Introduction-Motivations for creating the series:

I came to Physics Forums originally to read ZapperZ’s thread about becoming a physicist back in 2013. It was one of many factors that got me to pursue and education in physics that I am succeeding in to this day. One thing I wanted to find on physics forums that I didn’t seem to exist was a comprehensive guide to help students in my specific situation-a nontraditional student’s guide to succeeding in STEM education. Certainly there are many posts to guide people through the process of doing just that, but they were spread out and sometimes turned out to be flat out bad advice. I believe this was because very few people are active on Physics Forums who come from non-traditional backgrounds and went back to school later in life.

In my time as a physics student, I’ve grown immensely and helped grow other student’s confidence through tutoring and mentor programs at my school. Now that I’ve successfully been admitted to my dream school as a transfer from my local community college, I feel that this forum deserves an formal take on what the process is like, what mistakes are often made, and how to optimize your time as a STEM student starting fresh. Both my experience, and the experience of several non-traditional friends will be going into this series.

This series assumes you want to go back to school for a degree that takes 4 or more years to complete, and is geared towards American STEM majors. However, what is said here can be extrapolated to almost any non-traditional path through college.

Part 1-Mandatory components of an education:

Going back to school is a tough decision. As an adult, going back to school won’t eliminate all of your responsibilities and make things easier for you. It’s going to make things harder. Assuming you’re reading this, you’ve decided that the challenge is worth your time. Before you start you should know there are a great many ways to make things easier on yourself.

The most important thing you need to know is you can’t do this alone. Having a strong structure of family and/or friends to assist you emotionally and financially is critical. If you’re living by yourself that will likely have to stop. Time is going to become your most cherished commodity, and having a spouse or roommate(s) to split the rent with will allow you to work less hours to meet your needs while giving you ample time to work on school and still have a personal life. This will also keep you from becoming isolated. Depression is one of the most common diseases among students, and it comes out in scary forms when you have nobody around you to reach out to. This is where family and loved ones are necessary. You will get distressed, and as much as you will want to come on Physics Forums and be reassured at your decision to go to school, you will need people who know you and your situation to help you through those tough times.

Assuming your expenses aren’t being completely covered by a parent or loved one, your job should be low-stress (both physically and psychologically). If you dread going to work, it’s time to find another job. Nothing throws a wrench in an education more than working a bunch of long shifts and dreading every second of it only to go home on edge and annoyed. Take it from someone who tried working as a nurse’s aide on night shift when he started school, it doesn’t work.

With a job comes money, and if you haven’t been living off of a strict budget, now is the time to do so. There are student services available at every community college whose purpose is to help students figure out how to go to school without going broke. Utilize them. If you have the time, learn to make a spreadsheet in either Google Sheets (free if you have a google account) or Microsoft Excel (free with a student email address). Be honest about what you need and live by what you decide.

Lastly, if you don’t take care of your health, it’s time to start. Proper diet, exercise, and good sleep habits are all necessary to do well in school. You don’t need to go to a gym or become vegan, but you do need to regulate yourself. Schedule set times every day for when you exercise and prepare food, and get at least 6-8 hours of sleep every night.

Here are some guides for the last paragraph that I’ve found to be useful:

Guide to eating cheaply but healthily as a student:

<http://imgur.com/a/pHUdq/layout/grid> (click on the pictures for the text to the guide)

Why you can’t catch up on lost sleep:

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fact-or-fiction-can-you-catch-up-on-sleep/>

Subreddit dedicated to diet and fitness guides:

<https://www.reddit.com/r/fitness>

Part 2-Beginning at a Community College:

Unless you were a stellar, straight-A student in high school, you likely won’t be able to get into a reputable 4-year school right away. The beauty of it is, you don’t have to. In fact, it would be hazardous to do so. You’ll need a strong foundation in both the techniques of your major and work ethic to succeed at a 4-year school. The community college system is the best means to do this. If you’re worried about getting in, don’t be. Former prisoners in their forties were my classmates at my school, so you will likely get in as well. Just apply a decent length of time before the semester starts.

Once you’re accepted you will have to take placement examinations for math. If you want to avoid a bit of hassle study up whatever material from algebra you don’t feel comfortable with before going in, but chances are the longer you’ve been out of school the harder it will be to place high. Don’t feel bad if you place into lower arithmetic or algebra classes. If you placed there, chances are you needed to relearn the material. And believe me, nothing kills students in upper-division math courses more than not having a strong foundation in these high school level courses.

Once you’ve been placed based on your skill level, you’ll be asked to speak to an academic advisor to schedule your classes. I had mixed experiences with the advisement at my school. Many times schools won’t have people in their advising office who are knowledgeable about transfer programs. Sometimes they’ll even be inclined to get you to take unnecessary courses based on ignorance of the transfer process. Before you go speak to an advisor, you should speak to a Transfer Counselor at your school. Every community college has two or three on staff. These are the people who directly work with local 4-year schools to prep students properly for getting into them. They will have a good idea of all the programs available at these schools and their expectations of community college students. Discuss your goals with them and they will give you a good idea of what classes you should be taking.