

A decorative graphic is present on the page. It features a large green square in the top left corner. A thin yellow line starts from the bottom right corner of the green square, curves upwards and to the right, and then curves downwards and to the left, ending near the bottom right corner of the page. A horizontal black line and a vertical black line intersect at the end of this yellow curve. A small yellow square is located at the intersection of these two lines, to the right of the vertical line and below the horizontal line. Another small yellow square is located at the bottom right corner of the green square, to the right of the vertical line and above the horizontal line.

# Going Back to School: A Bulletin Poll

August 2009



# Going Back to School A Bulletin Poll

Data Collected by ICR, Inc.  
Prepared by Teresa A. Keenan, Ph.D.  
and Linda L. Barrett, Ph.D.

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Washington, DC 20049  
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## Executive Summary

The economic recession and high unemployment may lead people to consider going back to school to improve their employment opportunities. We polled people ages 50+ to determine what they think about going back to school. These data are based upon 1,006 telephone interviews with a representative sample of people ages 50+ between July 22 and August 2, 2009.<sup>1</sup> The key findings are:

- A minority (16%) of the population ages 50 and older say she or he is likely to return to school. This group tends to be younger (21% of 50-64 vs. 7% of 65+) and reports having some college education (32% some college vs. 7% high school or less, and 17% of those with post-graduate work). The most frequent reason they mention for going back to school is to *sharpen skills that might help on the job* (47%). Younger respondents are significantly more likely to say they want to *sharpen skills that might help on the job* than older respondents (52% of 50-64 vs. 23% of 65+). The second most frequently mentioned motivation for going back to school is *strictly for pleasure for example wanting to learn about new topics* (39%). Older people (71% of 65+ vs. 32% of 50-64) and women (51% vs. 25% men) are motivated by the pleasure of learning.
- Three in ten (30%) people 50+ say they think they will go to a community college.
- We also found the degree of importance placed on learning new skills varies by age, education, and race. Younger respondents 50-64 years are more likely to say learning new skills is *important* than older respondents 65+ (35% vs. 14%). This may reflect younger respondents who are working in a competitive marketplace while older respondents are more likely to be retired.
- Respondents with some college are more likely than those with a high school education or less to say learning new skills that might help you in this difficult economy is *important* (37% vs. 22%). Black, non-Hispanic respondents were more likely than White (non-Hispanics) to say learning new skills that might help you in this difficult economy is *extremely important* (24% vs. 8%).
- More than half of the respondents (57%) say the last time they enrolled in classes was more than 15 years ago. Respondents who have taken classes in the past year are significantly likely to be younger (13% of those 50-64 vs. 4% of those 65+) and to earn over \$25,000 suggesting they are still employed in the workplace. They are also more likely to say they have some college or post college education compared to those with a high school degree or less (17% and 17% vs. 3%).

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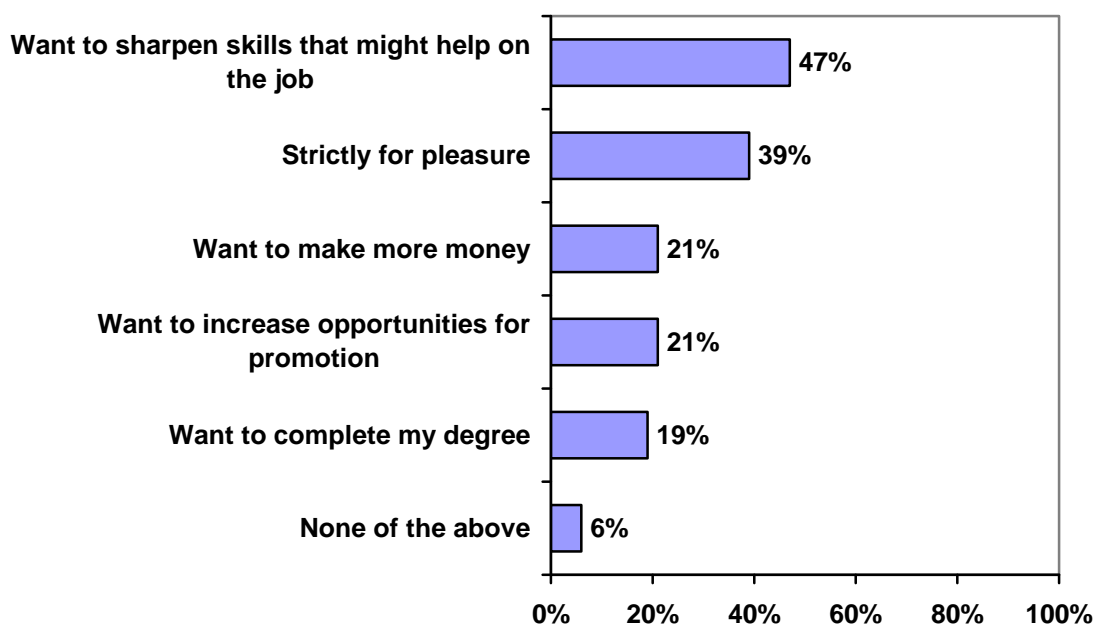
<sup>1</sup> The margin of error for the total group of respondents is +/- 3.09% at the 95% confidence level. This means that 95 times out of 100 the respondents' answers will be between +/- 3.09% of the reported proportion. The margin of error increases when we examine sub-group data.

## Detailed Findings<sup>2</sup>

More than eight in ten (84%) adults ages 50 and over say it is *not very* (13%) or *not at all likely* (71%) that she or he will go back to school or take classes of some type this year. The minority (16%) who say they think it is *likely* she or he will return to school are more likely to be younger (21% of 50-64 vs. 7% of 65+), and report having some college education compared to high school (or less) or post-graduate work (32% vs. 7%, 17%). The most frequently mentioned reason for going back to school is that she or he *wants to sharpen skills that might help on the job* (Figure 1). It is interesting to note that nearly four in ten people say they took a course strictly for pleasure. Older people (71% of 65+ vs. 32% of 50-64) and women (51% vs. 25% men) are motivated by the pleasure of learning.

**Figure 1**  
**Reasons for Going Back to School**

Q2. Why do you think you will return to school?



Source: Going Back to School, AARP, 2009.

N = 152

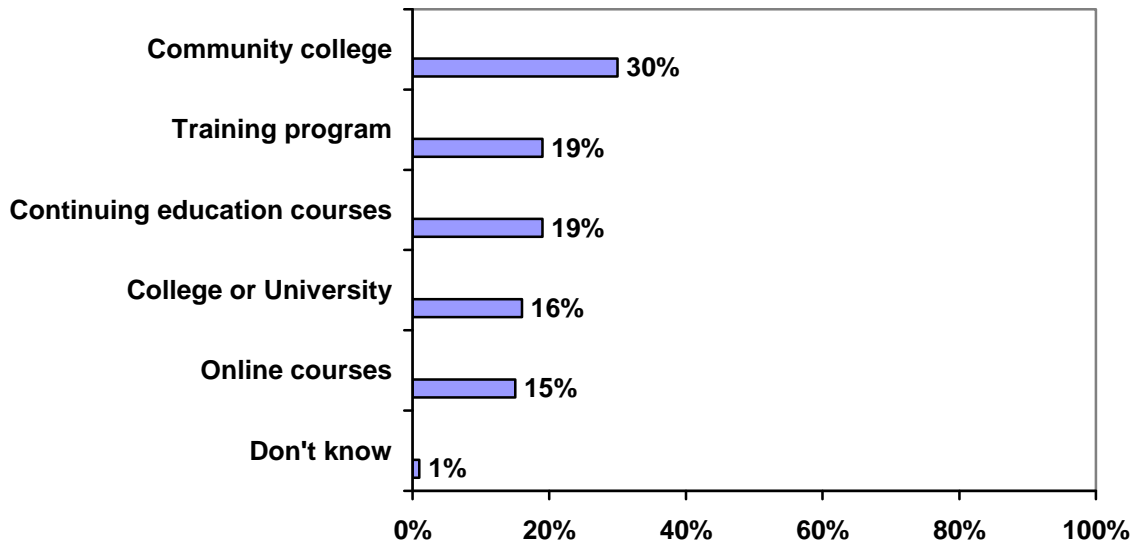
\*small base

<sup>2</sup> Respondents in this study are ages 50 and over with six in ten (62%) between the ages of 50-64 and almost four in ten (38%) ages 65+. Slightly more than half were women (54%) and slightly less than half were men (46%). Three-fourths (76%) are white non-Hispanic, and about one in ten (10%) is African American and one in ten (10%) is Hispanic. Half of respondents had a high school education or less (51%). Approximately one-quarter (23%) had some college, and approximately one-quarter (25%) had a post-graduate education. More than half of respondents (56%) were not AARP members, AARP membership does not appear to influence responses to these questions. More than a quarter (27%) have a household income of less than \$25,000 per year, another quarter (23%) have a household income of \$25,000-49,999 per year. Fourteen percent report an annual household income of \$50,000-75,000 and almost one in five (18%) report an annual household income of \$75,000 or more.

Among people ages 50 and older who say it is *likely* she or he will go back to school or take classes of some type this year, the greatest proportion say they would return to a community college or take continuing education courses or training programs (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
**Type of School They Would Return To**

Q3. Where do you think you will return to school?

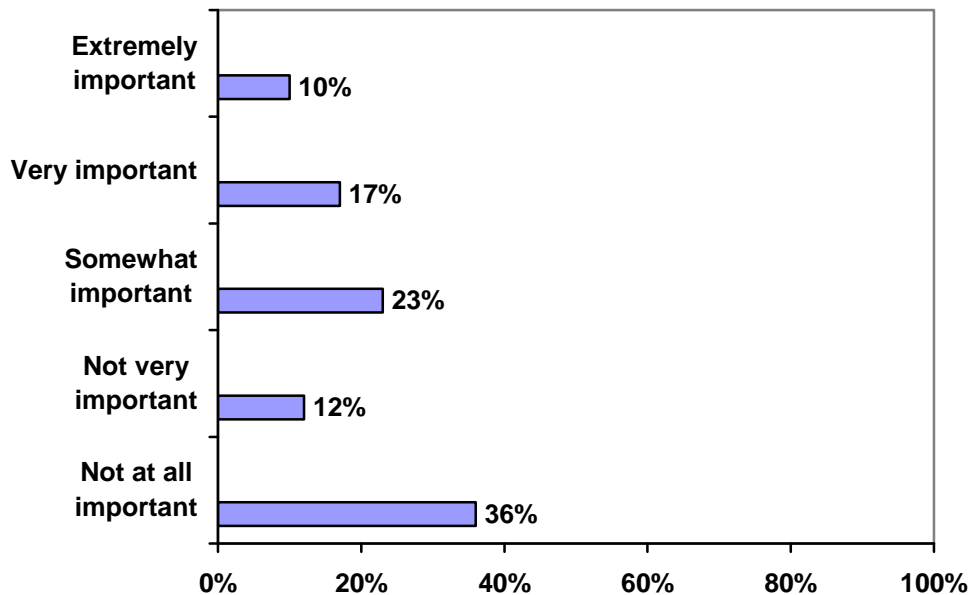


Source: Going Back to School, AARP, 2009.  
N = 152  
\*small base

All respondents were asked how important it is to learn new skills that might help them in this difficult economy. More than a quarter said it is *extremely* or *very important*. Another quarter said it is *somewhat important* (Figure 3). Approximately half said it is *not very* or *not at all important*.

**Figure 3**  
**Importance of Learning New Skills in a Difficult Economy**

Q4. How important to you is it to learn new skills that might help you in this difficult economy?



Source: Going Back to School, AARP, 2009.  
N = 1006

The degree of importance placed on learning new skills varies by age, education and race. Younger respondents 50-64 years are more likely to say learning new skills is *important* than older respondents 65+ (35% vs. 14%). This may reflect younger respondents who are working in a competitive marketplace while older respondents are more likely to be retired.

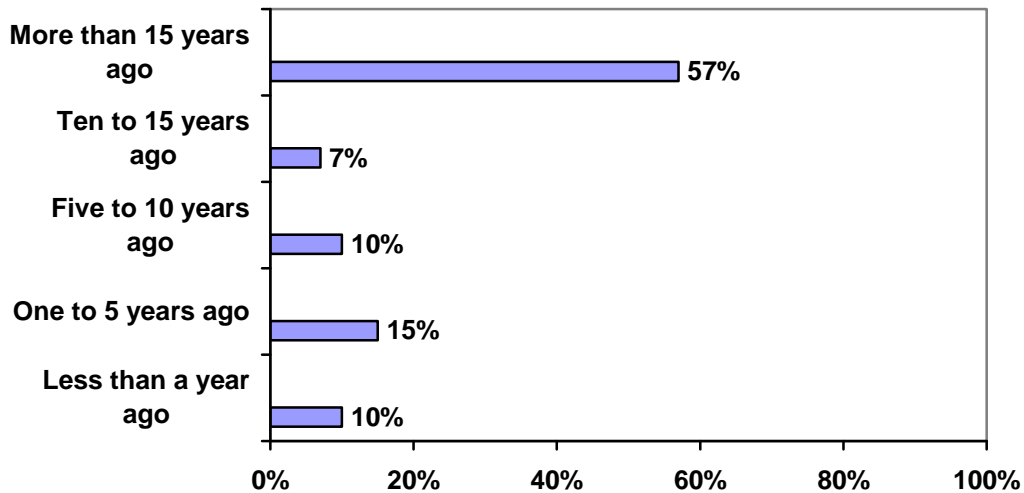
Respondents with some college are more likely than those with a high school education or less to say learning new skills that might help you in this difficult economy is *important* (37% vs. 22%).

Black, non-Hispanic respondents were more likely than White (non-Hispanics) to say learning new skills that might help you in this difficult economy is *extremely important* (24% vs. 8%).

When asked when the last time was that they enrolled in classes, the majority (57%) said more than fifteen years ago (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**  
**Last Time Enrolled in Classes**

Q5. When was the last time you enrolled in classes?



Source: Going Back to School, AARP, 2009.  
N = 1006

Respondents who have taken classes in the past year are significantly likely to be younger (13% of those 50-64 vs. 4% of those 65+) and to earn over \$25,000 suggesting they are still employed in the workplace. They are also more likely to say they have some college or post college education compared to those with a high school education or less (17% and 17% vs. 3%).

## Appendix A: Annotated Questionnaire

## Back To School

*The study was conducted for AARP via telephone by ICR, an independent research company. Interviews were conducted from July 22 – August 2, 2009 among a nationally representative sample of 1006 respondents 50 years of age or older. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-3.09% at the 95% confidence level. More information about ICR can be obtained by visiting [www.icrsurvey.com](http://www.icrsurvey.com)*

**(Asked of total respondents age 50+; n=1006)**

BS-1 How likely is it that you will “go back to school” or take classes of some type this year?

	LIKELY				UNLIKELY			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not Very	Not at all		
8/2/09	16	4	4	8	84	13	71	*	*

**(Asked of total respondents who are likely to go back to school; n=152)**

BS-2 Why do you think you will return to school?

Any (NET)	94
Want to complete my degree	19
Want to sharpen skills that might help on the job	47
Strictly for pleasure (i.e., want to learn about new topics)	39
Want to make more money	21
Want to increase opportunities for promotion	21
None of the above	6
Don't know	--
Refused	--

**(Asked of total respondents who are likely to go back to school; n=152)**

BS-3 Where do you think you will return to school?

	DEGREE PROGRAM			Continuing education courses	Online courses	Training program	Don't know	Refused
	NET	Community college (2-year degree)	College or university (4-year degree)					
8/2/09	46	30	16	19	15	19	1	--

(Asked of total respondents age 50+; n=1006)

BS-4 How important to you is it to learn new skills that might help you in this difficult economy? (READ LIST; ENTER ONE RESPONSE)

	IMPORTANT			Somewhat	NOT IMPORTANT			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very		NET	Not Very	Not at all		
8/2/09	27	10	17	23	48	12	36	2	1

(Asked of total respondents age 50+; n=1006)

BS-5 When was the last time you enrolled in classes?

	Less than a year ago	One to five years ago	Five to 10 years ago	Ten to 15 years ago	More than 15 years ago	Don't know	Refused
8/2/09	10	15	10	7	57	*	--

(Asked of total respondents age 50+; n=1006)

AM-1 Are you or your spouse or partner currently a member of AARP (IF NECESSARY: formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons)?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
8/2/09	43	56	1	*



**Knowledge Management  
601 E Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20049**

**For more information please contact Terry Keenan at:  
(202) 434-6274 or email [tkeenan@aarp.org](mailto:tkeenan@aarp.org)**