Darlene Smith, a 47-year-old administrative assistant at Carl Sandburg College, expresses an array of emotions during an interview Thursday afternoon at the school. Smith is a recent graduate of Kaplan University. Pursuing an online degree allowed Smith time to work and be a single mother to her two daughters.

Higher education comes home

Online degree can be convenient alternative to campus

Saturday, February 17, 2007

BY JANE CARLSON
THE REGISTER-MAIL

When Darlene Smith wanted a bachelor's degree, the 47-year-old Galesburg woman went online.

Smith, a life-long Galesburg resident, finished a degree in business and management of information systems from Kaplan University last fall without ever setting foot on a campus. She and her two daughters, ages 6 and 17, will travel to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., next week to participate in graduation ceremonies.

Based in Davenport, Iowa, Kaplan University is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and is a member of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The for-profit school offers associate's, bachelor's and master's degrees online and on its physical campus.

Because she works full-time and is a single mother, a more traditional pursuit of a bachelor's degree was not an option for Smith, who is an administrative assistant at Carl Sandburg College and received an associate's degree in marketing from the college in 2003.

"I always wanted a bachelor's degree," said Smith, noting that her job at CSC is her "bread and butter," but she wanted to learn more about business and technology to help her launch a part-time sewing business on the side.

Local colleges didn't offer the upper-level evening and weekend classes Smith needed to fit with her schedule, but commuting to a university would have been too time-consuming, she said.

Smith had high standards when she began researching options for online degrees. She was
most interested in gaining the knowledge that would help her achieve her goals, so the curriculum was important, but she also wanted the degree to be legitimate, so only considered schools that were accredited.

She also contacted the Better Business Bureau to check for complaints about for-profit colleges. Her research led her to Kaplan, whose affordability also was a factor in her decision. Kaplan was among the first institutions to join a distance education demonstration program of the U.S. Department of Education that allows students in online degree programs to seek federal financial aid.

Smith was assigned an academic adviser and began taking classes in September 2003, reading class material and writing papers on her own time, but using instant messenger programs and software provided by Kaplan to participate in class discussions and seek input from her professors.

Just as in brick-and-mortar institutions, Smith said, faculty took extra time to answer her questions. But instead of face-to-face, it was via programs like Yahoo! Messenger.

"You learn so much because the teachers are so dedicated," Smith said.

Just before Smith finished her coursework at Kaplan, Carl Sandburg College finalized the first of two arrangements with universities to offer bachelor's degrees online for local students.

CSC students complete bachelor of arts degrees at Western Illinois University through the Board of Trustees Bachelor of Arts, or BOT/BA, program, which maximizes transferability from associate's degree programs and was approved in September 2006.

The BOT/BA program, designed for non-traditional students who are unable to earn four-year degrees by traditional means, utilizes distance learning technologies to offer courses on CSC's campus and in students' homes.

In December 2006, CSC launched a partnership with Franklin University of Columbus, Ohio, to offer four-year degrees in 15 majors to its students through the university's Community College Alliance Program.

**Online Education**

Kaplan University

[www.kaplan.edu](http://www.kaplan.edu)

WIU Board of Trustees/Bachelor of Arts*

[www.wiu.edu/SES/BOT/](http://www.wiu.edu/SES/BOT/)

Franklin University Community College Alliance*

[www.alliance.franklin.edu](http://www.alliance.franklin.edu)

*In partnership with Carl Sandburg College*