



# Thinking Through Going Back to School

## A Worksheet from CSU OnlinePlus

*This worksheet, based on some common considerations and questions we've fielded through many years of working with students, is designed to help you evaluate which goals, resources, and degree programs are right for you.*

### Step 1: Identify Your Objectives – What Do You Want to Accomplish?

Start by asking yourself these questions:

*“What do I hope to gain from returning to school?”*

*“What do I want the result of my studies to be?”*

Next are some of the most common reasons people return to school. Select the statements that are most relevant to you (or add your own), then rank your selections.

**I want:**

- To make more money
- To enter a field with more job opportunities/higher demand
- A new job because I lost my old one
- To learn new skills to stay marketable
- To complete a degree I already started
- A promotion/to move up in my current career
- To learn more about an area of interest
- To do work that will make me happy
- To turn my passion into a career
- To make a difference in the world
- More mental stimulation
- A more interesting career
- To go to school for personal fulfillment

## Step 2: Choose the Type of Program to Pursue

Below are overviews of common higher education options. Circle the statements that resonate with your goals, then identify the course of study from which you selected the most statements.

**Courses only:** Taking classes “a la carte” can help you in a number of ways, including:

- Getting into the habit of being a student
- Discovering new interests and talents
- Deciding whether to continue studying a certain subject
- Earning credits that you can possibly transfer to a degree or certificate program

**Certificate program:** Usually consisting of three to six courses, certificate programs can be an excellent option if you're interested in:

- Getting a more in-depth introduction to a subject area
- Learning new skills in a short amount of time
- Earning new credentials (to get started pursuing a new field)
- Boosting your current credentials (to get a raise or promotion)

**Associate's degree:** Generally consisting of 60 credits, associate's degrees are a popular choice for people interested in:

- Earning the minimum credentials necessary for certain medical and technical jobs
- Possibly transferring credits to earn a bachelor's degree later down the road
- Spending less money on school in order to gain a credential

**Bachelor's degree:** Bachelor's degrees usually require about 120 credits in order to graduate. You may want to pursue a bachelor's if you're interested in:

- Meeting minimum qualifications for a vast number of professions
- Gaining a well-rounded education beyond just your area of focus
- Receiving the necessary education to enter a new field
- Making more money than people without a degree

**Graduate/Professional degree:** You must already have at least a bachelor's degree to pursue graduate school. If you already have a bachelor's, your options are broad. Your objectives should guide what kind of program you pursue, but you should also think about how long you want to be in school. A master's degree requires approximately 30 credits and the completion of a thesis (there are some coursework-only programs). A Ph.D. program can range from 60 to 120 credits, plus comprehensive exams and the completion of a dissertation. Other professional degrees can vary in length from approximately 1 to 5 years. Graduate and professional degrees take a lot of commitment, but are worth undertaking if you're interested in:

- Significantly boosting your credentials in your field
- Qualifying for higher-level leadership positions
- Earning significantly more money in some fields
- Teaching at the college level
- Conducting research

### Step 3: Start Searching for Schools

Now you're ready to look for your ideal school and program. Begin your research with some simple online searches about:

- Top schools for your field of interest
- Schools in your geographic region with programs in your field of interest
- Schools with online or distance programs in your field of interest
- "Best value" schools that cover your field of interest

List the schools/programs that appear to be good fits for your needs (only list schools you know will be feasible for you to afford, and for you to attend in-person or virtually):

Next, consider the following for each school:

*What is the school's accreditation?*

*Who are the faculty in the program I'm considering? What are their credentials (e.g. field experience, published research)?*

*Is the school/program highly ranked? (You may need to search rankings)*

*Do I meet the minimum qualifications for the program?*

*Can I transfer some of my existing credits? (If you have any)*

*How much does tuition cost per semester?*

*When is the deadline for applications? Can I feasibly meet it? Or am I okay with waiting until the next application cycle?*

**Once you've answered the questions for each school/program, identify which of these elements are most important to you. Which school(s)/program(s) have the most positive qualities?**

List them below:

## Step 4: Consider How Returning to School Will Impact You Personally

Going back to school can impact two significant elements of your life: your finances and your personal time. Begin evaluating the financial elements by answering the following questions:

*“How much can I afford to pay up front?”*

*“How much money am I willing to borrow?”*

*“Do I know of any ways to get financial assistance?”*

*Does my employer offer tuition reimbursement?*

*What kinds of scholarships or grants might I be eligible for?*

Next, think about how you will fit schoolwork into your everyday routine. Consider the following:

*How much time can I devote to my classes each day? Each week?*

*(The general guideline is that you should plan two to three hours of study and homework time a week per credit hour taken.)*

*Who can serve as my “support system”?*

*Who can help me cover day-to-day responsibilities (e.g. family, house, pets)?*

*Who can offer me emotional support when I’m stressed?*

*What extracurricular activities will be impacted if I go to school?*

*Am I willing to reallocate my time from other activities to my studies?*

Take some time to reevaluate your answers in this worksheet. Show it to family and friends, and let them help you decide which choices would be right for you. Once you feel confident in your decisions, it is time to start applying.

*Best of luck from all of us here at OnlinePlus!*