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MAKING THE GRADE — The pleasures and challenges of returning to school as an adult

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Adults going back to school is not a new phenomenon. And since the new millennium, adults are finding that it is getting even easier to return to school. With the wealth of online courses, and the plethora of community colleges offering certificate or vocational training programs from culinary arts to graphic design, the joys of returning to school to enhance knowledge has never been easier.

Statistics show that students age 35 and older have risen from 823,000 in 1970 to approximately 2.9 million in 2001 (according to the National Center for Education Statistics). “You are never too old to go back to school,” says Julia Padawer, career Coach of Dharma Coaching. “People often hesitate once they’ve hit thirty because they think they’ve missed their window of opportunity.

That’s absolutely not true. If you believe it you can achieve — you can make a career transition at any age.”

More and more colleges and universities are catering their programs around adults returning back to school by becoming more accessible to the public. Satellite campuses for major universities are popping up in neighboring cities and suburbs so that working students can complete accelerated programs on the weekends or in the evenings. In addition, students can complete their degree program on the internet or through computer multi-media,

correspondence courses or broadcast television. Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) show nearly four million students taking college courses through distance education. Nina Withrington, a 31 year old Physical Therapist, says "I returned to school because of the convenience of gaining an out of state advanced degree online, without the hassle of having to move or change jobs."

How do returning students balance the responsibility of family and career with education? Adults returning to school are typically working professionals, with family obligations, personal commitments and other responsibilities. With all of these things called "life" on your plate, there are some basic concerns and pressure that go with deciding whether to go back to school. Time management is a big concern for someone returning to school, especially if they are working full time, have a significant other and children, and want to maintain their social life/active in your community. Financial obligations can also be a concern with the cost of living skyrocketing, coupled with tuition and books.

Ah, but then there are the pleasures of returning to school. There are many people that find enhancing their knowledge with new ideas, concepts, and strategies simply pleasurable. With the constant evolution and expansion of technology, people being on top of the new information in their field can be personally, professionally and financially rewarding. And, let's not forget how convenient schools are making it for adults to return. You can forget about worrying about a babysitter or making dinner when you can read your class lecture over the internet. There is no fussing over the time and energy it takes to fight Los Angeles traffic, when you can pop in a video or CD of your class lecture in the comfort of your own living room. Can it get any easier than this?

When life coaching a client who is contemplating a return to campus, I have them consider the following:

- Is going back to school necessary for professional growth or advancement in your career? If so, are the programs in consideration a good match for you? Tip: Check out www.edu-directory.org for a listing of colleges in your area or www.EarnMyDegree.com for a listing of online educational degrees.
- Are you able to accommodate attending or listening to classes, studying for tests, and writing papers in your busy schedule? Tip: Create a weekly schedule and include your daily routine. Then, block out time anticipated for schooling.
- Find out the school's financial commitment, then research financial aide opportunities, starting with your school's financial adviser first. Tip: Research the internet and public library for access to a wide variety of current scholarships, grants and financial aide. The search can be very time consuming, but if you are serious about finding alternative means for money, remember that the time you invest should payoff in the long run. Check out www.fastweb.com or www.scholarships.com for funding resources.
- Find out if your current or new job will reimburse for tuition. If not, consider that it may be negotiable and speak with the appropriate person.
- If you have family obligations and responsibilities, discuss with your family specific ways to help support one another during the school term.

Phyllis Francis, M.A. is a Professional Life Coach specializing in one-on-one personal life, executive, and group coaching through her company Stop Talk Coaching. Visit www.stoptalk.net or call 310.995.3101 to learn more about Stop Talk Coaching. Stop Talking about the life you have always wanted and Live Your Life Out Loud!