

education pays during tough economic times

By Anne M. Kelley

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Single mom Laura Chadwick no longer struggles to make ends meet thanks to the Calais CareerCenter and her employer, Calais Regional Hospital (CRH). She has gone from working as a part-time customer service representative in the department of registration and communications to becoming a full-time medical lab technician, more than doubling her hourly pay rate.

The hospital lab was not where Chadwick had ever envisioned herself. Working in the field of marine biology, a job she truly enjoyed, she was having trouble making ends meet earning a wage of \$9 per hour. "I wanted to do something I enjoyed, but I also wanted to take care of myself and my son," she said.

After coming across a job vacancy for a lab technician or technologist at CRH, Chadwick thought that she might be able to transfer her marine biology skills. However, both positions required credentials in the field: a two-year Associates Degree for a technician and a four-year Bachelor of Science Degree for a technologist.

CRH hired Chadwick to fill an open customer service representative position, and later trained her as a laboratory assistant.

Working in that job convinced her that she should pursue the credentials needed to qualify her as a full lab technician.

She applied and was accepted into the University of Maine at Presque Isle's (UMPI) Medical Laboratory Technology Program. That is when her life got hectic. She was able to complete much of her course work through distance learning, but still had to travel for some. In addition, she had to support herself and her son, so she stayed working at the hospital part time.

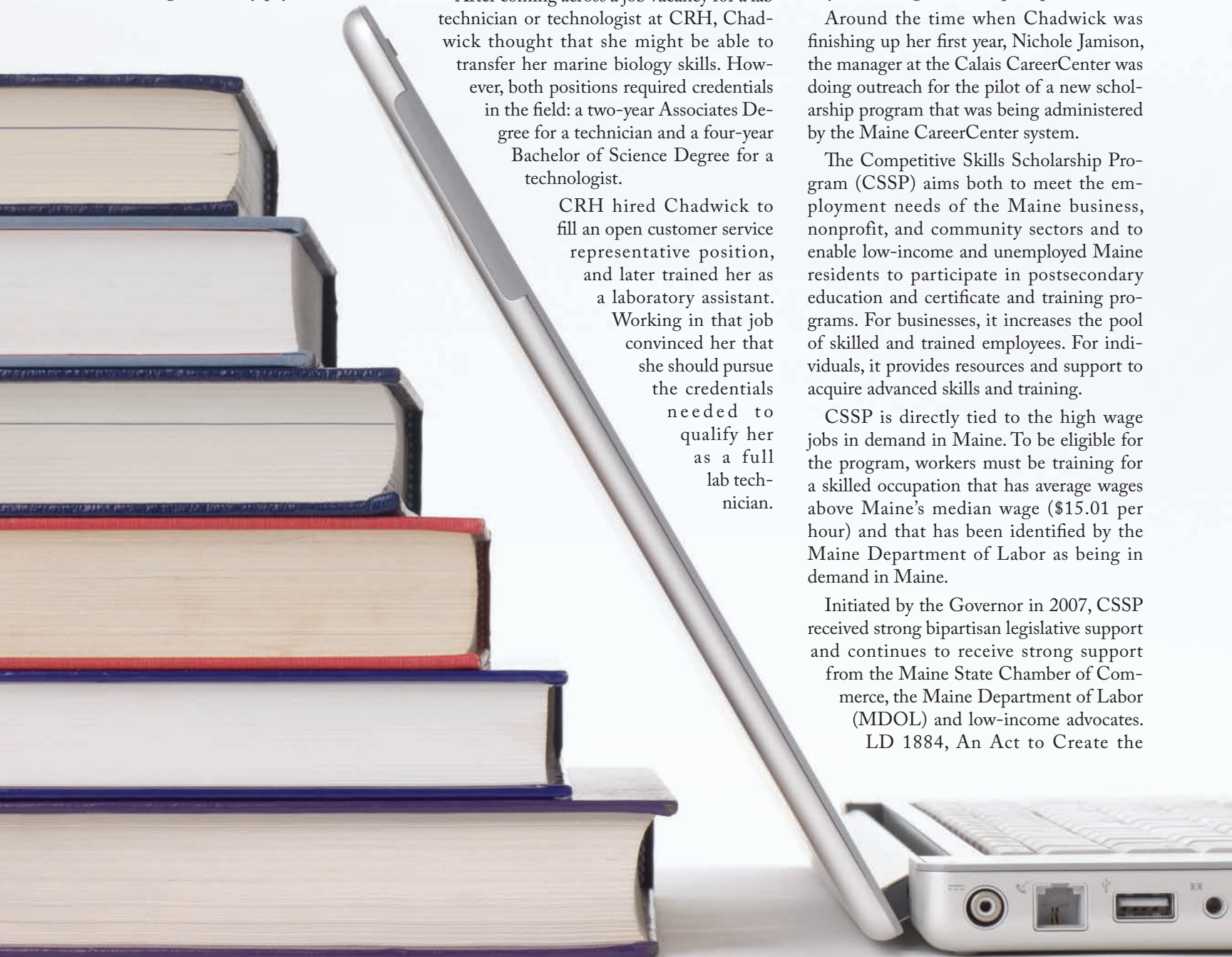
Around the time when Chadwick was finishing up her first year, Nichole Jamison, the manager at the Calais CareerCenter was doing outreach for the pilot of a new scholarship program that was being administered by the Maine CareerCenter system.

The Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP) aims both to meet the employment needs of the Maine business, nonprofit, and community sectors and to enable low-income and unemployed Maine residents to participate in postsecondary education and certificate and training programs. For businesses, it increases the pool of skilled and trained employees. For individuals, it provides resources and support to acquire advanced skills and training.

CSSP is directly tied to the high wage jobs in demand in Maine. To be eligible for the program, workers must be training for a skilled occupation that has average wages above Maine's median wage (\$15.01 per hour) and that has been identified by the Maine Department of Labor as being in demand in Maine.

Initiated by the Governor in 2007, CSSP received strong bipartisan legislative support and continues to receive strong support from the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, the Maine Department of Labor (MDOL) and low-income advocates.

LD 1884, An Act to Create the



Competitive Training Fund and Improve Maine Employment Security Programs (M.R.S.A. 26 §2033) went into effect on January 1, 2008.

Organizations representing diverse constituencies were unified around LD 1884's passage. MDOL Commissioner Laura Fortman, the leader of this effort, worked almost three years on its development and passage. Advocacy groups including Maine Equal Justice Partners, the Maine Women's Lobby, the Maine State Chamber and the Maine AFL-CIO supported the bill in the legislature, noting that the program

could work to provide real pathways out of poverty for low-wage earners while meeting the needs of Maine employers. The bill passed with the unanimous support of both the Maine House and Senate.

The program is funded by the Competitive Skills Scholarship Fund, a state fund financed by contributions from employers, the cost of which is offset from their unemployment insurance (UI) taxes. The same legislation that created the fund also provided \$67 million over two years in additional UI tax reductions to employers. Funds for the Competitive Skills Scholarship Fund

provided CSSP with \$2.65 million in state fiscal year 2009.

CSSP pays for things not covered by other education grant and loan programs, including tuition and fees not covered by other federal financial aid. In addition, students are eligible for support to pay for things such as child care, transportation, books, supplies, equipment, and remedial and prerequisite training when MDOL determines that those services are necessary for the student to participate successfully in their program.

— C O M P E T I T I V E S K I L L S S C H O L A R S H I P P R O G R A M —

BY THE NUMBERS

Who is CSSP assisting?

Over 60% of enrollees had household income below 100% of the poverty level (\$14,570 annually for a household of two) in the month before they applied for CSSP, well below the eligibility limit for the program of 200% of the poverty level.

66% were unemployed at the time of application and 1/3 were presently receiving unemployment insurance.

72% had filed for unemployment compensation in the past – 62% within the past 5 years.

Almost 1/3 (30%) had held 4 to 6 different jobs in the past five years and another 37% had held 2 to 3 different jobs during that time.

Before participation, the average hourly wage of enrollees was \$10.58, well below the statewide average hourly rate of \$17.50

SOURCE: CENTER FOR WORKFORCE RESEARCH AND INFORMATION, MAINE DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Most popular occupations for which CSSP participants are training

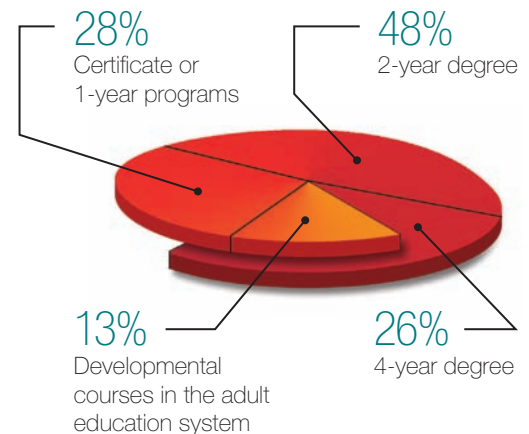


COUNSELORS/THERAPISTS
19%

NURSING
19%

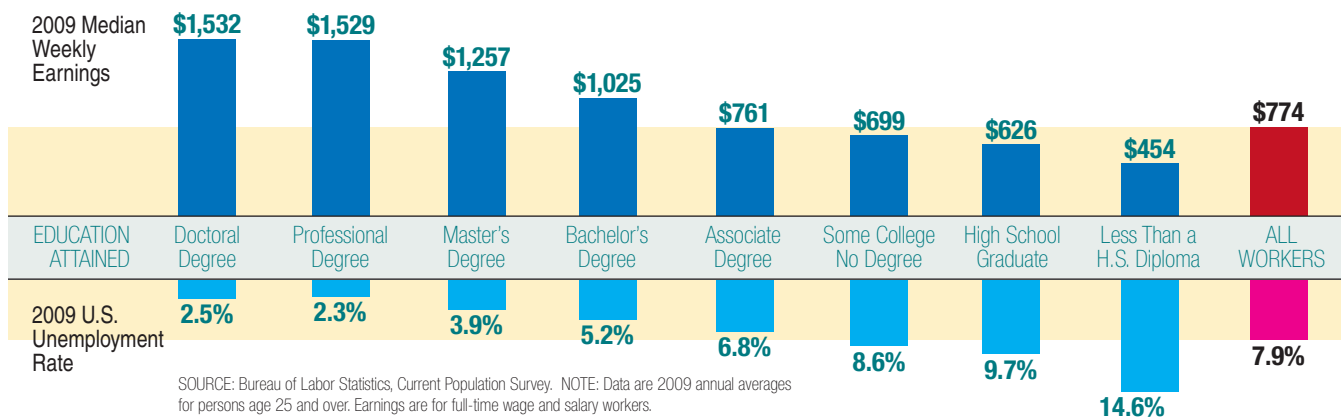
BUSINESS & RELATED FIELDS
17%

Types of programs



As of 9/30/2009, of the 475 who had ever enrolled in CSSP. Many participants in developmental courses were simultaneously in courses providing credit toward their certificate or degree. (For this reason the sum of the percentages above exceeds 100).

Education pays in higher earnings and lower unemployment rate



SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey. NOTE: Data are 2009 annual averages for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.

In addition to other qualifications, students must apply for education or training for a job in a high-wage in-demand occupation, not have a post-secondary degree, and have income of less than 200% of the federal poverty level for the family size involved.

Fortunately for Chadwick, she met all of the pilot program's qualifications and was accepted. "I don't know what I would

"I don't know what I would have done if it weren't for this program."

have done [if it weren't for this program]. I wouldn't be where I am today without it," she said. Most helpful to Chadwick was support she received from CSSP for child care for her four year-old son while she was attending classes.

CRH and UMPI also played a pivotal role in assisting Chadwick while she got trained. CRH worked with UMPI to get the hospital's lab approved to provide clinical training to students locally. This way, Chadwick did not have to travel for her clinical year.

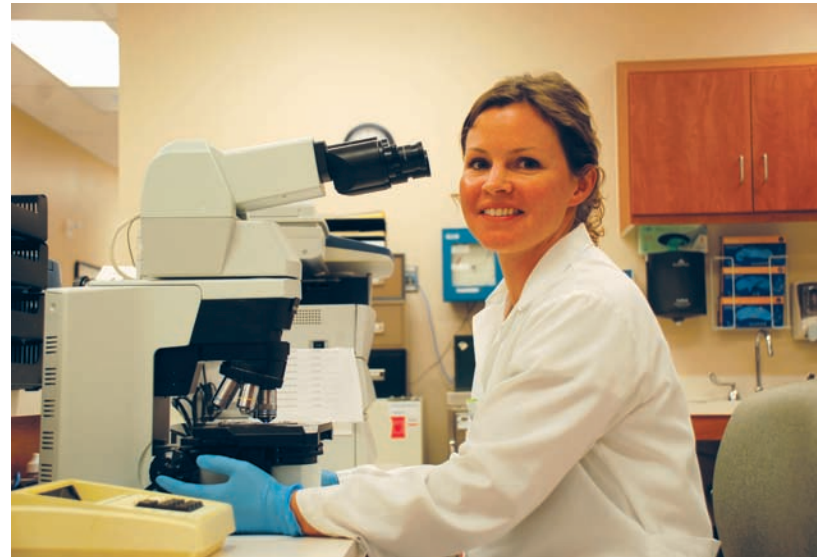
"The clinical program can be demanding," said CRH laboratory director Jake Thayer.

"This is when you have to pay the most attention." Without the extreme financial worries and the ability to stay with her son, Chadwick was able to do that. "I don't think I would have done as well in school if I had all of those things to worry about," she said.

The CRH administration has considered this an opportunity to invest in one of their employees and Thayer is already seeing the pay-off. Chadwick is now preparing to take the Medical Laboratory Technologist (Bachelor's Degree-level) credentialing exam this year. "Laura has the potential to go on to the graduate level and become board certified in different disciplines," he said. And Chadwick agrees, five years from now, "I hope I will still be learning."

Thayer is also impressed by the CSSP program that helped Chadwick make career growth a reality. "This is a fix, not a band aid," he said. "These kinds of programs are the key to solving the unemployment problem."

Success stories such as Chadwick's are an encouraging sign that CSSP is successful despite the current weak job market. Statistics show that not only do individuals with postsecondary education, on average, make



laura chadwick in the crh lab

PHOTO BY ANNE M. KELLEY

higher wages; their unemployment rate is lower as well. And this is why Fortman and others believe in CSSP. "In the long run, the more training people have, the less likely they will need to rely on unemployment insurance," she said. ■

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