

CGFM Profile: 2005 MPA Graduate Finds Certification Provides 'Big Picture'

As someone involved in strategic planning at the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), Malena Brookshire understood the early phases of the budgeting process. The end result was also familiar to her as a key player in producing the agency's Performance and Accountability Report. It was the broad range of activities in between that she wanted to learn more about.

She now has a better understanding of how all the pieces fit together, thanks to the CGFM Program.

Brookshire, a 27-year-old member of AGA's Washington, D.C Chapter, said that during the SEC's strategic planning process, staff is looking five years ahead. During development of the PAR, they're looking backward. "Now that I can see what happens in the middle, I can go to the right people and understand what they've been doing for the last six to eight months."

The idea of earning the CGFM came to Brookshire in May when she attended AGA's black-tie awards ceremony recognizing the 11 federal agencies that received the Certificate of Excellence in Accountability Reporting. The SEC submitted its Fiscal Year 2006 PAR for review for the first time, and received an award at the National Press Club, where Brookshire met many CGFMs. At a federal financial management conference a few months prior, she noticed that many of the speakers were CGFMs.

These high-profile events, featuring high-profile CGFMs, prompted Brookshire to start researching the credential. When she presented her plan to earn the CGFM to her employer, she received immediate support and encouragement.

Brookshire took the three CGFM preparatory courses, sponsored by her chapter at no cost to Early Careers members, over two weeks in June. She studied by reviewing all the information she highlighted in the course materials, then took the quizzes at the end of each section. She said the courses were not only helpful in focusing her attention on the prominent topics on the exams, but they also introduced her to colleagues at other agencies. Exchanging ideas and learning how other agencies operate was another big benefit, she said.

Afterward, Brookshire briefly explained the content of the courses to the CFO and her supervisor. "Now they're interested in having budget and formulation staff take the courses, so it started a ripple effect." The SEC is also reimbursing Brookshire for her examination fees.

A couple of weeks later, she became the first person within the SEC's Office of Financial Management to pass the three CGFM Examinations. She said the exams concentrated on big concepts, so it wasn't a matter of taking the quizzes and memorizing the answers. The questions involved using your knowledge in

certain situations to come up with an answer that may be “more right” than another one, particularly in the ethics section.

The state and local government section was challenging for Brookshire because she works on the federal side, but it was somewhat familiar to her, having taken a master’s level course on the subject at George Washington University. She earned her master’s degree in public administration in 2005.

It was at the University of Wisconsin at Madison where she first considered government employment. An internship at the Office of Financial Management at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction introduced her to state finances and its intersection with the federal government, which led her to her master’s program and the SEC, which was actively recruiting and hiring new graduates.

Brookshire said she would “definitely” encourage other government financial managers to earn the CGFM credential. “I think having the professional certification sets you aside from the rest, and it shows you’re willing to take the initiative to advance your career,” she said. “It shows that you’re willing to get the training to do your job effectively and make a contribution to your agency or organization.”