Finding the right fit: What to consider when choosing a university

**Time**
There’s more to timing than figuring out when classes meet. Finding classes that you can attend after work or on weekends is important, but also consider the length of the program. Are you okay with taking a class “here and there” or do you want to be done ASAP?

Tip: Accelerated programs often take less time to complete but require more weekly work. If getting done fast is your top priority, accelerated programs might be right for you.

**Technology**
Whether you’ve embraced the digital age or are taking your first clicks into the online world, technology might play a role in your decision-making process. Consider how you like to learn. You’ll have greater success if you’re comfortable with the format of the class.

Tip: Online courses are convenient for self-motivated students who can manage their time, work independently, and meet deadlines. Learning at your own pace means monitoring your own schedule.

**Cost**
Investigate how much your program will cost from start to finish. Think about what you will spend on tuition, fees, and even text books. Some colleges might have lower tuition but higher fees.

Tip: Remember that adult students might qualify for financial assistance, employer benefits, or government funding.

**Quality**
A degree is more than a piece of paper. Employers look at the reputation of the program and institution from which you graduated. Well-established programs may also have a strong alumni network in your field that can help with job placement.

Tip: Research an institution’s job placement rates, not just for the position you want when you graduate, but for the career you want ten years down the line.

**Location**
Universities often offer programs at regional locations in addition to campus locations. Some classes might be a longer drive, but require fewer face-to-face meetings if you can complete assignments online. Other classes might be closer to work or home so you don’t have to go out of your way on your commute.

Tip: Visit the sites where universities offer classes. Make sure you will have enough time in your schedule to get to class.
Strategies from Successful Adult Learners

Talk to your family.
Let your family know what changes you will make in your routine, such as when and where you will study and what assistance you might need. Remember that your commitment to studying will set a great example for your kids!

“I really enjoy my program here at NIU and have fun playing games with my three children that incorporate things I learn in class.”

-Christina P.

Try out new technology before you step into the classroom.
You don’t have to be a computer whiz when you return to school, but you should familiarize yourself with the basics before you have to upload your first assignment. Sample online lessons, find out if you can sit in on classes, and be sure to get the right equipment (computer, internet connection, up-to-date browsers). When in doubt about technology, don’t panic! Most colleges have tech help resources.

Connect with other students.
You’re not the only one balancing school, work, and life. Talk about the challenges, set up study groups, and discuss assignments. You will gain confidence and provide the same support for others.

“I felt intimidated about returning to school after 10 years! It turns out that school is not as difficult as I anticipated.”

-Dan B.

Reach out.
Your instructors, support staff, and advisors want you to succeed and are eager to help and encourage you. Email or call them. The more people you know, the more support and resources you can access.

Making Sense of the Dollars and Cents
Continuing your education is a major financial commitment, but help maybe available:

- Check into tuition reimbursement policies at work.
- Look into Veteran Educational Benefits—many are good for life. [niu.edu/militaryservices/financial/benefits.shtml]
- Spread out class costs by using an installment payment plan—most colleges have a contract plan. [niu.edu/bursar/payments/HIP.shtml]
- Look for scholarships. Yes, some scholarships are adult-friendly! [niu.edu/scholarships]
- Check U.S. and state tax laws—you might be able to earn a tax credit for education or retraining.

Visit NIU’s financial aid website [niu.edu/fa/] to learn more about financing your education.

www.niu.edu/adultlearner