



# EARN YOUR DEGREE! A QUICK GUIDE TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS.

Tips and Techniques to Help You Get Ready to Go Back to School

## Any Time Is Back-to-School Time

Did you know that earning a college degree is one of the best ways to increase your earning potential, improve your job security, and expand your career opportunities? It's true! And with more options for higher education being made available to more people, it's a goal within reach.

You know what earning a degree would mean to you personally. And you know that earning a degree is a big commitment. You're motivated, you're determined, and you're busy—with work, with family, with life. When you're ready, your goal is achievable.

## What can you do to give yourself the best chance for academic success?

This brief guide offers practical tips for prospective students, along with advice from successful grads who went back to school as busy adults. It will help you maintain your motivation, set realistic expectations and goals, and plan strategies for meeting any academic challenge.

## What's Your Motivation?

Having the right motivation is key to your success. Why did you decide to go back to school? What will keep you going when your degree program gets particularly challenging?

Are you fulfilling a lifelong goal? Do you want to move into a new career or improve your chances for a higher salary? Do you want to set a strong academic example for you kids? Being able to answer these questions will help keep you on track.

## My WGU Mission Statement

Take a few minutes to create your personal mission statement. Write it down, and refer back to you it any time you need a little extra motivation. The questions below can help you direct your thoughts.

- Why am I going back to school?
- What difference will earning a degree make to me?
- Why is now the right time to go back to school?
- What skills and strategies will help me reach my goals?

## Having a job-related goal helps you develop academic persistence.

You know that earning a degree can help advance you on your career path. But did you know that the opposite is also true? If you keep a career goal in mind as you study, you are more likely to succeed as a student—particularly when the subject matter you're studying is related to your professional aspirations.

Not yet sure what career path you'll take after graduation? Check out these Degree Guides from WGU's Career & Professional Development Resource Library. They'll help you answer the question: "What can I do with my degree?"





*“WGU made it possible for me to improve my family’s life by allowing me to home school my son and work while finishing my degree. I was able to work WGU into my life; I did not have to change my life for WGU.”*

–Marceline Miller,  
B.A. Social Science Education

## Set Yourself Up for Success

You’re more likely to succeed as a student if you take the time to prepare; you’ll approach your degree program with confidence in your strategies and abilities. We recommend these ten proven methods.

## Top Ten Tips and Techniques for Academic Success

1. [Make a financial plan](#)
2. [Prioritize 20 hour per week for studying](#)
3. [Learn how to learn](#)
4. [Set up your schedule and study space](#)
5. [Know what’s required in your program](#)
6. [Plan ahead and set attainable goals](#)
7. [Build your personal support system](#)
8. [Connect with classmates](#)
9. [Consult the experts](#)
10. [Stay focused and flexible](#)

### #1 Make a financial plan

Education is an investment that pays off in many ways, but most people need to plan ahead financially to pay for their degree. Follow these tips and start planning now:

- Create a budget to track and plan your regular expenses.
- Get your employer on board. Many companies offer tuition reimbursement or assistance programs.
- [See if you qualify for a scholarship](#). WGU offers a variety of scholarship opportunities for new and returning students. We awarded over \$10 million in scholarships last year!
- [Consider your options for financial aid](#). About 71% of WGU students receive some kind of financial aid, and still graduate with less debt than the national average. You can use financial aid funds to pay for learning materials, technology, tuition and fees, and other education expenses. Check [wgu.edu/financialaid](https://www.wgu.edu/financialaid) for a step-by-step guide to applying for federal financial aid, or contact [WGU’s Financial Aid office](mailto:financialservices@wgu.edu) at [financialservices@wgu.edu](mailto:financialservices@wgu.edu) or **877.435.7948**.

## #2 Prioritize 20 hours per week for studying

Make school a top priority. Of course, unexpected events happen and urgent situations may require you to adjust your academic plans. But as with any major undertaking, earning your degree will require that you set aside time and energy each week to focus on your studies and work toward graduation.

Plan to devote at least 20 hours per week to your studies. And be consistent; the most successful students are regularly and consistently engaged in their coursework.

*"I really was taking time during lunch breaks. When my kids were away at sporting events I'd bring my phone with me and read my textbooks online. I just happened to find a whole lot of those little niches in my schedule where I could plug time in. And I made it a priority."*

—Sarah Ratekin  
M.S. Management and Leadership

## #3 Learn how to learn

What's the best way for you to learn something? Is it through hands-on practice, extensive note taking, or discussing a topic with other students or faculty? Take the time to learn more about how to learn effectively. People process information in different ways, and you'll want to find the study strategies that work best with your natural instincts.

WGU offers learning resources and a student success center to help you identify your learning style and practice your study strategies.

*"The competency-based model at WGU allows you to draw on your experiences rather than taking time sitting in a classroom, having the teacher expound on something that you already know. So you can skip over that part, go on, and learn the harder stuff that you don't know."*

—Robin Hill  
M.S. Nursing—Education





#### #4 Set up your schedule and study space

As an online student, you'll be able to complete your coursework anywhere you have an internet connection. But to maximize your study time, it's a good idea to set aside regular blocks of time and a regular study space. Your environment can affect not only your mood while you study, it can also impact how quickly you are able to work through material and how well you retain information.

Think about your ideal study space and evaluate your style by asking these questions:

- What kind of environment will help you focus?
- Do you need to be completely distraction-free?
- Will you study better at home or away from home?
- What study areas are available to you in your home, or in your neighborhood?
- Will you be able to study in the same space consistently? Or will you need to be flexible and study in different areas at different times?

*“Some nights I worked and studied late at night and other times I was able to squeeze it in. I did some of it on my lunch hour at work. No matter where I was, as long as I had internet, I had accessibility to WGU.”*

—Cindy Krupinski  
B.S. Information Technology Management

#### How to maximize your study space

- Choose a study location that will allow the level of focus you need, preferably one that is relatively quiet.
- Make your space as ergonomic as possible by choosing the right desk, chair, lighting, and technology (e.g., computer screen size) for your comfort level.
- Keep your computer and other learning resources within reach for easy access.
- Customize your space; make it inviting and post your personal mission statement where you can refer to it regularly for inspiration.
- Establish and post a study schedule at the entrance of your space to help keep you on track.
- [Read more tips here.](#)

## #5 Know what's required in your program

WGU degree programs are generally designed around a standard sequence of courses and requirements. Familiarize yourself with the standard path and any additional requirements (e.g., a capstone project or thesis) that you'll be expected to complete. This will help you set short-term and long-term goals for completing your work.

*From the very beginning, when you start a course, the breakdown is very clear. This is what you can expect: you have pre-assessments, you have your materials, and everything is given to you at your fingertips. There were a couple courses I went into thinking, 'I don't know anything about this subject. There's no way I'm going to be able to pass this.' But WGU gives you every single tool you need."*

—Andrea Petty  
B.S. Marketing Management

## #6 Plan ahead and set smart goals

Research shows that setting specific, challenging goals leads to better task performance—and when people perform better, they gain the confidence to pursue further goals.

Plan ahead for each term based on upcoming deadlines. Collaborate with your Program Mentor and Course Instructors to create term and course plans that have regular, even weekly, deadlines to help you build and maintain momentum. Setting short-term, attainable goals will help you keep your workload manageable and help you stay on target.

*We build upon successes and learn from our failures. It's true, success breeds success; so as we set and reach short-term goals, we can't help but be successful in improving education and in time we will reach our long-term goals. Think big, start small!"*

—Gary Carmichael  
M.Ed. Learning and Technology

## Set SMART Goals:



Specific



Measurable



Attainable



Realistic



Timely

## #7 Build your personal support system

Establishing a support structure is a vital part of your success. Who is part of your current support system? Who can you call on for help if your workload seems overwhelming?

Here are a few tips on establishing your personal support system:

- 1) Identify a few people you can count on: family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, mentors, etc. And consider expanding your community—you may find unexpected allies who can help.
- 2) Let them know how they can help. Do you need someone to give you pep talks? Pick up the groceries? Watch your children while you take a test? Try to pinpoint specific ways that people can help you as you focus on your studies.
- 3) Set clear expectations about how important your education is. Let them know that school is one of your top priorities.

*“My husband and I supported each other by setting up a schedule, and we were loyal to it. When it was my time to study, he took care of the kids. And when it was his time to study, then I took care of the kids. We supported each other through it.”*

—Elizabeth Pendas  
M.A. Math Education (5–12)

## #8 Connect with classmates

Utilize the university community as part of your support structure. You can connect with fellow WGU students and the university via [online learning communities](#), [social media sites](#), [WGU’s alumni website](#), and more. Use these channels to find study partners and mentors with whom you can discuss any school-specific questions you may have. Odds are that if you’re struggling with a course or topic, another classmate can help.

*“Go to your communities and check out what everybody else is having to say about that assignment or task and you’ll save yourself a lot of time.”*

—Bryon Denton  
M.S. Nursing–Education

WGU Online  
Communities



## #9 Consult the experts

Don't be afraid to ask for help! WGU students report that they are best prepared and most satisfied when they stay in regular contact with their Program Mentor, meet with their Course Instructor as soon as they start a course, and consistently engage with instructors as they progress through a course.

*“When I was having trouble studying something, and I just couldn't get a concept, I could shoot an email off to my [Course Instructor] and get a helpful answer back. They always answered with the kind of help I needed.”*

—Ken Spruell  
B.A. Science (5–12, Physics)

Be sure to familiarize yourself with the WGU resources available to students, which include the WGU Center for Student Success, [career and professional development services](#), [counseling services](#), and specialized centers for help with subjects like math and writing.

*“The most unexpected thing that I saw while I was a student was the depth of tools that WGU gave us to finish our classwork. There were video sessions, PowerPoints, online communities, and textbooks.”*

—Kate Leger  
B.S. Accounting, 2015



## #10 Stay focused and flexible

Sometimes life situations greatly impact your ability to study. If that happens, don't assume that your academic goals are out of reach. Discuss your circumstances with your mentors and instructors as needed, the sooner the better. And remember, it's okay to take time off if you need it to recharge and renew your focus.

*“The beauty of WGU is that it's such a flexible education that you can deal with the stuff that comes up, all the hurdles and bumps. Everybody has schedules and things that they have to do in life. You can still find some time to get that done.”*

—Raymond Baker  
B.S. Accounting, 2015

## Bonus Tip: Assess Your Computer Skills

Since WGU is an online university, you'll need basic computer skills to navigate your degree plan and complete your assignments.

If you're nervous about your skill level, make a plan to get some basic coaching. And don't worry! WGU offers one-on-one and group tutoring sessions for developing your computer skills. Contact the Center for Student Success at [866.895.9660 x3196](tel:866.895.9660) or [studentsuccess@wgu.edu](mailto:studentsuccess@wgu.edu).

*“I wasn't very computer-literate at the beginning, but I can say that's changed.”*

—Bonnie Shirley  
B.A. Interdisciplinary Studies (K-8)

## Do you have the technology?

Does your computer technology (hardware and software) meet WGU's technical readiness requirements? [Click here to check.](#)

## WHAT'S NEXT?

What's your next step? [Learn all you can about WGU and our competency-based education](#) model. At any time, feel free to connect with one of our Enrollment Counselors, who can answer any specific questions you may have. You can start a chat via [wgu.edu](#) or call us at [866.225.5948](tel:866.225.5948). The two of you can discuss your career objectives and background, the degree program you're interested in, the admissions process, and how to evaluate whether or not WGU is a good fit for you.

If you haven't already applied to WGU yet, get started today! You can apply online any time at [wgu.edu/apply](#).

Welcome to WGU!

*// We are non-traditional students who chose a non-traditional education path. We are the hard workers. The problem solvers. We are the time managers and overachievers. We are the overcomers, up-at-dawners, never-give-uppers. We are caretakers, moms, dads, daughters, sons, brothers, and sisters. We are employers and workers. We are WGU."*

*—Sarah Bierrman,  
M.S. Nursing—Education*



## ABOUT WGU

Western Governors University (WGU) is a nonprofit online university with more than 125,000 graduates from all 50 states. Nationally respected and regionally accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, WGU has been named a "Best Value School" by University Research & Review for four consecutive years.

For more information, please contact a WGU Enrollment Counselor at [866.225.5948](tel:866.225.5948) or visit us at [wgu.edu](#).

