

5 Things to Consider If You Want to Go Back to School and Complete Your Degree



By Sian Beilock

As memories of our pre-pandemic routines fade and the need to embrace a new normal becomes increasingly obvious, many people are looking for a fresh start – and this likely includes a significant number of women who've [quit their jobs](#) during “The Great Resignation” – and many who are now considering completing their college degrees.

As the president of Barnard College, an institution devoted to empowering women to pursue their passions, I know that higher education is a major life decision with far-reaching consequences. Therefore, all women who are thinking about taking on this rewarding challenge should embark on the journey with their eyes open.

If you want to go back to school to complete your degree, here are five questions to consider:

- **After you graduate, how easy will it be to find a job?** The likelihood you'll land your dream job after graduation depends on a number of different factors, including the quality of your college's career services center. Moreover, those who gain science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skills, regardless of major, will likely find more opportunities available to them. Job growth in STEM fields is expected to [significantly outpace](#) demand for other occupations between 2019 and 2029 (8% vs 3.7%), according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Regardless of your interests, however, having access to a top-notch career services center can make all the difference. At Barnard College, for example, we've had 90% of our graduates secure jobs or enroll in graduate or professional school within six months of graduation. And one of the major reasons why is because our students take advantage of [Beyond Barnard](#), our lifelong career services center, which is used by more than 75% of currently enrolled students and has held more than 11,000 one-on-one advising appointments since 2018.
- **What is your institution's teaching philosophy?** It's critical that you get a sense of how your chosen institution approaches teaching. If there's a mismatch, you could risk having [your intellectual curiosity stifled](#). At Barnard, rather than a “weed out” approach, where entry level courses are so difficult a lot of students don't pass, we're taking the opposite approach with great results: We're “weeding in,” so to speak. And doing so has greatly boosted interest in, for example, STEM majors. Approximately 35% of Barnard's Class of 2020 were science and math majors (compared with about 26% nationally) and 33% of underrepresented minority graduates in our Class of 2020 were math and science majors (compared with approximately 23% nationally). By embracing a teaching philosophy that focuses on inclusivity, Barnard now ranks No. 9 in the U.S. in graduating women who go on to earn doctoral degrees in STEM-related fields.
- **Will the program you've chosen fit with your existing schedule?** It's important to be realistic about the time commitment and flexibility that completing your college degree will require. As a working mother, for example, perhaps you'll need to take night classes or consider a program that will enable you to do most coursework on weekends. Or perhaps your schedule demands that you choose a virtual program with no requirement for in-person attendance.

And those who want to continue with their studies beyond a four-year degree should consider an option that combines undergraduate and graduate education. At Barnard, students enrolled in any of our [“4+1” Pathways](#) for accelerated graduate study can earn a bachelor’s degree from Barnard and a master’s degree from Columbia University in five years.

- **Can you afford to go back to school?** When you’re looking to improve your financial situation while investing yourself, the last thing you need is to be saddled with crushing student loan debt. To that end, explore the options that your college or university offers to make completing your degree less of a financial hardship. At Barnard, our need-based financial aid process is designed to foster equity, access, and diversity, and we meet 100% of a family’s demonstrated need. Almost half of our students receive financial assistance, including outside scholarships and loans. And while the national average student loan debt for recent college graduates is [nearly \\$30,000](#), our Class of 2020 graduated with just \$17,169. Additionally, our Beyond Barnard Internship Program provides half a million dollars in funding every year for student internships.
- **How will earning a college degree affect how you see yourself?** Becoming a college graduate is bound to influence how you perceive yourself. Before you commit to going back to school, make sure you know what limitations, if any, you’ve arbitrarily placed on yourself because you haven’t yet earned a college diploma. To draw on the resiliency needed to be successful in school, you must embrace the multiple facets of your identity. Celebrating the different sides of your personality allows you to find value in yourself even when one aspect of your identity is uncertain, such as after performing poorly on an exam, which may threaten your identity as a “good student.” In my life, tapping into my separate identities as a mother, runner, scientist, and manager ensures I won’t become overly reliant on any given area for my sense of self-worth. Because higher education is challenging, most college students, especially women, will doubt themselves at some point and perhaps even [feel like imposters](#). This is normal and you can overcome it so long as you remind yourself of your unique, multifaceted identities and avoid placing too much emphasis on any given area.

As a response to COVID-19 upending nearly every aspect of daily life, most of us have begun to [reevaluate what’s important](#) and reprioritize how we spend our time. One key “pandemic epiphany” for those who had left college before earning a degree is that an undergraduate education can provide personal fulfillment, expedite upward advancement, facilitate a career change, and boost one’s earning potential.

Fortunately, if you know what to expect, have the right mindset, and commit yourself to the demanding intellectual challenge that is higher education, you will gain confidence in your abilities, become better prepared for the labor market, and have the necessary tools to change the world for the better.

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