
This topic is one of several in Access Group's WiseBorrower® Education Series.

Thinking About Going Back to School?

Some things to consider

So you're thinking about going back to school to get an advanced degree. You may be wondering if this is a good idea given the current economy. Answering a few questions can help you determine if **now** is the right time for you to go back to school.

Why do you want an advanced degree?

Now may be a very good time to go back to school. Obtaining a graduate or professional degree can be an important investment in yourself and in your future. Maybe you're going back to school because you want a new career or possibly you just want to increase your skills in your present field. Perhaps you're going back to school because you can't find a job that matches your current skills or interests. Whatever the case, it's a good idea to identify the reasons why you want to do it and to write them down. Then you can evaluate the benefits and costs of furthering your education.

Be certain that the benefits of returning to school outweigh the costs. If after reviewing both the benefits and costs you're not certain that you'll be better off, then it may be wise to re-evaluate if going back to school is the best choice right now. At that point, it might be good to talk to people in the program of study you want to pursue at the school(s) you're thinking of attending. Whether they're students, faculty, admissions staff, or other professionals at the school, they may be able to help you clarify what is best for you.

You also should explore the status of current employment opportunities in your desired field. Even if the job market is strong now, there are no guarantees that it will provide good job prospects when you're ready to enter that market, but it certainly can help you evaluate the merits of pursuing your educational objectives if they're job-related. On the other hand, if current prospects are limited, you may want to talk with career planning staff in that field in order to better assess future employment opportunities. Also, check out the Web sites of any professional organizations affiliated with your planned career/profession and other employment/salary sites.

What will you have to give up to go back to school?

Whether you're thinking about obtaining an advanced degree or certificate, or you just want to complete some additional coursework, you'll be making an investment of both time and money. If you're currently working, will you continue working and earning the same salary while you're in school? Or, will you have to reduce your hours or quit your job altogether in order to pursue your educational goals? If you do, you'll be giving up at least a portion of your current income. However, what you're giving up may be worthwhile to you if the education you're pursuing will provide for greater earnings and/or a more personally rewarding career.

What will it cost?

The cost of your education is all about choice and how you pay for those choices. Tuition expenses depend on the degree program you choose to pursue and the school you choose to attend, as well as how long it takes you to complete your program of study. It also depends on your lifestyle choices as a student, such as housing, food, clothing, transportation, entertainment, etc.

Financing options influence what you'll pay, as well. There are three general financing options available if you or your family can't pay the full cost: (1) grants/scholarships, (2) loans, and (3) work study. The sources of these funding options include federal and state governments; the school you attend; banks and other lending organizations; and private foundations, civic organizations, and other associations. In addition, assistantships and fellowships may be available from the school you attend, particularly if you're pursuing a Master of Arts (M.A.), Master of Science (M.S.), or Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree.

Student loans are the most common and abundant source of funding available for many students. Remember, however, the resulting interest charges on loans will add to the overall cost of your education.

You must satisfy all of the following criteria to participate in the federal student loan and work study programs:

- *Enrolled at least halftime at an eligible institution pursuing a degree or certificate.*
- *U.S. citizen or eligible non-citizen (e.g., permanent resident) with a valid U.S. Social Security number.*
- *Not currently be in default on any prior federal student loans, nor owe a refund on a federal grant program.*
- *Registered for Selective Service (males only).*

Private student loan programs typically require that you satisfy the above federal eligibility criteria. They usually also require that you don't have credit problems. The Federal PLUS Loan program, which is now available to graduate and professional students, also requires that you do not have adverse credit. Consequently, it's a good idea that you review copies of your credit report from each of the three national credit reporting agencies well before you apply for any private student loans to ensure no errors exist. You can obtain a free copy of your credit report every 12 months from each of the three national credit reporting agencies (Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion) at www.AnnualCreditReport.com.

It's important that you contact the financial aid office at the school(s) you're considering if you will need financial assistance paying for school. If you're an international student, please note that there currently are no federal financial aid programs available to you, but there may be private student loan programs. Contact the financial aid staff at the school you want to attend for more information.

In making your decision, remember . . .

Your education is an important key to your financial future and to your success. Expanding your education by going back to school can add to that success. Answering the questions posed here should help you make a responsible, well informed, decision about what is right for you. You should take care that the costs of furthering your education will be exceeded by the benefits you'll receive once you've finished.