

Member's Quarterly

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Perspective

It's Never Too Late to Go Back to School

Take the lead and reap the benefits

There are many good reasons to go back to school at 50, 60 or even later. It may be to upgrade your skills in a highly competitive world or just to learn something new. It may also be due to circumstances you faced in your early life when you didn't go to college or finish your university degree. If you are thinking about it, you are not alone.

Forbes magazine reports that in the US, and this is likely true in Canada as well, the majority of degree seekers are now mature students. They also note that 60% of American adults age 23 to 55 without a bachelor's degree considered returning to school to get the diploma they always wanted. Where do you fit in?

There are many good reasons to go back to school at any age. For older adults, there are some distinct benefits. First of all, it's good for your brain. Learning new things not only helps keep your brain young, but it may also slow the development of age-related cognitive diseases. Researchers at York University found significant links between learning a second language and delaying the onset of dementia. Harvard Medical School reports that lifelong learning can even slow cognitive aging.

Many colleges and universities provide special programming and support for mature students. These include universities that offer mature student associations and older learners clubs. Once you hit 65, the benefits keep coming and you may qualify for free tuition from Halifax to Regina. Ontario residents over 60 may qualify for a bursary to cover their full university tuition.

The truth is that some of us find ourselves in careers that we've outgrown or were never quite right for us in the first place. We can certainly do the work, but it doesn't fuel our enthusiasm or passion. Perhaps we've done everything we can in one field but now want to try something new. Getting another degree may help make that happen. You may end up working long past 65 if your health is good, so why not make the last ten, twenty or more years the best of your working life?

Even if you're happy with where you are in your career, continuous learning is beneficial at any age. We can learn new things, find new challenges and have the opportunity for positive personal development. Sometimes things happen in our lives that make us question our career path - things like a major illness or the death of a loved one. That can motivate us to try something completely different and we end up back at school to turn that dream into reality.

In other cases, our life circumstances might remain relatively unchanged, but we still have that idea that we want to learn more about subjects or hobbies that interest us. We start by taking classes at the community college and realize that we want more. We then sign up for university courses as a mature student and join the throng of other older adults, some of whom have never been in a university setting in the past. All of us are there now by choice, to learn something new or fulfil a lifetime goal.

We may never use that Master of Fine Arts degree in our day-to-day career or gain income from it. However, we will feel better about ourselves and feel that we are still growing regardless of our age. That could be the greatest benefit of all!



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