

BY JOYCE GRONDIN

BANGOR – Ashley Owens and Leslie Scott have a lot in common: they are in their late 20s with young children, they live in rural parts of Maine, and they are each working toward a college degree online through New England College of Business and Finance.



Photo: Joyce Grondin
Leslie Scott, 27, of Garland, is taking advantage of online college classes that her employer, Bangor Savings Bank, is offering through a partnership with New England College of Business and Finance. The online program is a result of the bank's involvement with the Maine Employers' Initiative.

This would have been much more difficult to achieve if it were not for their employer, Bangor Savings Bank.

Owens, 28, who works as a teller/customer service representative in the Greenville branch of the bank, said that she attended the University of Maine for a couple of years after graduating from high school, but dropped out because of the cost. In the meantime, she got a job at Bangor Savings Bank and this year, took advantage of the offer to enroll in college classes online, all paid for by the bank.

"I was excited. It's a great opportunity and a great benefit. It's no cost out of my pocket except for paying for half (the cost) of my books."

With a 1-year-old child to care for, Owens finds that having college classes available to her online makes a degree much more attainable.

Scott agrees. The 27-year-old mother of two works as a front desk coordinator at the bank's Technical Center of Operations in Bangor, traveling 40 minutes one way from her home in Garland.

"Once I saw the benefit, I thought it was too good to pass up," Scott said. "I attended class this morning in my pajamas while my son was playing on the floor."

The women not only are pleased that they can study at a time that is convenient to them, but they are glad that they don't have to leave the house at odd hours of the evening and commute to class, or pay a babysitter.

Another benefit, Scott added, is the fact that her children are aware that she's taking classes and they are curious about it. "It amazes them," she said. "It's a good example to set for them, as well."

Karyn Woolley, director of employee development and education at Bangor Savings Bank, said the partnership between Bangor Savings and New England College of Business and Finance was forged as a result of the bank's participation in the Maine Employers' Initiative.

The initiative, funded through grants from the Lumina and Ford foundations, under the auspices of the Maine Development Foundation, is working in partnership with the Maine Compact for Higher Education and the Maine Community Foundation to increase the educational attainment levels of Maine's workers.

The Maine Employers' Initiative, explained Senior Program Director Patricia Hart, urges employers to take "one more step" to increase college attainment among their employees. Hart said that Maine's level of educational attainment is much lower than the rest of the New England states. She said Maine was ranked 35th out of 50 states in the nation on personal income in 2007, according to Census numbers. That low income, she believes, correlates with the lack of higher education in the state.

The goal, Hart said, is to have 500 employers in Maine take “one more step” to promote education for their employees. As of the beginning of May, 86 employers around the state have made the commitment to participate in the Maine Employers’ Initiative.

Some of the ideas the initiative have presented and that employers have pursued include: taking steps to build awareness about the value of higher education, actively supporting employees in planning for college, and creating a pathway for the employee to pay for college or a certification.

Prior to becoming involved in the Maine Employers’ Initiative, Bangor Savings Bank paid \$1,400 per year toward an employee’s education at a local university, with the employee required to pay half the fee upfront and being reimbursed the other half at the end of the semester, depending on the grade.

Now, the bank will pay the full cost of four classes per year for an undergraduate degree and two classes per year for a master’s degree. And, Bangor Savings will pay for the class at the beginning of the semester, offering 100 percent of the tuition for those who receive a

grade of A or B. Previously, the bank paid only 80 percent for those who received a B in the class.

Furthermore, employees like Owens and Scott who like the convenience of studying from home, will be reimbursed for six classes per year through online programs at New England College of Business. At the moment, both women aspire to earn an associate’s degree.

“Our employees like the change,” Woolley said, adding that 12 employees have signed up for the online classes since they were first offered in January.

“We’ve been happy with the response,” Woolley said. “The enhanced benefits have been motivating for a lot of employees.”

Woolley said that Bangor Savings Bank will continue to assess the program each year, reviewing the toolkit provided by the Maine Employers’ Initiative, and add or change parts of the program if needed.

“We’re very pleased as an organization to offer this to our employees,” she said.