dreams, you most certainly understand the draw of online schools. But are they for everyone?

Learning styles and online education

The question of which students are best suited to online education has been studied for nearly as long as there have been online schools. According to the Illinois Online Network, there are four distinct learning styles:

1. **Visual/Verbal Learners**: Students who learn by reading.
2. **Visual/Nonverbal Learners**: Students who learn by looking at graphs and diagrams.
3. **Auditory/Verbal Learners**: Students who learn by listening.
4. **Tactile/Kinesthetic Learners**: Students who learn by engaging in hands-on activities.

While many online courses can be text heavy, it’s important to not make the mistake of thinking a virtual education is out of the question for auditory and tactile learners. At online schools today, lectures can be delivered via podcast and online coursework can incorporate lab simulations and hands-on activities.

When it comes to having a fruitful and productive online education experience, the question may not be as much about learning style as it is about motivation. Eric Chen, an associate professor of business administration at Saint Joseph College in Connecticut, points out that learning online is not as easy as it seems.
“The best online learner is one who takes responsibility for his or her learning,” explains Chen. “Online courses are not forgiving for students who fall behind schedule.”

**Motivation, motivation, motivation**
It is a theme that repeats itself over and over again when talking to instructors and administrators who work in online education: students must be motivated to learn.

“Students of all types are poised to succeed because of the data-driven, individualized instruction they can receive—if they log in,” says DeLaina Tonks, Director of Open High School in Utah. “The only students who struggle at OSHU are those who don’t open the laptops.”

Sarah Ault, Director of Schools for Connections Academy, agrees. Ault says students come to Connections Academy for a number of reasons. They may need a flexible schedule to accommodate sports or a parent’s work travel. Other students may need either more or less time to finish coursework than what’s typically offered in a traditional setting.

“All kinds of students learn best online,” said Ault. “The ones who are most successful have support at home to log-in everyday.”

**Adjusting from traditional schooling to online coursework**
While some perceive online education as an easy alternative to a traditional classroom, Wendy Weiner cautions that flexible scheduling doesn’t necessarily equal less time spent studying. As principal of Conservatory Prep in Florida and an online instructor for Nova Southeastern University, Weiner says online education can be much more time consuming than traditional studies. In addition, parents should be prepared to log in some hours on the computer with their children.

“Children with sequencing issues and ADD-type attributes do really well online,” notes Weiner, “If they have someone working with them.”

On the one hand, children struggling with attention disorders can benefit from an online format that generally shows only one concept per screen as opposed to traditional textbooks that may display numerous lessons in one place. However, that benefit can be offset by student tendencies to wander around the Web instead of focusing on their studies.

Jenny Lewis discovered firsthand just how demanding online learning can be. After a difficult seventh grade, she enrolled her son, who has ADD, in an online school for eighth grade.

“It’s a lot of work! I have to do all the planning and organization,” explains Lewis. “My son gets very distracted and often is using the Internet for his own purposes rather than doing his work.”

To combat the allure of other websites, Weiner notes it may be possible to print coursework materials and study offline where there are fewer distractions.

**Benefits of online learning for all students**
While online schools may not be the walk in the park many students envision, they certainly have their benefits. “With online learning, you have to apply the information,” says Weiner. “It’s not rote memorization, which is often used in traditional learning environments. It’s taking it to a greater level of critical thinking.”

The research on online learning would tend to agree. A 2009 report completed by the Department of Education looked at nearly 100 studies comparing the performance of online learners with that of students in a traditional classroom. The result? On average, online learners performed better than their counterparts who received face-to-face instruction only.
Transferring: 5 ways to make the community college transfer easier

Four out of every five community college students want to transfer to a four-year institution. If you are one of them, these five steps can make the process easier.

Enrollment in community colleges has been steadily increasing, according to a study by the American Association of Community Colleges. Reasons for this increase include more affordable courses, partnerships with local business and industry, enrollment caps at four-year universities and the ability for students to "retool" their existing skills. Today, almost half of all undergraduate students in the United States are served by community college programs.

If you are a student who wants to transfer to a four-year college, you’re not alone. A 2011 study by College Board found that four out of five students who attend community college hoped to move on to a four-year college or university.

From community college to a four-year institution
In many cases, community college students start earning credits with transfer in mind. Some colleges and universities have guaranteed transfer agreements with community colleges in the area, ensuring that most, if not all, of the credits students take at community college will apply toward their higher degree. Whether that guarantee applies to your particular situation or not, keep these five tips in mind to make the transition from community college easier.

1. **Find a good advisor.** Getting through the transfer admissions process starts with a good advisor. Transfer counselors are there to help you choose the right courses, plan your next steps and get through the transition as smoothly as possible. Meet regularly with them to ensure that you are on the right track to complete your educational goals. Don’t wait until your final semester of community college to work with an advisor; your contact with transfer counselors should begin when your college career does.

2. **Choose your courses wisely.** Some states have articulation agreements that make it clear exactly what courses are needed, and what grades you must earn, in order to transfer those credits to a four-year college or university in your state. Ask your advisor if your state has such an agreement in place, and where you can access
the information. Choose courses that you know will transfer, especially if those courses are for an intended major.

3. **Complete your associate degree.** Earning your associate degree can make your work easier when transfer admissions time rolls around. If you already hold an associate degree, you have likely completed all general education requirements and can enter a four-year university as a junior. In addition, those who have not earned their associate degree might have to show a higher grade point average in order to be accepted into a four-year institution.

4. **Shop around.** Even if your heart is set on a particular college or university, take the time to shop around with an open mind. Earning your degree through a community college might open doors to colleges you thought were closed to you. Many colleges offer transfer fairs on a regular basis; find out when they are and attend with a list of questions in hand. Making sure the right program is available at the school also matters. In some cases, you might be accepted to the college of your choice but not into the particular program you want to pursue. Make certain both the college and the program are suitable for you before you take the transfer leap.

5. **Look for financial aid.** Filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid is a must for any students planning to transfer their college credits. Start gathering any information you might need to complete this form long before the deadline looms. In addition, many colleges and universities set aside scholarship funds specifically for those students who transfer in from a community college. In order to determine exactly what you qualify for, the four-year school will likely need a financial aid transcript from the community college. Get the ball rolling on this as soon as you can to ensure the information is in the proper hands before the deadline.

**Be as prepared as possible for your transfer**
The importance of preparation for your transfer plans can’t be overstated. The College Board survey found that one of the biggest problems for students transferring from community college was the lack of appropriate transfer courses. Taking two years of courses only to find that several of them are not eligible for transfer can set your dreams back a year or more. Engaging an advisor and carefully planning your courses from the start might be the most important thing you can do to ensure a smooth and easy transition from community college to a four-year institution.
Stay-at-home moms & online education: Why it works

For many moms, the decision to leave the workforce to stay home and raise a family is an easy one, but that is not to say it comes without sacrifice. Taking a break from your career can put financial strain on your household and wreck havoc on your resume, not to mention your self esteem. A study presented by the American Sociological Association notes that a mom’s choice to stay home can make her feel as if her life is on hold, inciting feelings of guilt and depression.

“I know I’m lucky to stay home with my kids, but I envy my working friends sometimes,” says Michelle Brown, a stay-at-home mom in Virginia. “I know I chose to quit my job, but stir craziness and spit up can get to you after a while.”
According to the U.S. Census, stay-at-home-moms, or SAHMs in Web-lingo, also tend to be less educated than working moms, a trend that can backfire if they want (or need) to return to the workforce. The New York Times reports that in 2009, economic strife forced many such women back into the job market. Those without the right education often found themselves competing against college graduates laid off from other positions.

Fear of this scenario is forcing many moms to measure their career aspirations against their commitment to staying home with their children. Fortunately for some determined moms, online education presents a welcome compromise.

Online schools: New technology, new options

From iPhone apps that track newborn sleeping patterns to wildly active online mommy groups, today’s mothers are decidedly plugged in. This technology provides not just a means for managing life as a stay-at-home parent, but also for investing in the future. Returning to school provides some moms with a new sense of purpose, a snazzier resume and a safety net should financial disaster strike. It also provides these women with new options, no matter how chaotic their lives become.

“Online education benefited me as a mom because it allowed me to work on classes on my own time. I was able to read lecture notes when the kids went to bed or napped,” says Amy Reinagel, a SAHM pursuing an online master’s degree in public health. “It also didn’t require me to find childcare for my kids.”

Kevin Silva, former associate director of instruction technology for Chapman University, agrees. “[Online education) eliminates travel to and from campus, which saves an enormous amounts of time,” says Silva. “[It also allows students] to participate in the course and perform coursework when time is available, instead of being on a specific schedule.”

Online education may be a convenient alternative to traditional classroom instruction, but it has its challenges. Experts say that online students must be organized, motivated and prepared to work just as hard as they would in the classroom. Being a stay-at-home parent juggling mommy and household tasks can make overcoming time and motivation hurdles difficult, but it can also nurture the skills (and patience) necessary to tackle them.

Put your mom skills to work in the (virtual) classroom

Being a parent can feel like a disadvantage in a classroom filled with recent high school graduates, but the skills that are gained by managing family life can actually benefit you in an online learning environment. For instance, a knack for organization, time management and problem solving can help you overcome the challenges of managing both school and family obligations.

“Our day-to-day responsibilities can often be a distraction from any educational activity,” explains Silva. “To manage online learning, a student has to try to allocate some amount of time each day to course activities like reading, class participation, lectures and coursework.”

Student and SAHM Reinagel agrees: “I needed to be an expert time manager, otherwise I would have been so overwhelmed,” she says. “Being able to multi-task was a very important skill that has helped me to be successful in the program.”

Moms also tend to be driven, especially when it comes to tasks that will benefit their families down the road. This determination is a major plus among online students who must step away from the daily grind to study, no matter how rough their days have been.

“I am very self-motivated,” says Reinagel. “I keep reminding myself that I am doing this for my kids.”
How to stay the course without losing your marbles

Being a parent may benefit you as an online student, but managing school and family life can still be challenging, even with the convenience of online schools. In a world where being a SAHM often means having very little time to yourself, the thought of taking on more work can seem daunting. That doesn’t mean it’s an impossible feat; you just have to know how to set yourself up for success.

“Pursuing an online education is totally doable with children, but requires a great deal of… support from family,” says Reinagel. “I would also ask my professors to look at some of my work ahead of time, or give me an assignment ahead of time if I had a lot going on that week. They were all willing to help because they all wanted to see me succeed.”

5 time management tips for working students

Balancing work and school is no easy task, especially for full-time students who work more than 25 hours a week. Juggling academic demands and a busy work week takes more than dedication and determination. Careful planning can help you avoid overloading your academic and work schedules, which can lead to poor performance and less favorable grades. Avoiding outside distractions during study time can also help keep you focused on your academic work.

Staying on track: One student’s academic journey

Giselle Nichols enrolled in the University of Nevada, Reno in the 2002 fall semester as a biology major and now has just a few classes left to earn her bachelor’s degree. Throughout her academic career, Nichols worked about 20 hours a week as a barista, and for the past five years she also worked a minimum of 20 hours a week as a server and bartender at a popular restaurant chain.

Many semesters Nichols carried more than 12 units,
but that balancing act proved extremely difficult. The last few semesters she's scaled back to just nine semester units and found that her studies didn't suffer.

"Don't try to do too much in school," Nichols advises. "You don't need to take 12 or even 18 credits. Back off on your credit load and focus on doing well in those classes. If you take too much, all your classes will suffer and you will do mediocre or average work instead of doing well and getting more out of them."

Lesson 1: Don’t bite off more than you can chew in your current schedule. College is a marathon journey, not a 40-yard dash. Sprinting can expend too much energy and fail to find the finish line.

Web 101: Focus on the work at hand
Brian Mauro, Dean of Students at Fairleigh Dickinson University’s Florham campus in Madison, N.J., says students must control the amount of time they spend online. Facebooking, Tweeting and reading Wikipedia pages about your favorite bands may be fun, but it also wastes valuable study time.

“Students use computers and technology for studying all the time,” Mauro says. “It is a blessing—it helps with research and paper writing. However, it is also a curse. There are so many distractions online. Students need to manage their online time. If you are going to surf the Web, limit that time to 10 minutes.”

Lesson 2: Don’t get lost online. Make a clear distinction between study time and play time. Have a fixed goal in mind when you sit at your computer to write a paper or complete online lessons, and work as if you are on a pressing deadline.

Socialize smartly: Reign in your social activities
The social lives of full-time students who also carry a heavy workload can often take a hit, but college also provides many new opportunities to expand your social skills and make new friends. Mauro often cautions students about getting too caught up in the social aspects of college life.

Adults who are thinking of returning to college don’t face the additional social demands of participating in sorority or fraternity life, but oddly enough, Nichols says her sorority actually helped her with her studies because it became a supportive network.

“I lived in the sorority house, so I was surrounded by a group of young college women who were all doing the same thing,” she says. “We would stay up until 1 or 2 in the morning studying, and it gave me inspiration to stay awake and study. I did better in those years of school than I did in other years.”

Lesson 3: Limit your social activities. It’s one thing to show your school support by attending a football or basketball game on the weekends, and quite another to hit the college bars every weeknight.

Lesson 4: Adult students should seek out support groups. Students going through the same thing you are can help you focus on your shared coursework, as well as commiserate on the pressure you face.

Life lessons: Hard work is what life is all about
Mauro recommends students cap their workload at no more than 20 to 25 hours of gainful employment. Also, he says, try to tie in your work experiences with your career ambitions to get ahead in your field. For instance, many journalism or communications majors find employment as interns at newspapers or as associates at public relations firms or advertising agencies.

“Keep your priorities fixed and look at long-term goals,” he says. “Working now, you might have more money, but you might be sacrificing on your goals and delaying your long-term goal of graduating.”

Many adult students must work part or full-time to pay for their educations. Nichols says that without the pressures of work, she would have wrapped up her studies years ago. However, she realizes the benefits of her struggles over the years.
“People like myself have learned some amazing lessons by learning to work hard in life,” she says. “If I have kids one day, I will make them pay at least a little bit for school to make them understand the balance.”

**Lesson 5:** Figure out the right work/school balance for you and your family. Students who must work to support themselves while enrolled in school show dedication and perseverance, traits employers seek.

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5 tips for returning to school as an adult student

Over 3 million students over the age of 35 were enrolled in college courses in 2009, the U.S. Census Bureau reports. If you’re considering returning to school as an adult, get ready to join a large and growing trend, but also be sure to arm yourself with a few key skills to help you succeed. Here, two non-traditional students share their secrets of success for returning to school as adults.

**Tip 1: Create a support network**

For Karen Southall Watts, a mother of two who made the decision to go back to school to earn a master’s degree in management while dealing with a separation from her partner, self-motivation and a support network were the keys to success. “I recommend adult students build their support network and then jump in with as much confidence as they can muster,” she says.
Some schools, like California State University Fullerton, offer cohort programs where students progress through the program together—automatically building in a support network. If your dream school doesn’t offer such a program, one thing adult learners can do is look for students who share their class schedule or have similar interests and suggest they meet to study together.

**Tip 2: Make education a family affair**
In Karen’s experience, including family as an active part of her education helped to balance the load. She reached out to her children in particular, telling them that her available hours were going to shift while taking courses from home.

If you have young children, setting study time to coincide with their activities can keep everyone occupied. A bonus technique is to set up a timer with a promised treat when it buzzes so that kids will stay out of your study space for short periods of time.

**Tip 3: Conquer your high-tech fears**
“Most returning/adult students are concerned about things like rusty skills and lack of technological savvy,” Karen says. “Both of these are manageable, but sometimes the anxiety of getting started can be overwhelming.”

Support systems in some schools will stay on the phone with students when they speak with tech support representatives, making sure tech issues are understood and solved. Additionally, students who are considering online schools should look for programs that have 24 hour technical support, and should also try to talk to other students about their support experience.

**Tip 4: Get real about a budget**
Adult student Laura Mokelke left school the first time in 2003 for health reasons. She returned because she needed to support herself and pay her medical bills. While Karen used student loans to cover the cost of her education, Laura chose to balance school with a full-time job. “As an adult, you have larger financial responsibilities,” she says. “The standard of living is increased, as are the pressures of a real job during the day.”

Budgeting for education is serious business. Online budget programs like Mint.com can help you visualize where your spending habits can be found. Creating a strong budget doesn’t mean cutting out all the fun in your life, but it might mean a few less gadgets or vacations each year.

**Tip 5: Break out of your rut**
While older students enjoy the benefit of experience, they can also be limited by ingrained working and study habits. “Older students are more set in their ways,” Laura says. “Examples in the book need to be more realistic and applicable instead of broad strokes or [they] will not be able to relate to them.” Adult students would be advised to make an effort to be open-minded towards new ideas—and, potentially, much younger professors.

Returning to school older and wiser has its benefits—for starters, you’re likely more focused and goal-oriented than you were 10 or 20 years ago. “It helps to let adult students know that they often do much better than their younger counterparts,” Karen notes. Choose your own de-stressing techniques and enjoy a rich education that you might not have appreciated back when you were fresh out of high school.

**Non-traditional education at a glance**
- 3,193,000 students age 35 and over were enrolled in higher education courses in 2009 in the U.S.
- Of that, there were about twice as many women as men—1,069,000 students were male and 2,124,000 were female.
- In the 2007-08 school year, 23 percent of undergraduate students and 48.7 percent of all graduate students were 30 years old or older.
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