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Too Old for School?

Back To School Mid-Life Success Stories

By [Sally Kane](#), About.com Guide

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Are you contemplating furthering your education but think you're too old for school? Many would-be students age 35 and older see age as an obstacle to [furthering their education](#). The collection of personal stories below outlines the challenges and victories of returning to school later in life. As these stories show, you're never too old for school.

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Brenda Echols

Back to School Age: 58
Degree: Master's in Nursing Management/Leadership

A True Survivor

At age 58, Brenda returned to school in the fall of 2009 for her master's in nursing management/leadership degree with Western Governors University, a nonprofit online university designed for working adults looking to earn a bachelor's or master's degree. She was, and still is, the only person in her family with an advanced degree. Here's what she had to say about her

journey to a masters degree as an older student:

I wanted to get an advanced degree for self-improvement to better equip myself with the tools I needed to remain current in the field. My biggest challenge was overcoming breast cancer while working on my degree. It almost took me out of school, but when I thought about it and talked it over, I decided to hold on and hold out as strong as I could.

I did it at almost 60 years old and I believe others can too, as long as they believe. It's never too late to believe, it is never too late to dream. Being a student helped me maintain my focus during my challenges; my dream sustained me along with family and friends. I never missed a beat.

Today I celebrate life: I am cancer-free, I am a survivor and I am a master's degree recipient.

Sarah Kelly

Back to School Age: 47

Degree: Cosmetology License

Career Change: Banking to Salon owner

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I Found My Dream Job

My name is Sarah Kelly and I'll be 50 in July. I went back to school at 47 years old. I resigned from my job at Wells Fargo Bank in May of 2009, took a summer break then entered the Aveda Institute,

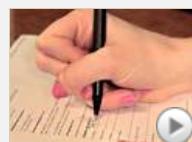
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Minneapolis to get my cosmetology license in October of the same year. I received my bachelor's degree in Economics from the University of Minnesota back in 1990.

It's not exactly graduate school, but I've opened a salon and have had a very successful shop for a couple years now. I've been so much happier in my new vocation. It's my dream job and it's absolutely what I was meant to do.

Too old for school? Absolutely not! I was anxious about going to school with kids one quarter to one half my age. But I was also a more dedicated and serious student. I was motivated to lose weight (it is the beauty industry after all). I worked out every day (P90X – the ab and core exercises turned out to be crucial to my work). You can't have chicken arms when you're standing next to [20 somethings!](#)

I worried for nothing. The kids were gracious and respectful. A lot of them called me Mom. I was their surrogate mom away from home. I was flattered when they asked me for advice. I was gratified that they accepted me in their lives. I was floored they asked me to speak at our graduation. It was very flattering.

Tips to prepare for returning to school:

1. [Do your homework](#), before, during and after your schooling. Be prepared, but you have no one to impress but yourself (and your instructors).
 2. Be supportive of your classmates. They're probably young and this really is their first rodeo. Help them out, but only if they ask.
 3. Don't judge. Everyone already does, don't add to their burden.
 4. Keep an open mind, everyone has something to teach you.
-

Theresa Cardamone

Back to school Age: 55

Degree: B.A. in International Studies

It's Never too Late to Pursue Your Education

As a 55-year old freshman with zero college credits, I had a steep road ahead of me when I enrolled at NYU-SCPS last fall. There was a 38-year gap since my last formal schooling. I had no SAT scores. But I did have decades of life experience to draw on which provided me with a strong foundation for academic success.

I'd been business manager/outreach coordinator for a prominent children's theatre, developed and managed a world-class Arabian horse farm, been heavily endorsed as a candidate for the Seattle School Board, lobbied the Washington State legislature on education issues, and ridden across the USA on the Bicentennial Wagon Train. I could drive a semi, clean a stall and/or entertain a sitting President of the United States. But only one year ago, I could not secure a minimum wage job. I was being screened out because I had no degree. That ends here.

My B.A. concentration in International Studies will bring my [resume up-to-date](#) and I will maximize my earning potential for the rest of my productive life. I hold a 4.0 GPA, am on the Dean's list, and was just elected vice-president of my school's undergraduate student council. Has it been challenging? Yes. Worthwhile? Hell, yes. It helps that my personal standards are in sync with the university's high bar. I was just notified that I have received one national scholarship, and have hopes for more. I am living proof that it is never too late to effectively pursue your education.

Frank Anthony Polito

Back to School Age: 36

Degree: MFA in Dramatic Writing

Career Change: Actor to Writer

Second Oldest in the Class

My name is Frank Anthony Polito. In 2006, I received my MFA in Dramatic Writing from Carnegie Mellon University at the age of 36, after pursuing a career as an actor in New York City for the previous 11 years.

Out of the group of writers studying in the program, I was the second oldest. There were indeed challenges, like spending five to eight hours each day in a classroom after being out of school for over a decade. Sometimes the teachers would talk down to us, as most of the other students were right out of undergrad, and they would treat us like children. Often times, I had to remind them that I'd already lived in "the real world."

Alas, I've not done much dramatic writing since graduation, but I have taken the [skills](#) I learned to begin a career as a novelist. To date, I've published four books, the most recent being a novel called Lost in the '90s that I self-published under my own imprint.

In terms of tips for older students, I'd say that you should treat the younger students as your peers. Some of them will act as if they have all the answers, so try to remember how grown up you felt at the age of 20 or 21. You might even find that some of your teachers are younger than you, and you need to give them just as much respect, if not more. They are the ones who will be grading your work, after all.

Debbie McDonald
Back to School Age: 58
Degree: Medical Billing & Coding
Former Occupation: Small business owner

School Internship Led to Job

At 58, Debbie McDonald had reservations about going back to school, especially knowing she would be older than her classmates and likely even older than her instructors. But after owning several small businesses, including a children's consignment store and an RV service and repair shop, the Western New York resident found herself unemployed and looking for a more stable position. She knew that the healthcare field was growing so decided to enroll in Bryant & Stratton College Online's medical administration for billing and coding degree program.

One of Debbie's first class assignments was to interview someone who worked in medical billing and coding. Her doctor's office referred her to the company they used and Debbie made the call. That one call proved to be a game-changer for Debbie. Not only did she complete the class assignment, but when she was searching for an [internship](#) a few months later, Debbie reached back out to the same company and they created a position for her. Debbie's efforts continued to pay off and she was eventually hired for a full-time position at the company.

Of going back to school, Debbie says: "You just have to keep going and put yourself out there to other people because you'll never know what comes back to you when you do. When you get older, you kind of lose some of your memory and mind, but [going back to school] really proved to me that you're never too old to learn."

Nancy B. Irwin, PsyD, C.Ht.
Back to School Age: 44
Degree: Doctorate in Clinical Psychology
Career Change: Stand-Up Comic to Psychotherapy/Clinical Hypnosis, Speaker/Author

From Stand-Up Comic to Sexual Abuse Recovery Expert

I returned to school at age 44 to earn my doctorate in clinical psychology. Theretofore, I was a stand-up comic. I was bored only working 30 minutes a day, and started volunteering at a shelter for sexually abused teens. It was an absolute epiphany for me. I fell in love with it; it waked up the healer in me and voila, now I'm an expert in sexual abuse recovery and prevention. I treat sex offenders as well as victims, for it is my belief that the best way to help victims is to help the perpetrators.

I went on to write the self-help, non-fiction Your-Turn: Changing Direction in Midlife (Amazon, 2008), which is a collection of over 40 stories of people over 40 who made positive transitions in their professional and/or personal lives.

It's never too late to create a life you love. You must be prepared to hear, "How old will you be when you finish?" a number of times. I learned to answer this one with a quip, "The same age I'll be if I don't finish!"

Yvonne Conte
Back to School Age: 45
Career Change: Sales Person to Motivational Keynote Speaker/Author
Monroe Community College, Rochester NY

Getting a Degree Changed My Life

Getting a degree changed my entire life. When I lost my sales job due to a corporate merger, I could not find work. Very quickly I could not pay my bills and lost my home to the bank.

Financially, I was ruined. I was 45 years old with only a high school education. I felt defeated and lost.

I enrolled full time as a communications major not really knowing what I would do with that degree. In my classes I learned to work a TV camera, write scripts and run a radio station. However, what I really learned was how to research, interact, write and network. And because I graduated with a 3.85 GPA, for the first time in my life, I had confidence. To me, that belief in myself was worth the price of tuition.

At local businesses, I began teaching classes about writing, stand-up comedy and acting. Eventually I began to speak for local businesses and within one year after graduation I was a full-time keynote speaker and a published author. Currently I am a six-time published author and deliver 50-60 keynotes a year all over the U.S. None of that would have happened had I not attended college. The most important part of going back to school for me was gaining confidence and realizing that I had talents and abilities.

Rhoda Weiss

Back to School Age: 50+

Degree: Ph.D. in Leadership and Change

I Would Do It All Over Again

Recently, I received my Ph.D. in Leadership and Change, some 30 years after receiving my master's degree. Many friends and colleagues questioned why I would do this. After all, I had a successful career and did not need my Ph.D. to advance. It was, however, something I always wanted to do for myself, a personal goal. It was certainly not easy. It took a good seven years to complete, all the while keeping up my work schedule (national speaking and consulting), my leadership commitments (national chair & CEO of the 32,000-member Public Relations Society of America) and many other commitments as well as a steep bill to pay (there goes the retirement saving) and humongous "homework" assignments.

What helped me was the fact that it was a high-residency program (it met throughout the year for determined periods of time), the fact that half my cohorts were over 50 and also that I listened to older graduates who had been through it. What really got me through the program were:

- Amazing advisors and professors (all highly tenured and experienced that came to this very special program)
- Terrific fellow students (three of us had a weekly conference call – one was the treasurer of a large multi-national, the other acting president of a university)
- Excitement over the curriculum and projects and a dissertation that was fascinating (although not my original intent).

Most importantly, I learned a great deal more about leadership (even though I had led a number of organizations), organizational change, quantitative and qualitative research and so much more.

A few tips: to save some money, I was able to take some of the assigned books out of the library. Also, you need friends in and outside the program to support you emotionally. And, yes, I'd advise everyone to do it and would likely do it again.

Kami Evans

Back to School Age: 41

Career Change: Headhunter to Holistic Health Coach

A More Fulfilling Path

As a successful headhunter with my own agency supporting the technology and financial services sectors, the writing was on the wall. I was a person who flew to nine countries in three weeks when I was only 29. I thought I was a rock star, so much so that I even had the audacity to fly the concord to England because I couldn't be bothered with first class. I thought money grew on trees and it was just going to be in abundance for the future. I made enormous investments at my local places of worship: Christian Dior and Luis Vuitton. Of course, I never got a return on my investments; post-baby I went up a size never to be seen again and my shoes also joined the increase. But I still have a collection of purses to be enjoyed.

So I did the usual marriage, mommy and the becoming a yoga teacher thing. I loved what I learned and shared knowledge but I wondered what else I could do. I came to the realization that I am 41 and have skills in yoga, social networking and a bit of branding. I thought why not. So I dabbled in fundraising and development but that was not a good fit and the money was not the same. Since I still have the entrepreneurial spirit. I thought I'd become a holistic

health coach.

I felt that the program offered at the Institute of Integrative Nutrition ticked all the boxes. Learning is all online, support is via website and iPad (that you get when you pass the registration process) also it gives me the [flexibility to work from home](#) and hopefully help others and network with like-minded people. In September, I get to practice what I preach and by March I will be a graduate.

Needless to say, many of my peers are also mindful and living a [greener life](#) so I hope I can get those who don't to jump on the bandwagon. This is a far cry from the concord days but it sure feels more fulfilling.

Andrew Yearde
Degree: B.A. in Economics from NYU

Returning to School Is Worth It

In fall of 2008, a small consulting company called CBAY Analytics I started with a partner ceased operation. We had trouble finding clients and unaware we were in the midst of one of the greatest economic downturns. I financed the business with all my savings, as many small business owners do and deferred taking salaries, so when the lights went out I was left without unemployment compensation. Part of the trouble I was having in selling myself to other employers was that I did not have a college degree. In my career as a treasurer and guru at managing asset-backed commercial paper programs (ABCP), which is a segment of the structured finance sector, I managed individuals with MBAs and other advanced degrees. It took 15 years to process my green card and citizenship, so I put off college and worked hard. In summer 2008, I researched two universities, and the NYU-SCPS program admission individuals were the most receptive and offered a more comprehensive program for the adult student.

Initially, I had no money and no source of the tuition, so I managed to obtain a private student loan to cover the first semester. In the subsequent years, I was able to obtain financial aid, scholarships and subsidized loans. Ultimately, the assistance I received may cover half of the total cost. I do not know the exact amount of the overall financial burden yet, but it may be somewhere around \$60 -70,000.

The obstacle was difficulty; however, it pales in comparison to the emotional drag life places on you. In January 2009, when I came home from class I discovered the lock on my apartment was changed. My wife decided she wanted a divorce. I still don't really know why, though unemployed I was aggressive and persistent in looking for work. I made hundreds of applications and at night I attend classes. In the days after that traumatic event I slept in my car in winter cold, used the school gym's facilities, and kept on attending classes.

A few months later, I was told by a [judge](#) in at a child support hearing that I have the capacity to earn over \$168,000 per year based on my earnings in 2004 and 2005. I finally received employment in summer 2010, with Amazon.com at the lowest level as a warehouse worker. In the past two years, I received two promotions, but my day typically starts at 6 a.m. At 4 p.m., I drive a hundred miles to New York City, then sit in class for three hours and arrive home near 11:30. Anyone deciding to return to school and having to hold down a full time job must buy stocks in a coffee company, because there will be nights you will not have much sleep trying to meet paper deadlines.

My employer does not reimburse tuition, but they approve time off if I need it, so as long as the work gets done. This may be oxymoronic, but adult students have to balance both demands. Another advice is to be weary of [choosing online classes](#), the time demands and the [stress](#) of being permanently on the grid (Internet) is great. Another bit of advice, where I may get in trouble here is, do not rush out to buy the expensive textbooks. I have bought the previous versions for pennies on the dollar and they work fine. There were classes I did not even bother to buy the text books and used the online resources of the school library and the Internet.

The best advice I have is to avoid stressful relationships and ask for help. At time you may want someone to review a paper, to interview for an assignment, ask their opinions etc. In fact, if you have a significant other that will help with the children and housework helps significantly.

Is it worth it definitely! You just become more efficient and that is not lost in the work place. The sense of confidence, introspection and pride from doing it is priceless. Going back to school is serious decision and adults should weight the cost benefit, i.e. how much more will you earn for the remainder of your work life vs. the cost. How much do you value being able to in an exclusive club, where your chances of being employed is always greater than those without a degree?

Also, do not underestimate the value of family pride. Expect to lose key friends and family members during the journey, but the ones they are replaced with will be invaluable. This may seem corny, but to successful at the outset prospective adults must be focused, determined and resourceful in order to succeed. I will graduate from NYU with Honors in three weeks with a BA concentrating in Economics. I will also be the convocation speaker for my college.

Chris Tobias
Back to School Age: 42
Director of Educational Excitement

An Unexpected Outcome

I returned to school at age 42 as a [layoff loomed](#) at my company. While the layoff, thankfully, passed me by I went ahead and took the opportunity to get the education I had always wanted but never felt permission to get as a younger person. If age has taught me anything it has taught me that you never know what is coming next. So why not study the topics that excite you? Perhaps your passions will lead you to something unexpected. Something better than you thought possible.

As a returning older student, I quickly discovered that I lacked the skills to handle a heavy load of school work along full time employment. Fortunately my business background helped me to quickly research academic success tools and create a hands-on set of techniques for efficient, enjoyable school success.

101 Secrets to Passing Any Test.

When I first heard news of my company's [planned layoff](#), I had no idea what was next for me. Today I am having a wonderful time helping other students, young and old, succeed in school. It was a wonderfully unexpected outcome.

Elizabeth Venturini
Back to School Age: 50+
Career Change: Marketing to College Career Strategist

Do Something You're Passionate About

My name is Elizabeth Venturini. I am a 50+ year old, 2010 graduate of UCLA's College Counseling Program. Today I make the college admissions process easier for high achieving, late blooming teenagers and all of the stressed out parents who love them. I focus on the end result of graduating with a college degree – a job.

Not knowing all of the terminology used in education was the biggest challenge I had to face. Coming from the corporate world was an advantage as I had a business perspective and used it throughout my coursework.

The UCLA College Counseling program provides students with the tools they need to help teens and adults with today's demanding college admissions process. It gave me the opportunity to start a new career and do something I feel passionate about.

I suggest to any students in career transition who are interested in going back to college to complete a career interest assessment to find out their current likes, interests, values, and work style. This is important because what they valued in their careers when they were 20, 30 or 40 years old may have changed now that they are in their 50s or older.

Greg Mantell
Degree: Master's in Broadcast Journalism
Internet Talk Show Host

Just Go For It

I decided to return to grad school for my Master's in Broadcast Journalism at University of Missouri at Columbia. In many ways I see it as an extension of what we are already doing (an Internet talk show), the best way to take it to the next level. I was able to get in due to great networking and placement and connections. It didn't really hit me until a few people mentioned I would be older than many of the students who are in their 20s.

As an interviewer I am used to interacting with people of all ages—I interview many people younger and older than I am. I received a graduate research assistantship with the Investigative Reporters and Editors program and they seemed to like the fact that I had real world experience--mature, focused on what I'm doing. Personally I believe being older hasn't phased

me as much because I am aware that many people are going back to school at an older age now and I did already graduate from college years ago.

Unlike a 20 year-old who doesn't know what they want to do, I know what I want to do and I am very focused on doing it. Various people at the school have commented on the fact that they liked the that I have so much real world experience; so I am sure adding the master's program to it can only help take things to the next level.

My main challenge was moving from LA to Missouri! I enjoy living in LA, but will do it for school. I plan to move back (or to another major city) after graduation. It is easier for me since I don't have kids.

Advice? if you know why you want to do the program, then go for it. No reason not to. It's a different world these days. I read that entering students at Harvard Medical School range from 20s to early 40s.

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