



Education Guide #2

Alternative Approaches to Further Education

Most working people find it difficult to further their education due to time and financial constraints. Work and family responsibilities often prevent adult learners from attending traditional college and in-person courses that meet at regularly scheduled times. This guide covers other means of taking courses or gaining college credit by:

- Providing information regarding alternative methods.
- Helping create a plan and an environment to support you as an adult learner.

Returning to School

When adults are asked what they think of when faced with the prospect of returning to school they often react with one or more of the following:

- I don't have time to attend classes.
- What should I study?
- Classes won't fit with my work schedule.
- I'd have to go to school forever to get a degree!
- I'm too old to go back to school.

All are legitimate concerns for you as an adult learner. Alternative types of study may help you overcome these barriers.

Why Alternative Study?

Students who pursue traditional study receive college credit by taking classes and passing exams. Those who pursue alternative methods of study earn credit in a variety of ways. **These methods have real advantages for many adult students since they often:**

- Have varied and flexible schedules.
- Document prior learning for credit.
- Allow a degree to be completed more quickly.

One important thing to remember is that alternative study is most helpful for independent learners, but less appropriate for students who require a more structured classroom setting to succeed. If you are not well organized and find that you constantly procrastinate, then alternative study is probably not for you.



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Alternative Approaches – Course Work

Online Learning – Online Learning is education pursued at a distance from an institution. It involves significant independent study. Your courses are accessible through online learning platforms on your desktop computer, laptop, or phone. You will generally use phone, email, or the messaging system via the online platform to maintain contact with your instructor or tutor.

Many colleges and universities offer online courses. These are full credit bearing classes in which all course materials (syllabus, course outline, assignments, and textbooks) are accessed online and work is completed on your own schedule.

Most online programs have deadlines for registering, as well as course completion. There may be tutors or instructors available by phone, email, or web chat for consultation purposes. Some of the most widely used programs are SUNY Empire State College (www.esc.edu) and the Open SUNY (www.explore.suny.edu) online courses and degrees.

Another private, non-profit institution that offers online education is Excelsior College (www.excelsior.edu). The college combines its own online courses with your previous college credits to create a more customized program to help you move more swiftly towards your goal.

You can also go to the website of the college of your choice to see if they offer online courses and degrees. Additional resources for information about online degree programs are listed on the last page of this guide.

Independent Study – Independent Study is an individualized instructional program. The courses require the same amount of work as traditional college courses and you earn the same amount of credit. The courses are usually graded using the same standards as an on-campus course. You and your instructor will generally agree upon a specialized topic to research for an agreed upon number of academic credits. You learn the material independently with guidance from the instructor. There are no scheduled classes. Instead, you and the instructor arrange the times to meet. Many colleges and universities offer an independent study option. If you are interested, you should inquire with your school advisor, an instructor, or the chair of your degree program.

Diploma Mills – **Caution!** Diploma mills are schools that are more interested in taking your money than providing you with a quality education. These types of schools award fraudulent academic degrees and diplomas with substandard or no academic study, and without academic approval by officially recognized educational accrediting bodies or qualified government agencies. Be sure to review the accreditation of a school you are interested in to make sure it is a legitimate institution. You can get more information on Degree Mills by visiting: <https://www.geteducated.com/college-degree-mills-what-they-are-a-how-they-work/>

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Alternative Approaches - Earning Credit

Credit-by-Examination Programs – Many colleges can award you credit toward your degree on the basis of scores received through credit-by-examination programs. These programs offer exams in general areas covered during the first two years of college and in specific subject areas. Every college has its own policies on accepting credits for exams. It is essential that you speak with an advisor or the registrar at your college to find out which credit-by-examination programs are accepted before you sign up for any exams. You wouldn't want to go through the effort of studying and passing an exam, only to find out that your college does not accept credit-by-examination programs. The following is a list of some of the established credit-by-examination programs for you to explore once you have discussed this with your college advisor.

- **UExcel** - Credit by Exam (www.excelsior.edu/exams/)
- **College-Level Examination Program** - CLEP (www.collegeboard.org)
- **DANTES Subject Standardized Test- Formerly** - DSST (www.getcollegecredit.com)
- **The Thomas Edison State College Examination Program** - TECEP (www.tesc.edu)

You can find more descriptive information about these exams from the Partnership's Education Guide Number 3: Credit-By-Examination Programs.

Evaluation of Prior Learning

Prior learning is any information, education, or experience that can be documented by using a portfolio, or can be assessed through examination. Time on the job does not automatically translate to college credit. Any experience that you may have must be documented before an institution will grant you credit. **The following are ways to document prior learning:**

- **Training Program Assessment** – The National College Credit Recommendation Service evaluates courses and training programs sponsored by corporations, unions, and the armed services, and issues program guides that recommend credit for those deemed equivalent to college courses. See more at www.nationalccrs.org.
- **Portfolio Assessment** – Many colleges offer students the opportunity to create a written compilation of prior learning experience. This documentation is usually called a portfolio and may be evaluated by a faculty member to determine if credits can be granted for prior learning. The portfolio may include autobiographical information, statements about the type, method and length of your learning experiences, and examples of work completed during those experiences. Some colleges offer a portfolio course that serves as an aid to creating a portfolio for later evaluation. Contact your school advisor if you are interested in this form of study.

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Barriers to Pursuing Further Education

There are many obstacles you may encounter upon returning to school. Some may be external, such as lack of time, money, or support from family, friends, or supervisors. Others are more internal, such as lack of focus or feeling unable to succeed in an academic world. To counteract these barriers, it is important to find ways of getting support.

Creating Support

Calling on support from family, friends, and co-workers gives you the reassurance that you need when engaged in educational endeavors. Most colleges have academic support services and resources available to assist students. Tutors can offer you assistance with both assignments and getting organized. Refer to your school for more information on this type of service.

Your academic advisor is another resource as well as the college's Counseling Center. The Partnership also has advisors who are available to advise and support you through the process of continuing your education. You can contact Partnership Advisors at (800) 253-4332; press option one.

It is sometimes helpful to sit down and write a list of barriers that you might encounter. You can review the list with family, friends, co-workers, or a Partnership advisor and enlist their help in overcoming the barriers. Creating this supportive atmosphere encourages you to stay with your studies.

Blending

With all the different methods of taking courses and earning credit, many students combine several different strategies in continuing their education. People often blend traditional courses, online learning, credit-by-examination, and an evaluation of prior learning to earn a degree. The different methods you use depend on what you are comfortable doing. Caution – make sure that any courses you take from schools, other than your degree institution, will transfer to your particular college and degree program. Research this before you take the courses, not after.

Being an Effective Consumer of Educational Services

There are many things to consider when deciding on education programs. It is important to research options, ask questions, and compare the different methods of pursuing further education. For more information, please refer to the Partnership's Education Guide No. 1 Returning to Learning: Guide to Sound Decision Making.

Additional Resources for Alternative Education

www.degreesearch.org

www.geteducated.com

www.earnmydegree.com