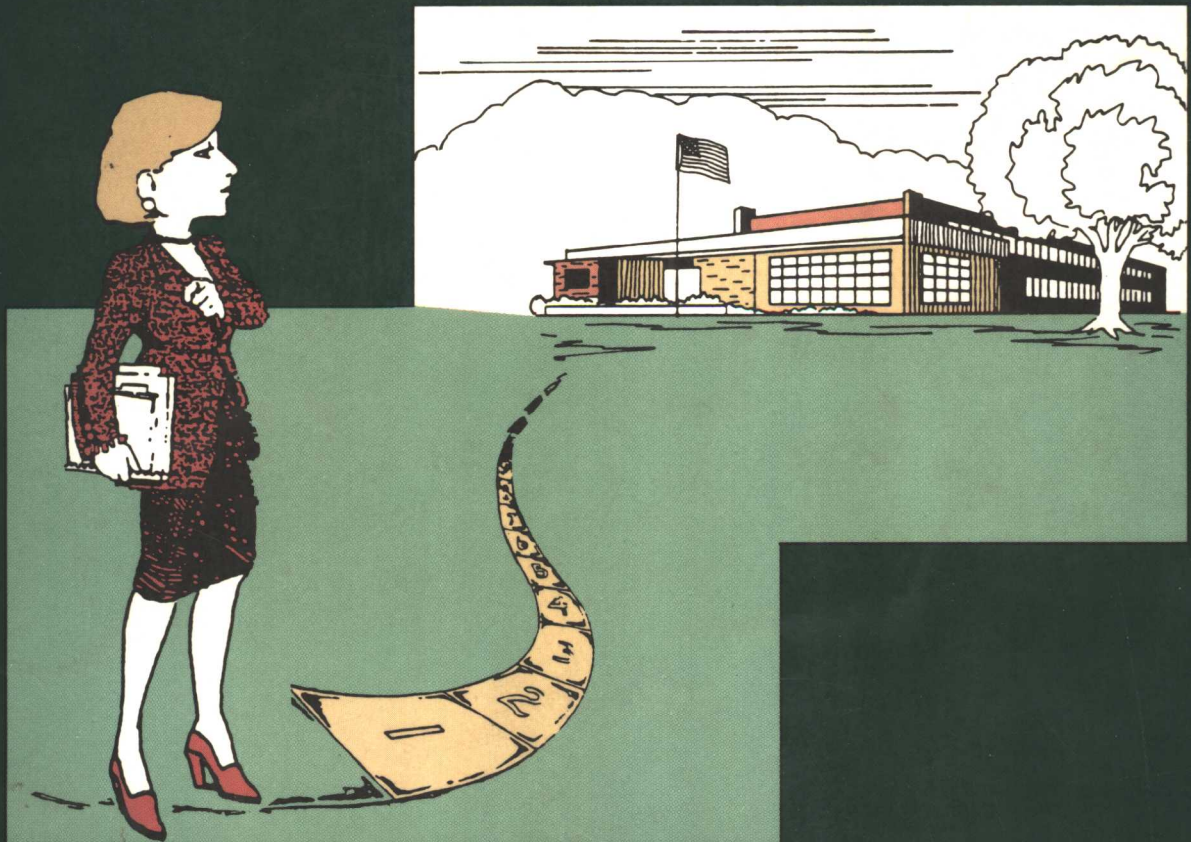


# GOING BACK TO SCHOOL

Deciding To Return

M. Diann Cassidy, Ph.D.



Examining the Reasons and Resources

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. Diann Cassidy is particularly well qualified to write about the challenges of returning to school, since she personally experienced them. As a single parent over thirty, without a high school diploma, she faced the prospect of a low-paying menial job with little chance of advancement.

In deciding to go back to school she solved the problems she writes about: day care for children, financing her education, qualifying for admission, finding the right school and program, transportation, setting reachable goals and selecting the right advisors; all those "what-ifs" that usually deter individuals from getting the education that will assure them of more rewarding jobs.

As a result of this effort, Diann is now an Organizational Communication Consultant. Her firm, CASSCOMM, works with small businesses providing communication training for employees. Other company activities include publishing company newsletters and brochures and consulting on corporate videotapes.

Diann received a B.A. in Mass Communication from the University of Central Oklahoma and a M.A. and a Ph.D. in Organizational Communication from the University of Oklahoma.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# INTRODUCTION

By picking up this book, you have shown at least a mild interest in returning to school as an adult student. You may be serious and ready to pursue your goal: Perhaps you'd like to learn to be a beautician and own a hair dressing salon or to become a registered nurse. Maybe getting an accounting degree or becoming an engineer is more your style. You may not even know what you want to learn or become, simply that you want things to be better.

No matter why you are considering going back, you will have questions about what to expect. Is it possible for you to be successful? Answering these questions is what this book is about.

*Going Back To School* is about the process of returning as an adult—from thinking about it casually, to making the decision, to doing things that must be done and then assessing your progress. These decisions and activities are necessary whatever type of schooling you decide to take. Just remember: you can reach the educational goal that is important to you.

This book is not about getting a job. It will, however, help you find people and resources when the time is right.

Part I answers some questions you may have about age, family considerations and time, educational background, and working while going to school. Part II discusses getting into school, including what to study, finding the right school, getting enrolled and what to expect during the first week of school. Part III tells you how to finish what you've started and helps you plan and reach short and long-term goals. Part IV contains indexes on special help you may need, such as child care or taking the GED.

You can succeed in school. Keep this book with you until you reach your goal. Then pass it on to someone else who is where you are today, making a decision about going back to school.



P A R T

***I***

## Deciding What's Right For You



- Should You Go Back to School?
- What If You're Too Old to Go Back to School?
- What If Your Educational Background Isn't Good Enough?
- What If Your Family Can't Cope?
- What If You Have No Money?





# SHOULD YOU GO BACK TO SCHOOL?

It could happen any time. You could be anywhere. The idea hits you: *"Maybe I should go back to school,"* you say to yourself. You reason that a good education could provide you with new skills. With new skills, you could do work that is more satisfying, more interesting and higher paying. You could have a better life.

But within seconds of developing this positive scenario, paralyzing doubts can set in.

## What-If's: Powerful Paralyzers

Adults can find powerful reasons for not returning to school. Four of the most common include age, educational background, family and time constraints, and finances. Your self-talk goes something like this:

- What if I'm too old? I might feel out of place with nineteen-year-olds.
- What if I don't have a high school diploma? Without a diploma, I probably couldn't get an education.
- My grades were so rotten in high school, I doubt any school would let me in.



## WHAT IF'S: POWERFUL PARALYZERS (continued)

- What if I *got* in and wasn't smart enough to do the work?
- What if I have no money? What if my family suffers materially because I go back to school? With my school expenses, they'd have to give up everything.
- My family needs me. It would be so selfish of me to go back to school.

The power of uncertainties can be paralyzing when the questions loom larger than the answers. It is much easier to continue doing what you are doing because then, at least, you have some control over your life. Because it is easier to do nothing, that's what many people do.

### Diffuse the Power of What-If's: Who Are You?

Discover your power to conquer uncertainty by looking at who you are and what you are made of. Begin wherever you are right now. Describe yourself by completing the following four statements:

1. My age is \_\_\_\_\_
2. My educational background includes (the highest level of education you have reached) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. My family and relationship involvement includes (children, ages, grades in school; spouse, significant other; other special circumstances)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. I will handle school finances by \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## What-If's: Obstacles or Excuses?

Even if you think that your self-description looks dismal, you can almost certainly find a way to reach your educational goal. However, three things are necessary: you must desire it deeply, you must believe strongly that getting an education is an investment in your future; and you must perceive a need for a change.

The obstacles are real, but they can be overcome. Take a closer look at the what-if's of age, educational background, family considerations and finances. Are they really stumbling blocks, or are they excuses?

### Action Guide #1

Make a list of all the reasons that caused you to think, *"Maybe I shouldn't go back to school."*

Rank your list of reasons according to their importance to you. Write a number 1 by the most important item, and so on, until you number each item. Generate as many reasons as possible.

**Assessment Question 1.** Rate your level of desire to go back to school.

Place an "X" on the line below at the appropriate place from 1 (weak desire) to 5 (a very strong desire).

\_\_\_\_\_

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Transfer your answer for Assessment Question 1 to the Back To School Assessment Form on page 29.

# WHAT IF YOU'RE TOO OLD TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL?

Many people believe that since they are not in the usual college-age group, going to school is off-limits to them. They are wrong.

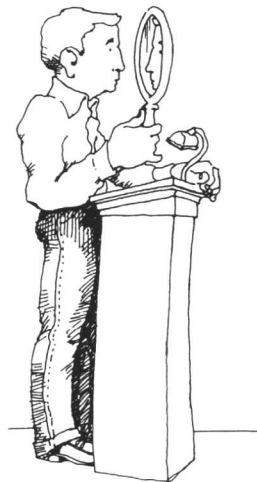
## Who's On Campus?

If you decide to return to school, you can expect to find people there who are both younger and older than you. Younger students usually attend morning or afternoon classes. Older adults usually attend evening classes because many of them work full-time jobs.

As the average age of the population increases, many schools actively recruit older students: women who interrupted their educations for families, veterans, or retirees. You are never too old to learn: Grandma Moses painted her first picture when she was 76 and had her first show at a New York City museum when she was 80. Grandma Moses painted 20 pictures during her 100th year.

## Can You Do It?

You may feel that your life is at a dead end. Your confidence or self-esteem may be shattered because of a divorce, the death of a spouse, a plant closing, or a corporate layoff. If you think that you are too old to go back to school, and if you have low self-esteem because of some situation in your life, you may be convinced that you aren't smart enough to reach your goal. You are smart enough.



You must have confidence, but it is important to be realistic. Age limitations do exist, both in educational opportunities and the job market. Some limitations are explicit, others implied. For example, medical schools generally state that they "do not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, creed, national origin, age, or handicap." However, only 5% of the almost 17,000 applicants accepted into medical school are over the age of 31.

But it can be done. After all, 5% of the medical students—850 in all—are older than 31. You could be one of them. Restricting opportunities by age is often senseless. However, restrictions do exist. Schools and employers must have sound reasoning to justify these restrictions to avoid lawsuits. Chances are that you can get the education you want, and you can earn a living using it.



**Action Guide #2**

List educational programs that might lead a nontraditional student into a labor market with no hope of employment. Call some schools and ask if their program has an age requirement or, after you complete the educational requirements, if you would find age restrictions in the job market.

**Assessment Question 2.** Select the statement that best describes your feelings about your age and returning to school.

- ☐ I feel limited by my age, because my educational choice and career field do have age limitations.
- ☐ My age might be a problem in getting the education I want or entering the career field of my choice. Or, my age might be a problem because I have not yet decided what to study or what career I will pursue.
- ☐ I do not feel limited by my age, because age considerations do not affect my educational choice and career field.

Transfer the number of your answer to the Back To School Assessment Form on page 29.

# WHAT IF YOUR EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH?

Many adults have deficiencies in their preparation for higher education. One out of every four Americans age 25 or older does not have a high-school diploma. Of those who have a diploma, fewer than half hold four-year college degrees, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. Women who maintain family households are the least likely to have a solid educational background: In this group, 44% have not graduated from high school.

## Going Back To School

If you want to, you can get back in school. If you already have a college degree, you should be able to get into almost any graduate program. If you have some college credits or a high school diploma, you should be able to get into almost any undergraduate program. If you have some high school, you can get into many technical schools, community colleges and universities. If you don't have any credentials, you can prove that you are smart enough without them. Whatever your educational background, if you want to go to school, there is a place for you.





## Getting into School Without Taking the GED

Many schools will accept students on an unclassified basis, which is sometimes referred to as special student admission or probationary admission. This means they will let you in, but not as a student seeking a specific degree. Many schools welcome students who do not have high school diplomas.

**What They Want from You.** Students admitted as unclassified are encouraged to change their status and seek a specific degree as soon as possible after their first enrollment. This is so that hours earned while in unclassified status can be transferred and counted toward the degree. If you are accepted on an unclassified basis, prove that you can do the work, and then they'll let you stay.

## If You Are Required to Take the GED

If it's required, then do it. Taking the General Education Development test adds only one small step to your program, and it will give you confidence that you can accomplish your next goal. Some students benefit from the review they get by first studying for and then taking the GED. Check out the process now and get it out of the way so you can go on to more exciting things. Appendix A lists the person to call in your state.

**What They Want from You.** Gaining entry on the basis of GED scores is similar to the unclassified status in that you are encouraged to enter the program and prove that you can do well. Some schools require that you perform quickly. Retention standards include making a certain grade point average during your first semester.

If you doubt your ability to pass the GED because of your educational background, call the GED administrator for your state. Ask this question: "I want to take the GED but I don't know if I am ready to pass the test. What should I do?" Describe your circumstances. For example, if you've been out of school for 20 years, say so. The person who answers the phone can give you guidance on what to do next.